

Family Inclusion in Science Centers and Museums

By Margaret Middleton

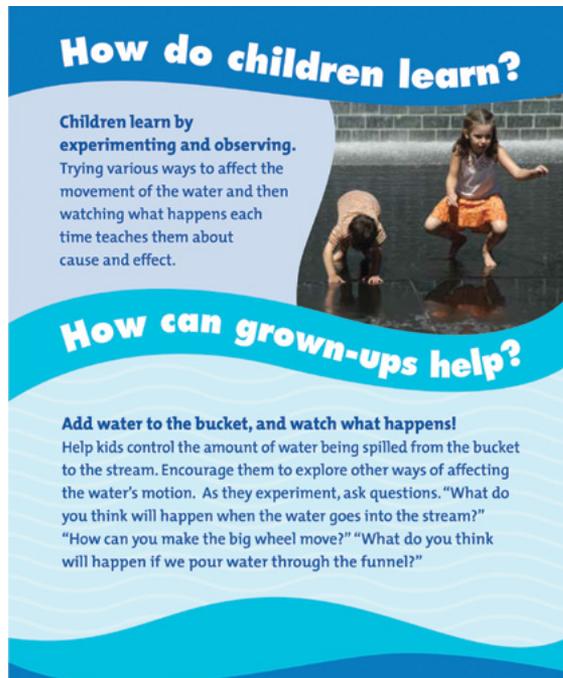
Families make up a major part of science center and museum audiences. The Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (COVES, www.understandingvisitors.org) found that, in the 13 participating science centers that collected data from July to December 2016, 75% of all groups included at least one person under the age of 18. This percentage varied widely among individual museums—from 23% to 100%—as sites ranged from large to very small in both urban and rural areas across the United States.¹

Although these data refer to broad intergenerational learning groups, all too often “family” can become a code word. We often use “family” to mean a nuclear family with two heterosexual, legally married parents in their first marriage, residing in the same household with their children. But according to the Pew Research Center, only 46% of U.S. kids have an experience that fits that description (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family).

Science centers and museums that aren’t actively engaging families who don’t fit that codified definition aren’t serving the majority of families. Family inclusion is about actively welcoming diverse families in museums.

HOW CAN MUSEUMS ACCOMMODATE A GREATER DIVERSITY OF FAMILIES?

There are plenty of actionable, concrete ways to address family inclusion in museums, some of which you can even begin putting into practice today:



An inclusive sign from Boston Children’s Museum, which uses the term “grown-ups” instead of “parents.” Image courtesy Boston Children’s Museum

- **Representation:** Many science centers and museums strive to incorporate gender and racial diversity in their exhibits through graphics featuring women and people of color. Similarly, science centers should make sure to feature varied visual depictions of families in signage. Include single parents, same-sex parents, multi-racial families, and multiple generations. When writing label copy addressing visitors, use “grownup,” “adult,” or “caregiver” instead of “parent,” “mom,” or “dad.” Not all adults accompanying children in the museum are parents. If you include books in your exhibits, consider titles that represent diverse families. (For some examples, see www.leeandlow.com/categories/133/related_products?active_section=Collections).

1. COVES is spearheaded by ASTC and the Museum of Science, Boston. Data represent 2,674 surveys.

- **Seating:** One of the subtle ways museums signal the type of family they expect is through seating. Instead of fixed benches or square tables with four chairs, try modular seating that is easily moved and reconfigured by visitors to accommodate a variety of families. Make sure to include several seating heights to accommodate visitors of different sizes. Bean bag chairs are fun but they are tough for older folks and anyone with mobility issues. If you use bean bags, make sure there are more accessible options available, too.

- **Bathrooms:** Gender-inclusive bathrooms can meet the needs of transgender and nonbinary family members or anyone else who may not feel comfortable or safe using gender-segregated restrooms. They are often single stall and accessible so they can accommodate wheelchairs, strollers, and anyone who needs assistance in the bathroom, including children. They often have changing tables (which should also be present in both men’s and women’s restrooms).

Unfortunately, signage for gender-inclusive restrooms often reads “Family Restroom” and depicts a family like the image on the left below. Opt for a more inclusive sign like the one on the right below.



Gender-inclusive restroom signs are available at www.mydoorsign.com/all-gender-restroom-signs and elsewhere.

- **Family memberships:** Make sure your policies fit your expanded definition of “family.” Instead of defining a Family Membership as a membership for two adults and their children, offer flexible memberships that accommodate families with any number of adults and children, and charge accordingly. This makes room for single



A two-mom family visits Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose. Photo courtesy Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose

caregivers and families with more than two adults in them. Not all family members share a surname so be sure to ask and enter each name individually. Don’t send out mailings to “The Smiths”; instead, address the adults of the family by their full names. Do away with mandatory gendered honorifics like “Ms.” and “Mr.” If your software requires the field, first call them up and complain, and then add “Mx.” to the mix—it’s a gender-inclusive title that started in the United Kingdom and has been catching on. Instead of “mom,” “dad,” or “parent” categories, simply use the word “adult.” Family memberships should not be limited to “members of a household” so as not to leave out families that live apart (like families with divorced parents) or families with hired caregivers.

WHAT’S A GOOD PLACE TO BEGIN?

Museums are not exactly known for being nimble when it comes to change. If you’re not a top decision maker at your museum, policy and infrastructure changes may be harder for you to influence. One of the easiest (and cheapest!) ways to cultivate an institutional culture of family inclusion is to start expanding your museum’s definition of family through language.

Host a brown bag lunch to discuss the meaning of the word “family.” You can use the Family-Inclusive Language chart I created (see page 52 and inluseum.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/infographic.jpg) to talk about the assumptions we make about our visitors and how to avoid embarrassing and even hurtful interactions. The new words you choose will change the way you greet visitors at the admissions desk, give tours, write label copy, and communicate using social media.

Family-Inclusive LANGUAGE

avoid	why?	instead
<p>“parents” “mom” “dad” “mom and dad”</p>	<p>Not everyone accompanying a child is a parent. Grandparents, step-parents, and nannies may not identify as parents.</p> <p>Not all children have a mom and dad.</p>	<p>“grownup” “adult” “caregiver”</p>
<p>“son” “daughter”</p>	<p>The children in someone’s care could be grandchildren, nieces, nephews, godchildren, etc.</p> <p>You may also not want to assume the gender of a child.</p>	<p>“children”</p>
<p>“extended family”</p>	<p>This term is usually meant to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins but for folks of many cultures this isn’t “extended” family- it’s just family.</p>	<p>“family”</p>
<p>“family resemblance”</p>	<p>We’re conditioned to look for similar features in family members so you may see resemblance where there is none. Many families include step-parents, adoptive parents, or parents who conceived with donated eggs or sperm.</p> <p>Inversely, don’t assume that a child who doesn’t look like their caregiver is adopted- many multi-racial children resemble one parent more than the other.</p>	<p>keep it to yourself</p>
<p>“members of a household”</p>	<p>Families don’t always live together. For example, families with divorced parents or incarcerated parents.</p>	<p>“family members”</p>

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These language shifts are simple, but don’t mistake them for being superficial. Words have power. In fact, according to cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky (2011), “Studies have shown that changing how people talk changes how they think.” You actually have the power to challenge your own implicit bias.

A few carefully chosen words can go a long way

in helping visitors feel more welcome in your museum. Start with language, and before long it will be even easier to make the case for further change. ■

REFERENCE

Boroditsky, L. (2011, February). How language shapes thought: The languages we speak affect our perceptions of the world. *Scientific American*, 304(2), 62–65.

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