

High Museum of Art Family Learning in Interactive Galleries Research Project Case Study Summary

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Who are the families?

The six families in the High Museum of Art case study sample were selected because they were frequent visitors to the Museum and to the Greene Family Learning Gallery. The families first began visiting the Museum for many different reasons. When the children were

quite young, several parents were attracted to the Museum when they learned about the art-making programs for pre-schoolers. Once there, they discovered the Greene Family Learning Gallery and felt they found a special place for their children. Consequently, many parents decided on that first visit to become members. Other parents had a rich prior history in the arts and were experienced art museum visitors in general. For these parents, appreciation of the arts and regular visitation to the art museum was tradition, a value, which they wanted to pass on to their children.

Fathers in the case study families engaged in a variety of professions including a creative director for the Cartoon Network, librarian, insurance sales agent, Federal Fire Marshall, and an executive for Coca-Cola. Two of the mothers held fulltime jobs outside of the home, one as an editor and the other as a nurse in the National Guard. Of the four mothers who did not have a full time job outside the home, two home-schooled their children.

What do families do in the High Museum of Art?

On average, High Museum of Art families in this study spent an average of two hours at the Museum. The shortest visit length was 90 minutes and the longest was just under three hours. In comparison, the average length of time families spent on the like-site outings was two and a half hours. These families spent around 80% of their time in the collections and exhibition galleries or children's programs and 20% of the total time spent on the visit in the Greene Family Gallery. Food was a component of the experience for most families on most Museum visits. Either they ate at the café or brought their own snacks and ate outside. In addition to interacting with family members, some family members sought interaction with others outside the family group. One family met regularly with another family; other families sometimes

brought friends or extended family members. By expanding the social unit, both children and adults had age-mates to talk and play with.

Museum Collections & Exhibitions

Parents employed a variety of strategies when they took children into the collections and exhibition galleries and, in most cases, one or both parents were the primary initiators of the art-looking experience. Families tended to stay together in the art galleries and decision-making as to what to see and when to move on was a collective experience, moving organically back and forth between a child-initiated and a parent-initiated decision. In one case, the parent noted that their child tended to “speed” view the art works so they used Museum-created family guides, invented their own gallery games in order to slow her down. Many families reported reading labels out loud as a strategy to engage their children. One mother noted that she visited the museum by herself or with a friend, prior to the family outing so she could think about what might interest her daughter the most. Several families made sure to see the special exhibition on each visit. One parent mentioned how her children enjoyed using the audio guides and felt like they were doing a very adult thing. Families with very young children often reported spending short amounts of time in the art museum proper (collections or exhibitions), watching children for signs of fatigue such as lack of focus, running around, or crankiness. The visit agenda varied across families. In some cases the mother set an agenda and, for the most part, stuck to it.

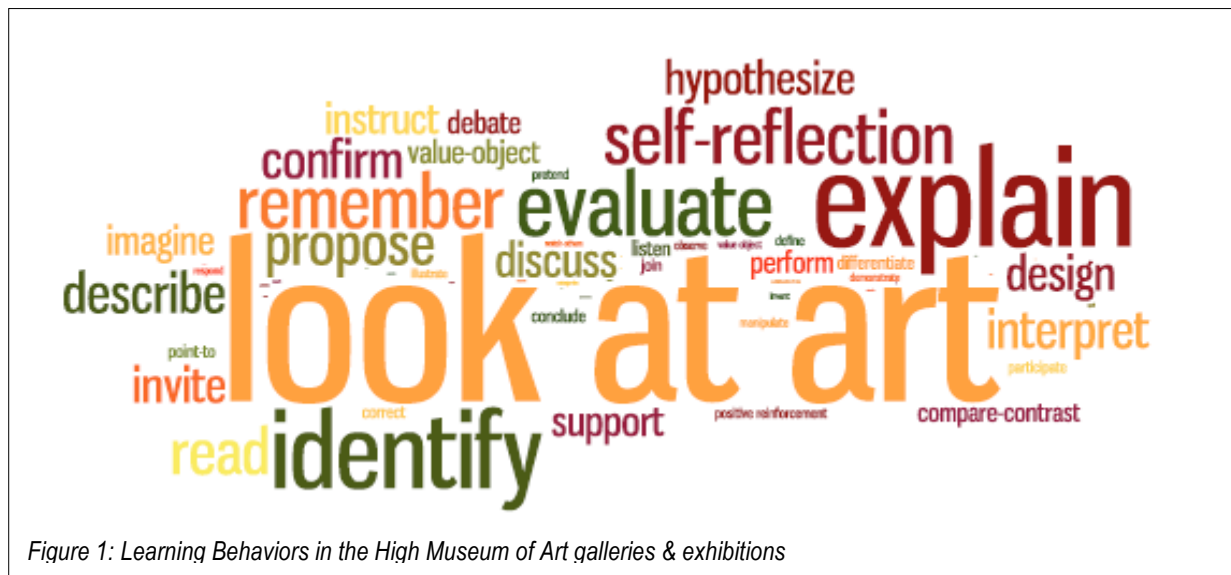


Figure 1 illustrates a “word-cloud” of the learning behaviors exhibited by the case study families while visiting the collections and exhibitions at the High Museum of Art. Unsurprisingly, the most frequent learning behavior was looking at art, followed by explaining, identifying, and evaluating the merit of an artwork. Other strong trends in the analysis of learning behaviors included families drawing on memories of other, related experiences, reflecting on how they felt about what they were seeing, interpreting or hypothesizing on meaning or intent of an artwork, proposing explanations, reading labels, describing aspects of an artwork, discussing, inviting

each other to look, and supporting each other's efforts to make meaning of the art work.

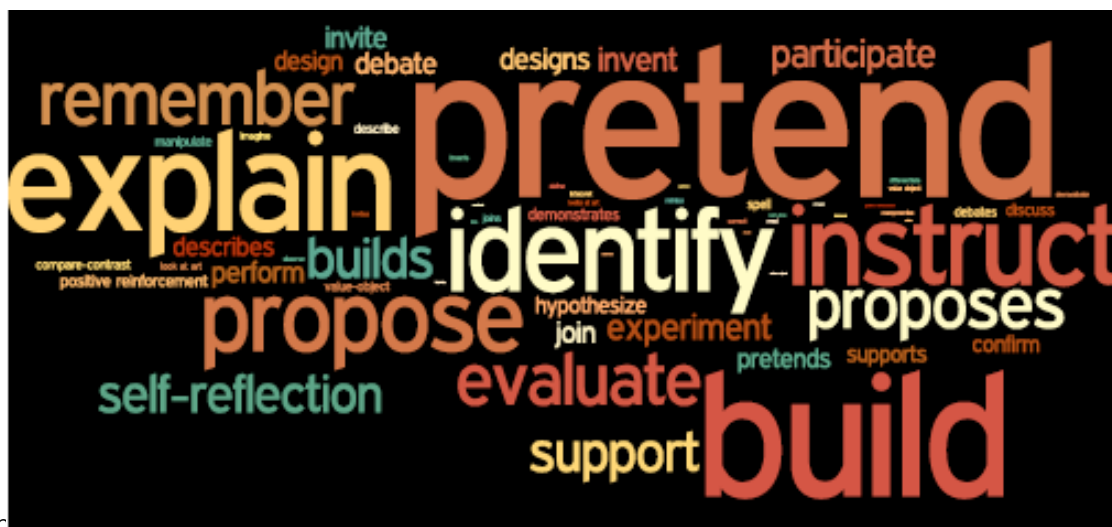
Greene Family Learning Gallery

In contrast to the family patterns while in the collections or exhibitions, parents' styles differed from active facilitation to a more "hands-off" approach of careful non-interference, remaining available to answer questions and offer encouragement, while in the Green Family Learning Gallery. The most common exception to this trend was in families with very young children (infants or toddlers). In these cases, the mother tended to play with and entertain that child, although occasionally older siblings or the father took on that guiding role.

Parents said that the Family Gallery provides children with an opportunity to “blow off steam” created while following stricter behavior rules in the collections and exhibitions. While children engaged with great enthusiasm, when both parents were present on the visit, one parent seized the opportunity to visit the other galleries while the other parent stayed with the children. Or, one parent stayed with a child or two in the Family Gallery while the other parent took a child or two to an art-making program on a lower level.

The interactive gallery provided freedom for children - freedom to explore and engage in creative play, together or independently. Parents took advantage of loosened constraints in the interactive gallery and found ways to engage their children of different ages. Older, self-directed children chose their own activity; younger children looked at, touched, and played with novel materials, while parents provided an overlay of language and new words to their infants and toddlers. Many parents reported deriving enjoyment and benefit from an opportunity to just watch their child play, explore, and engage socially with other children.

Families used the interactive gallery to modulate the pace of their museum visit. Sometimes they visited the interactive gallery at the beginning, the middle, or the end of their visit, depending on the level of attention and energy among group



High [REDACTED]
Figure 2: Learning Behaviors in the Greene Family Learning Gallery
 2011

members, as well as other things they wanted to do that day. Of the eighteen total visits observed, seven visits did not include a stop at the Greene Family Gallery, on four visits the interactive space was visited at the end, on four visits it was in the middle, and on three visits it was at the beginning.

Figure 2 provides a word-cloud illustration of the learning behaviors that these families employed while in the Family Gallery. Pretending and building were the most common behaviors, in keeping with the purpose of the Family Gallery - to be space to stimulate creative, imaginative play. Explaining, instructing, proposing, and remembering continued to be frequent learning behaviors as they were while in the collections, exhibitions, and family programs, yet in the Greene Family Learning Gallery, adults and children engaged in these behaviors almost equally.

What Other Leisure Learning Choices do Families Make?

The most commonly cited family leisure choice was to do things together out of doors. This included going to the beach, hiking, fishing, walking tours, gardening, and playgrounds. This finding fits with the general professional opinion that family visits to museums are more frequent when the weather is not agreeable. The families in the case study project also visited other museums fairly frequently and they took advantage of local events and festivals during their family time together. Naturally much family leisure time was taken up with the children's sports, piano and dance lessons, and play dates. Many families considered going to the library and reading as a family activity.

How do Families Value the Greene Family Learning Gallery?

For most parents, the value of the Greene Family Learning Gallery was that it was a "safe" space in which children could run off pent-up energy. Parents described the space as "no rules" and "low maintenance" meaning that the parents could relax their vigilance a bit and they did not have to structure the child's experience there. Several families acknowledged that they would visit the Museum less frequently without this type of family space. Many saw the interactive gallery as an attractive addition to the overall museum experience, in some cases serving as an incentive or reward for visiting the museum. Parents valued the expanded sensory experience, explaining how their children can touch, feel, and use their hands to create and build in the space. Parents valued hands-on experiences for how they engage children's attention. The interactive gallery added fun and freedom of expression to the museum experience.

Other ways in which this space was valued was that it offered children a valuable social opportunity by engaging with other children. Certainly parents valued the creative nature of the play space. They recognized and valued that the experiences there stimulated children's imagination. Many parents noted that they valued the Family Gallery because it gave them opportunities to observe the ways in which their children learned, socialized, and invented through their play.

In many cases, parents did not distinguish a difference in value between the Family Gallery and the museum experience as a whole. These values cut across the different types of spaces they might have visited while at the museum. Parents perceived the Museum visit as something that everyone in their family group could enjoy together. Having many options in one place satisfied parents' desire to keep everyone happy, interested, and entertained. They valued the Museum because of the rich and unique learning opportunities, learning about art and culture, about the creative process, and about different perspectives or ways of seeing. For example, several parents mentioned how Monet's eyesight affected his painting style and how that helped them illustrate that people have different perspectives.

As was the case with like-site leisure learning choices, the art museum was valued because it was a way parents could support and stimulate their child's interests. In addition, many parents express a long-held interest in visual art, design, or architecture, so they've created common ground in the Museum for their family group. Many parents said they hope to inculcate in their children a lifetime habit of appreciating the arts and supporting art museums. Some parents expressed that participating in the arts, as makers and appreciators, reinforces their shared identity as a family.

Another value of visits to the Museum related to family discussions. As a result of their visits to the Museum, parents reported that they engage in conversations about things that they did not ordinarily have the opportunity to discuss. These conversations extended from the present into the past, as well as possible and imaginary futures.



Since most families participated in a family program while on these accompanied visits, many of their statements about value related to these programs. Specifically, parents valued the family programs because it offered children opportunities to be creative, explore a variety of art-making methods and materials, and enabled their children to interact with other adults, in particular, the museum staff facilitating the family programs.

What Characteristics are Shared Across the Greene Family Learning Gallery and Other Family Leisure Learning Destinations?

A focus of this study was to determine what characteristics of the High Museum of Art and the Greene Family Learning Gallery, in particular, were shared with other family leisure learning choices. These families valued leisure learning experiences that provided:

- Opportunities to engage the varied interests of family members while reinforcing family values;
- Experiences that are both educational and fun;
- Options that are active over more passive experiences, in which the family has some freedom of choice, as well as opportunities to manipulate objects and engage the senses;
- Activities and content that stimulate family conversations;
- Environments that are child-friendly, without lots of rules, and opportunities to burn energy;
- Unique opportunities that stimulate creativity and spark imaginations; and
- Options that allow children to practice social skills with other children and adults.

How do Families Make Connections Between the Museum Experience and their Home Life?

Most of the parents in the study went to great lengths to situate a family leisure learning experience within a larger context of the child's life. Some parents reported having conversations on the way home from the Museum or shortly after returning home where they reviewed what they saw and did, discussed what they enjoyed, and connected the visit to other experiences and memories. Some parents reported that their children were inspired to create art at home. The inspiration could come from art that they saw while there, experiences in the Greene Family Learning Gallery, and/or art-making activities they engaged in during a family program at the Museum.

Participation in study

Parents were asked what effect, if any, participation in this research study might have had on the family. Some parents with two or more children noticed that they went on more outings with all of the children. For example, one mother explained how she might take a younger child to a museum while the older children were at school. Participation in the study spurred her to schedule outings with all of her children. One mother noticed that the father accompanied the rest of the family on the Museum visits more often than usual. This was greatly enjoyed by the children. Finally, mothers noted that they became more conscious of the types of conversations that they had as a family and that they tended to engage in more family conversations about their experiences together.