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## **Family Learning Programs in Museums**

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Beyond presenting the latest trends of museum learning programs for families the paper reveals the special characteristics and principals of family learning in museums by examining the diverse methods and tools applied by museums in order to involve families into museum learning. Since an increasing number of museums offer special methodological support for parents by their family guides and diverse downloadable learning materials the paper focuses on the most prevalent features of these publications as well.

### *Characteristics of family learning programs in museums*

From the point of view of museum learning families should be defined as multigenerational visiting groups because families are so diverse by nowadays. This paper adopts the family definition of Lynn D. Dierking: *„Two or more people in a multigenerational group that has an on-going relationship; they may be biologically related but not necessarily. In fact, the general rule is that if a group defines itself as a family, they are one.”*<sup>1</sup> Professor Dierking also states that family learning is a *„special type of free-choice learning where families can reinforce social history and identity”*.<sup>2</sup>

Families visit the museum with diverse expectations like learning, entertainment or social exchange. Involving families into museum learning programs is important also because in many cases family members are isolated to each other. Thus family activities offered by museums may promote a kind of family reintegration as well. By experiencing fun, enjoyment problem-solving and learning in the museum together family ties can be strengthened. Family learning programs in museums foster

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<sup>1</sup>Dierking, Lynn: Laughing and Learning Together: What is Family Learning?. <http://engagefamilies.org/family-learning/what-it-is/family-learning-laughing-and-learning-together/> [18.04.2017].

<sup>2</sup> Dierking, Lynn: Family Learning . . . Laughing & Learning. Video presentation. Family Learning Forum. USS Constitution Museum. 2010. <http://engagefamilies.org/family-learning/what-it-is/family-learning-laughing-and-learning-together/> [18.04.2017].

self-esteem, creativity and communication skills of the family members and they promote to share experiences and new areas of interest.<sup>3</sup> In the same time family learning activities in museums intend to develop children's motor, sensory and communication skills with the contribution of the adult companion.

By nowadays most of the museum family learning programs follow multidisciplinary approach. For instance financial skills of children can be developed in a historical museum through the involvement of old coins. Many museums put an emphasis on the development of digital competences in their family learning programs. For example many of the family programs in the British Museum involve the use of digital technology somehow and some of them aim to develop the digital design skills of the participants as well. The involvement of senses into the museum education program promotes the effectiveness of the learning process. Museum education programs providing the opportunity to learn through smells, sounds, touch and flavours foster the motivation of the learners and result deeper understanding. Museums' family learning programs are successful if the visitors are active, motivated and engaged since these conditions are necessary for the effective learning process.

Representing history or culture through personal life stories has become prevalent in many museums recently. Beyond using story telling as a method to share knowledge about history, museums tend to collect the traces of living history and they often provide opportunity for the visitors to share their own stories. Museums should always find the connections to the personal life of the visitors. Furthermore many museums started to follow an approach which involve visitors through a more personal way.

The Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Collaborative (PISEC) defined the characteristics of family friendly exhibits almost 20 years ago. According to them the family friendly exhibits are „*multi-sided, multi-user, accessible, multi-outcome, multi-modal, readable, relevant*“.<sup>4</sup> By nowadays this has been expanded and it has become a requirement for any innovative museums to have a special program development which intends to engage families and to follow a family learning pedagogical approach which should „*promote the family as a learning environment and encourage participatory learning*.“<sup>5</sup>

We have to state that creating children friendly environment and providing children friendly features are not enough, museums have to be family friendly as well, they have to involve families as units. Family learning programs in museums have to be based on social interaction and the construction of the families' own experience. An innovative museum is

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<sup>3</sup> <http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/F/a/Family-Learning-Museums-Galleries.pdf> [20.04.2017].

<sup>4</sup> <http://name->

[aam.org/uploads/downloadables/EXH.spg\\_08/EXH\\_spg08\\_Why\\_Family\\_Learning\\_in\\_Museums\\_Borun.pdf](http://name-aam.org/uploads/downloadables/EXH.spg_08/EXH_spg08_Why_Family_Learning_in_Museums_Borun.pdf) [20.04.2017].

<sup>5</sup> Developing and supporting family learning in museums and galleries. Renaissance North West, 2009. p.5. <http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/F/a/Family-Learning-Museums-Galleries.pdf> [20.04.2017].

acknowledging how children and adults learn and it is aware of that people learn best when they are active, motivated and engaged. The consideration of the different learning styles have started to spread in museum education work and museum learning professionals apply the diverse educational methods more and more consciously. Communication and the marketing activity of the museums are also crucial in engaging families.

### *Methodological support for parents*

An increasing number of museums offer downloadable methodological support and background information for parents in order to promote the success of the family visit and to strengthen their competences as parents. The downloadable learning materials, working sheets, methodological guidelines, etc. can be mentioned in connection with this. Providing a downloadable document which includes recommendations about how to get prepared for the museum visit with kids, what to do in the museum and how to reflect on the new experience after the museum visit has become more and more prevalent. There are some common features of these materials such as they suggest that the family visit should be limited in time (maximum 90 minutes long) because the most important aim is to provide an enjoyable learning opportunity and to make children wish to return to the museum. These materials very often express the requirements about the expected behavior in museums in order to support the parents in informing their kids about the behavioural rules. Many of these materials include useful information about the different facilities and further rules which support the museum visit such as the maximum size of baby-strollers and bags which can be taken into the exhibition space and many of them share important notes about the dining opportunities or diverse family activities offered by the museum. Including a map about the museum which shows these facilities is really useful.

Providing explicit methodological support for the parents about how to involve their kids into the museum learning experience has become more and more common as well. Some museums even defines the questions which should be posed by the parents during the museum visit. The Guggenheim Museum in New York recommends for instance in its „*Tips for Parents*“ sheet to pose the following questions while they visit the exhibitions with their kids: „*What do you see? What colors do you see? What shapes? What is happening here? What were your clues? What may have happened before? What might happen next? Does the artwork remind you of anything you know or have experienced?*“<sup>6</sup> The Kohl Children’s Museum of Greater Chicago also offers a downloadable parents guide in order to foster the success of the museum visit. The material calls

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.guggenheim.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/guggenheim-tips-for-parents-2016.pdf> [20.04.2017].

the parents' attention to the diverse learning opportunities offered by the museum and it also informs them about the different skill development opportunities offered by each exhibition of the museum (eg: movement, coordination, sensory, balance, exploration, tactile skills, communication, early literacy skills, etc.).<sup>7</sup> Other museums offer downloadable work sheets for families which can be used during the museum visit. There are some museums which offer recommendations for families about activities they can do outside of the museum or even at home. For instance the Boston Children's Museum offers a detailed guideline about activities families can do together at home.<sup>8</sup>

### *Examples of innovations supporting family learning in museums*

Sleepover programs have become more and more popular in museums. For instance three Smithsonian Museums offer interactive sleepover programs for families with kids between age 8-12. Every three child participants are supervised by one adult and all of the programs are handicapped-accessible. The sleepover program of the National Museum of American History which can accommodate up to 150 participants is based on a detective story where participants have to clue exciting treasure-hunt tasks.<sup>9</sup> The sleepover program of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History can involve 180 participants on each occasion. It offers an interactive exploration of the museum, the families participate in hands-on crafts projects and they also view an IMAX film during the special evening.<sup>10</sup> The sleepover program of the National Air and Space Museum includes games and art activities beyond revealing the secrets of the most fascinating crafts.<sup>11</sup>

We also have to mention that an increasing number of museums provide museum learning programs for a special target group which includes grandparents visiting the museum together with their grandchildren. Beyond providing a special learning opportunity for the kids these programs also intend to promote the reminiscence of the elderly and strengthen family ties between grandparents and their grandchildren. Socializing and having common experiences with their grandchildren has a positive effect on the elderly psychically as well. The „When I was Little“ program of the National Museums Liverpool is an innovative example for such intergenerational reminiscence programs. The program involves children between age three and seven and their grandparents. The

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.kohlchildrensmuseum.org/sites/default/files/Parent%27s%20Guide\\_0.pdf](http://www.kohlchildrensmuseum.org/sites/default/files/Parent%27s%20Guide_0.pdf) [19.04.2017].

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bostonchildrensmuseum.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/BCM-Home-Edition-2012.pdf> [19.04.2017].

<sup>9</sup> <http://smithsoniansleepovers.org/american-history/index.shtm> [04.04.2017].

<sup>10</sup> <http://smithsoniansleepovers.org/natural-history/index.shtm> [04.04.2017].

<sup>11</sup> <http://smithsoniansleepovers.org/udvar-hazy/index.shtm> [04.04.2017].

program is based on the use of a backpack with special things which helps the families to explore the museum together by encouraging the kids to ask questions about the memories of the grandparents and fostering the grandparents to share their memories.<sup>12</sup>

An other innovative way to support family learning in museums is to add a family visit section to the website of the museum where all the important recommendations regarding the visit and methodological supports can be placed. For example the British Museum created a special section on its website for families where beyond sharing information about family activities, special family guides, features and facilities which promote family learning they provide a special free application for families called Baron Ferdinand's Challenge which is a fun game compatible with iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch.<sup>13</sup>

## *Conclusion*

Various forms of informal and nonformal learning opportunities have been evolved in museums which intend to engage families. Museums' interpretation of families has been extended and diverse multigenerational groups are targeted by museums through their family learning programs by nowadays. Museum learning programs which involve grandparents together with their grandchildren have become more and more prevalent recently and a special form of them offers a unique learning opportunity for people with dementia. Family learning in the museum is a complex process where adults and children learn together. Beyond developing diverse competences these programs have an important role in strengthening the family ties and promoting the communication between the family members. Families have to be engaged by providing fun and enjoyment in the museum learning program. One of the most important benefits of family learning is the development of the parents' self-esteem, confidence and wellbeing which may motivate them to continue learning for themselves as well and which inspires them to return to the museum with their kids.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/learning/projects/house-of-memories/when-i-was-little.aspx> [10.04.2017].

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[http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/themes/room\\_2a\\_waddesdon\\_bequest.aspx#app](http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/themes/room_2a_waddesdon_bequest.aspx#app) [15.04.2017].

## **Resources**

- Dierking, Lynn: Laughing and Learning Together: What is Family Learning?  
<http://engagefamilies.org/family-learning/what-it-is/family-learning-laughing-and-learning-together/> [18.04.2017].
- <http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/F/a/Family-Learning-Museums-Galleries.pdf> [20.04.2017].
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