

Getting Started: 10 Steps to Encourage Family Learning at Your Institution

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We invite you to explore family learning and assess where your institution is along the ten steps! Families of all shapes and sizes are visiting our institutions in record numbers. Family learning in a museum takes place when two or more people (with an on-going relationship) walk around, look, converse, and engage in activities together. Conversation is key to encouraging family learning so the steps focus on elements of visitor services and exhibition offerings that will assist families in their personal engagement. Below is a list of ten steps to consider if you want to foster family learning. Each step is explored further in an exercise on the following pages. We welcome your comments and suggestions via e-mail on these ten steps and accompanying exercises. (www.familylearningforum.org)

1. Get acquainted with your family visitors: How many are coming in?
2. Step into the shoes of your family visitor: How family friendly is your facility?
3. Check out your exhibitions: Are there effective elements for family interaction?
4. View your program schedule: What types of events do you offer for families?
5. Reread your institutional mission and goals: Are you ready to welcome families?
6. Consider your commitment: Are you willing to be a family learning advocate?
7. Observe your visitors: Find out what they already enjoy in your museum!
8. Practice a family-friendly perspective: Transform a program to attract families!
9. Revisit your exhibition: Try a new technique to engage all family members!
10. Reflect on your “family friendliness”: Strategize possibilities at your institution!

1. Get acquainted with your family visitors: How many are coming in?

Gather some facts and figures about your family visitors—be on the look out for them entering your museum! Try not to sigh or get nervous due to strollers, diaper bags, or energized toddlers! Select a “mixed audience” day (a special event, monthly program or open house) to take your count.

The following will guide you in this process:

- Do you have many family visitors? ____ Yes ____ No
- Guesstimate what percentage of your audience will be families—do this prior to taking your count today! _____

	Visitors in Family Groups		Visitors not in Family Groups	
	Adults	Children	Adults	Children
One Weekend				
One Summer Week				
One School Vacation Week				
One Special Event				
Totals				

family visitors / total visitors = percentage of family visitation

Do the math to determine the percentage of families visiting your institution. First add up all the visitors in all the columns. Next, take the family total numbers and divide that number by the total visitation.

- What percentage of your visitors come as families? ____ %
- Are you interested in attracting more family visitors? ____ Yes ____ No

The basic body count is a good introduction to the many factors involved with serving these multiple generation audiences. Family audiences are so varied with each age group representing a different type of need! In order to serve their needs and engage them in learning, our institutions need to be well-acquainted with family visitors. We need to be aware of when they visit, who is making up the various groups, and what types of programs, events, and exhibits attract them to our museums!

2. Step into the shoes of your family visitor: How family friendly is your facility?

Our facilities from restrooms to drinking fountains need to meet the needs of the family audience! Try the following exercises to gain some insight on the amenities of your museum:

Survey your facility for family-friendly amenities. Use the brief list below:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| _____ Easy-to-find Restrooms | _____ Restrooms with Changing Tables |
| _____ Benches or chairs | _____ Refreshments Sold |
| _____ Snack area | _____ Clear directional signage |
| _____ Museum Shop(range of items) | _____ Tours or Programs for families |
| _____ Drinking fountains | _____ Friendly staff to answer questions |
| _____ Stroller Parking | _____ Activities for non-readers |

Stroll around with a stroller! You might also want to walk in the family visitor’s shoes by filling up a bag (with handles?) with the weight of all the “necessities”—diapers, bottles, spare clothes, snacks, etc—and grab a stroller, too. Now double check the list above to see where you are headed with your “family load” and walk around toting your bag and pushing the stroller! Look quickly for the restroom sign, a map of where there will be a demonstration in the museum, a drinking fountain, etc.

- Did you feel weighed down by your “bag?” _____
- Was it difficult to push the stroller and balance your supply bag? _____
- How did it impact your visit? _____
- Did anyone approach you to assist you “to stow your family gear?” _____
- Do you have a space available for strollers, backpacks, bags, etc.? _____

Next, find a little friend—yours or another (grandchild, child, family friend) to share in the above experience! Don’t share the “test” with them but rather experience a “fun” museum visit—what happens? Can they find the restroom? Did you wind up carrying their coats, stuffed animal, and drinking cup?

List three of your observations:

Find out from families—gather some more family friendly info! Stop and talk to a few families—approach five families and ask them about the amenities of your facility.

Use this checklist and ask them if your institution is providing the following:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Easy-to-find Restrooms | <input type="checkbox"/> Snack area |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Benches or chairs | <input type="checkbox"/> Refreshments sold - are they appropriate? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Range of items in Museum Shop | <input type="checkbox"/> Tours or Programs their family would try |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drinking fountains | <input type="checkbox"/> Friendly staff to answer questions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Posted list of daily events | <input type="checkbox"/> Clear directional signage |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Activities for non-readers | |

Are there any items not on this list that they would like to have? _____
Be sure to listen to the responses of all family members—from youngest to the oldest!

List some of the responses: _____

Family friendly institutions are one giant step closer to encouraging family learning. Multiple generational visitors need certain amenities including a place to stash a stroller, larger high contrast text (to serve both the youngest and oldest visitors) or activities for non-readers. Improving your amenities may take a little time but will be well worth the investment for all your future visitors!

3. Check out your exhibition: Are there effective elements for family interaction?

Family friendly exhibits address multiple learning styles and attempt to connect with visitors of different generations. Conversation can be the “key” to family learning and these exercises will explore exhibit elements which encourage dialogue!

Still toting your family bag from the previous exercise, visit one exhibit with a friend or family members

Take your time and move around the exhibit area reading the labels and interacting with the exhibit.

- Does your ‘family’ know where to start? _____
How does it feel? _____
- How long did it take to read all the labels? _____
Did anyone read them out loud? _____
- How long did it take before you were searching for a seat? _____
or someplace to put your bag? _____
- Count the words in the longest label. _____
- Approximately how long did it take you to read it? _____
- Count the words in the shortest label. How long to read it? _____
- Would either label engage you and your family? ____ Yes ____ No
- Which sections of the exhibit were most engaging? Why? _____

We suggest you view an exhibit with the following “Seven Characteristics of a Family Friendly Exhibit” developed by PISEC (The Philadelphia-Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative) to see how effective your exhibit layout is for family interaction:

- Is it multi-sided so families can cluster around? ____ Yes ____ No
- Is it multi-user for several sets of hands? ____ Yes ____ No
- Is it accessible-comfortably used by all? ____ Yes ____ No
- Is it multi-outcome so observations and interactions will foster group discussion? ____ Yes ____ No
- Is it multi-modal appealing to different learning styles and knowledge levels? ____ Yes ____ No
- Is it readable with text arranged in easily understood segments or layers? ____ Yes ____ No
- Is it relevant providing cognitive links to visitors’ existing knowledge and experience? ____ Yes ____ No

Reflect on your responses—you will easily see where your exhibits rank in their family friendliness characteristics! Did you discover the design of your exhibits and labels encouraged conversation? Why or why not? Are you surprised at what areas need attention? What changes could you make immediately? Which alterations would take more planning time and additional funding? How could you modify your long term exhibition planning?

4. View your program schedule: What types of events do you offer for families?

Reflect and respond to the following questions about programming at your institution.

- How many programs or events are planned for families during the year? _____
- Where are they advertised and promoted? _____
- Have families been recruited for other events and activities? ____ Yes ____ No
- If so, where have these events been promoted? _____
- Do you ever seek input from families regarding type of event or scheduling of activity? ____ Yes ____ No
- Do you hand out program evaluation forms? ____ Yes ____ No
- Do you incorporate family feedback in subsequent programs? ____ Yes ____ No

Speak to three (3) families visiting your museum and ask them if they have ever attended an event. If not, ask why not and what would entice them to attend? _____

What did you learn from their responses? _____

Strengthening and broadening our family program offerings will assist us in reaching more visitors. Are there areas of your program planning or implementation that you could make more family friendly? What did your evaluations reveal? What wasn't mentioned on those evaluations?

5. Reread your institutional mission and goals: Are you ready to invite families into your institution?

Along with all of the above information you've collected—consider the following:

- Is it possible to view your collection from a new perspective? Yes No

Do your collections support new themes that may appeal to a wider audience? Think broadly about topics that appeal to all age levels like sports, mysteries or food!

- Are you willing to recruit and address an audience with perhaps no prior knowledge of your subject? Yes No
- Is your institution willing to make your topic (history, art, science) fun for all ages? Yes No
- Is your Board and staff amenable to welcoming a family audience?
 Not committed Excited Nervous Unsure
- How would you rate your institutional commitment to families?
 Very high Average Low Not on our chart!

Less is more: One of the clearest differences between an adult focused institution and family focused institution is the amount of text on the wall. 150 word labels look scholarly and suggest the imparting of large amounts of content, but there's a catch. Visitors are considerably more likely to read shorter concisely written text and more likely to learn from them. Which approach supports your museum's mission?

6. Reflect on your commitment: Are you willing to be a family learning advocate?

A family learning advocate is a museum professional who includes and plans for the family audience in their facility, exhibits and programs in order to engage and encourage inter-generational learning.

Here are some more ways to develop your family-friendly advocacy status:

- Read an article about family learning and share it with staff and Board
- Revisit your institutional mission statement and carefully reread the goals—are families included as a group your organization wishes to serve?
- Is your leadership (board/staff) willing to commit institutional time, attention, and resources to build a family audience?
- Is your institutional culture ready to encourage families to laugh and learn
- Find out how families are using your institution now; do families show up for special events? Are families visiting on weekends when or holidays? Do they participate disproportionately in some programs? Sharing what you already provide with board members and other staff can generate support for family learning.
- Is there a large family audience in your area looking for what your institution could offer? Share demographic information or information about organizations in your area that successfully engage families.

Every project or new initiative needs a champion! Are you ready to take the lead in your institution? Would it be advantageous to identify some other key players in launching a family learning initiative?

7. Observe your visitors: Find out what they already enjoy in your museum!

Observing families is easy, informative and objective. It requires minimal training so everyone from frontline staff to your board president can participate. All you need is a clipboard, a floorplan of your exhibition, and a watch.

Find a location where you can observe families entering your exhibition. Write the time they enter the exhibition on the floorplan and trace their path as they use your exhibition. You will use one floorplan for each family you observe. Note family behavior along the way and the time they leave the exhibition:

- Do they read certain text panels?
- Do they find particular artifact interesting?
- Did they walk right by your favorite part of the exhibition?
- Where do they talk to each other?

Variations on a theme

Timing and tracking can take many forms and attempt to answer many different kinds of questions. You can track how different groups of visitors use your offerings. You can note timing along visitor's paths within the exhibition to find out where they spend the most time and the least time. Numbers or letters on the floorplan can indicate where certain behaviors occur. Tracking behaviors like text reading, looking at artifacts, touching exhibits, and engaging in conversations can help identify strengths and weaknesses in your exhibition as well as bringing a greater understand of how your visitors use your exhibitions. You can even write down overheard visitor comments.

Each observation sheet should use the same set of rules or protocols. Sometimes it is necessary to decide to follow one member of a group because members of a family move to different parts on an exhibition and take different amounts of time. Defining behaviors to be observed on the floorplan will lead to consistent reporting so that finished observations can be tallied effectively. Think ahead of time how the information will be used. Collecting details that will not be significant is just creating extra work.

Results!

If families are spending less than 10 minutes in a large gallery, you can bet they are not reading thousands of words of carefully crafted text. On the other hand, maybe they are stopping somewhere you did not expect.

Remember one family may not tell the whole story. A sample size of 20 to 30 observations can provide a good general picture of how families use your exhibition. If you want statistically significant numbers you will need to complete 100 forms. The results and the experience of observing visitors can help every member of the museum staff understand how families see and use your institution.

8. Practice a family-friendly perspective: Transform a program to attract families!

Many museums have reported popular themes to attract families include baseball, sports, animals, food, games, etc. You may wish to review your collection themes to see what “high-appeal” topics are perhaps hiding on the back storage shelf! Packaging a family friendly theme with storytelling, hands-on activities, or an outdoor exploration activity may bring many new families through your door! Remember to market and advertise the program in family friendly publications or places around town.

- What is one current program that could be reshaped to be more family-friendly?
- What area of the collection have you not programmed for the family?
- What new themes could be explored to attract new families to your museum?

9. Revisit your exhibition elements: Try a new technique for all family members!

Developing family interactives for your exhibit does not mean you invite family members to handle the original artifacts! It means adding an activity which will make your family visitor want to spend more time looking at the artifacts or engaging in a discussion around the topic! A puzzle, map, audio, lift flap, or some other intriguing hands-on manipulative will work! The goal is to get the family to stop and engage in a conversation. One of our new favorites is a simulated role play with a script so all family members can take a seat, face each other, and start learning about our topic together! Learn more about this exhibition element technique at www.familylearningforum.org

- Carefully examine your exhibitions and identify an area in one where families could linger!
- What simple element could be added to engage the family?

10. Reflect on your “family friendliness”: Strategize the possibilities at your institution!

You’ve made it through our exercises! We suggest you take some time to digest your new information and reflect on family learning. **You may wish to tally up your “family-friendly” responses:**

- Review your yes answers in question #1—what surprised you about these?
- How many checks for family amenities in #2?
Were your amenities in the great, good, or needs work range?
- How many “yes” answers to a family-friendly exhibit in #3?
Did you discover an exhibition just waiting for that family-friendly element to be added?
- How many “yes” answers in #4 as you reflected on your museum programs?
Did you learn anything shocking? Exciting?
- Did you discover you are willing to be a family learning advocate and an encourager of family learning?
- List three “doable” new ideas or modifications to your current offerings to make your institution more appealing to families.

What does all of this mean to you? to your institution? to the families in your community? Remember our family visitors are our fuel for future members and also help our institutions dig deeper roots in our communities. These tips and exercises are just a starting point for you and your institution. You can increase and add to every institutional area mentioned—we invite you to take the challenge and join us in discovering how to work with families to encourage them to laugh and learn together.