

WELCOMING YOUNG CHILDREN INTO THE MUSEUM

A PRACTICAL GUIDE



SARAH ERDMAN AND NHI NGUYEN WITH MARGARET MIDDLETON

**ROUTLEDGE GUIDES TO PRACTICE IN MUSEUMS,
GALLERIES AND HERITAGE**

Welcoming Young Children into the Museum

Welcoming Young Children into the Museum provides all of the information practitioners need to consider when making the decision to engage with this audience and their carers. Meeting the reader where they are, this guide enables professionals to work toward outcomes that fit with their needs.

Working methodically from the initial stages of bringing staff on board, through to implementation and evaluation, readers are carefully steered through each phase. “Big-picture” needs, like adherence to mission, are considered alongside logistical components, like cleaning schedules, to ensure that museums cater to young children in a way that is beneficial to both the visitors and the institution. Drawing on current neurological research and best practices in early childhood education and development, this guide presents case studies from a variety of different institutions around the world that demonstrate that creating interesting, developmentally appropriate opportunities for young children is about much more than just simplifying what is already on offer. Erdman, Nguyen and Middleton demonstrate that the age and needs of the visitors must be taken into careful consideration, as well as the assets and potential obstacles of the institution.

Welcoming Young Children into the Museum will be essential reading for professionals working in museums large and small, regardless of type. It will be useful to those who are considering setting up new programs for early years audiences and those with existing programs, who would like to improve their offering.

Sarah Erdman is a mom, museum professional and early childhood educator. Her professional practice focuses on how to best serve young children in informal learning settings. She has a MAT in Museum Education and an AAS in Early Childhood Development and has been teaching for over 10 years in formal and informal learning environments.

Nhi Nguyen is an experienced early childhood museum educator based in Philadelphia. She graduated from Haverford College with a degree in Anthropology and received her graduate degree in Museum Education at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Her research focuses on promoting a positive racial identity in young children through museum programming.

Margaret Middleton is an independent exhibit designer currently based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and working at the intersection of design and social justice. Middleton has a degree in industrial design from the Rhode Island School of Design and over 15 years of experience working in the museum field.

Routledge Guides to Practice in Museums, Galleries and Heritage

This series provides essential practical guides for those working in museums, galleries, and a variety of other heritage professions around the globe.

Including authored and edited volumes, the series will help to enhance practitioners' and students' professional knowledge and will also encourage sharing of best practices between different countries, as well as between different types and sizes of organisations.

Titles published in the series include:

Interpreting Heritage

A Guide to Planning and Practice

Steve Slack

Managing Change in Museums and Galleries

A Practical Guide

Piotr Bienkowski and Hilary McGowan

Applying for Jobs and Internships in Museums

A Practical Guide

Martha Schloetzer

Welcoming Young Children into the Museum

A Practical Guide

Sarah Erdman and Nhi Nguyen with Margaret Middleton

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Routledge-Guides-to-Practice-in-Museums-Galleries-and-Heritage/book-series/RGPMGH

Welcoming Young Children into the Museum

A Practical Guide

Sarah Erdman and Nhi Nguyen with
Margaret Middleton

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Bib.
Item.....
Barcode.....
Call no.
.....
.....
Date

First published 2022
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2022 Sarah Erdman, Nhi Nguyen and Margaret Middleton

The right of Sarah Erdman, Nhi Nguyen and Margaret Middleton to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-51783-0 (hb)

ISBN: 978-0-367-51782-3 (pb)

ISBN: 978-1-003-05519-8 (eb)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003055198

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC



Contents

	<i>List of figures and resources</i>	viii
	<i>Contributors</i>	x
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
	Introduction: why young children in museums?	1
	<i>Introduction</i>	1
	<i>Why?</i>	1
	<i>Value to children</i>	2
	<i>Value to families</i>	2
	<i>Value to museums</i>	3
	<i>A brief history of museums and young children</i>	3
	<i>What does it mean?</i>	5
1	Reflection and research: preparing the ground	7
	SARAH ERDMAN, NHI NGUYEN WITH MARGARET MIDDLETON	
	<i>Motivation</i>	8
	<i>Team effort</i>	8
	<i>Elevator pitch</i>	11
	<i>Resource analysis</i>	12
	<i>Financial</i>	13
	<i>Space</i>	13
	<i>Human resources</i>	14
	<i>Supplies</i>	14
	<i>Conclusion</i>	15
2	Early childhood education: laying the foundation	16
	SARAH ERDMAN, NHI NGUYEN WITH MARGARET MIDDLETON	
	<i>How children learn</i>	16
	<i>Learning theories</i>	23
	<i>Why?</i>	30

<i>Family learning</i>	30
<i>Visitors are complex</i>	33
<i>Adults with children</i>	35
<i>Family learning</i>	37
<i>Conclusion</i>	38

3 Physical environment and available information: leveling the floor 40

SARAH ERDMAN, NHI NGUYEN WITH MARGARET MIDDLETON

<i>Accessibility</i>	41
<i>Information</i>	41
<i>Access</i>	43
<i>Internal considerations</i>	53
<i>Esthetics</i>	54
<i>First impressions</i>	55
<i>Conclusion</i>	57

4 Program planning: framing the walls 58

SARAH ERDMAN, NHI NGUYEN WITH MARGARET MIDDLETON

<i>Information gathering</i>	58
<i>Program spaces</i>	59
<i>Program framework</i>	61
<i>Anti-bias/anti-racist pedagogy</i>	63
<i>Program types</i>	67
<i>Additional resources</i>	79
<i>Strategies for planning</i>	79
<i>Evaluation</i>	80
<i>Conclusion</i>	85

5 Making exhibits for young children: designing the interior 91

MARGARET MIDDLETON

<i>Planning</i>	92
<i>Observing visitors</i>	93
<i>Prototyping</i>	93
<i>Advisory committees</i>	94
<i>Writing interpretation</i>	95
<i>Physical space</i>	98
<i>Exhibits</i>	100
<i>Digital components</i>	102
<i>Cleaning and reset</i>	102
<i>Staffing</i>	107
<i>Conclusion</i>	107

6	Staff training: making a house a home	109
	SARAH ERDMAN, NHI NGUYEN WITH MARGARET MIDDLETON	
	<i>Why?</i> 110	
	<i>Benefit to visitors</i> 110	
	<i>Benefit to staff</i> 111	
	<i>Structuring staff training</i> 112	
	<i>Types of staff training</i> 118	
	<i>Frequency of staff training</i> 120	
	<i>Conclusion</i> 121	
7	Reflection and review: why this is all worth it?	124
	SARAH ERDMAN, NHI NGUYEN WITH MARGARET MIDDLETON	
	<i>Appendix A: Storytime resources</i> 128	
	<i>Reading aloud</i> 129	
	<i>Appendix B: Anti-bias anti-racist learning resources</i> 131	
	<i>Appendix C: Selected resources</i> 132	
	<i>Bibliography</i> 139	
	<i>Index</i> 142	

Figures and resources

2.1	Development charts	20
2.2A and 2.2B	Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Olinksy's hierarchy of visitor needs	23-24
2.3	Bloom's Taxonomy	25
2.4A/B	Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding	26-27
2.5	The four goals for anti-bias education	29
2.6	Family Inclusive Language Chart	32
2.7	A common description of a complex problem is that something is "the tip of the iceberg"	34
4.1	Learning about the concept of rainbows	62
1	2-year-old child in "The Obliteration Room" <i>Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors</i> , February 23 to May 14, 2017, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC	87
2	Two children contemplate the fountain in the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC	88
3	Close inspection of works on display at The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA	89
4	Inspired by Degas at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC	90
5.1	This family label is from "Make Way for Ducklings: the Art of Robert McCloskey" at Museum of Fine Arts Boston	96
5.2	The context of this label helps caregivers notice children's learning behaviors and the suggestions offer ways to encourage those behaviors in "Peep's World," an early science learning exhibit at Boston Children's Museum	97
5.3	A reference chart of the average needs of young children to be able to sit, stand and see exhibits clearly	99
5.4	In the visitor center at Walden Pond, young naturalists' curiosities are rewarded when they lift tiny doors to reveal beautiful natural specimens	101
5.5	A wall-mounted basket at Maryland Science Center for manipulatives in need of cleaning.	104

5.6	For this close-looking activity in “Mammoth Discovery!” at Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose, we could have provided a bin of loose, plastic magnifying glasses	105
5.7	In the Rainbow Food Truck exhibit, children make beautiful play pizzas with colorful faux vegetable slices	106
6.1	A sample graph for providing staff training	122

Tables

2.1	Chart of Developmental Milestones for children Birth—5 Years Old	36
5.1	Caregivers	92

Boxes

4.1	Grown-up and Me Lesson Plan	67
4.2	Festival Lesson Plan	71
4.3	Workshop Lesson Plan	74
4.4	Evaluation Charts	81

Contributors

Margaret Middleton is an independent exhibit designer currently based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and working at the intersection of design and social justice. Middleton has a degree in industrial design from the Rhode Island School of Design and over 15 years of experience working in the museum field.

Middleton developed the Family Inclusive Language Chart in 2014 and consults with museums on implementing family inclusive practice. Their writing has been published in the *Journal of Museum Education*, Exhibition (NAME), Dimensions (ASTC) and Museum magazine (AAM).

Nhi Nguyen is an experienced early childhood museum educator based in Philadelphia. She graduated from Haverford College with a degree in anthropology and received her graduate degree in Museum Education at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Her research focuses on promoting a positive racial identity in young children through museum programming. Over the last several years, she has worked in a variety of museums to create positive and engaging learning opportunities for young children and their families. There's nothing she enjoys more than co-learning with others!

Sarah Erdman is a mom, a museum professional and an early childhood educator. Her professional practice focuses on how to best serve young children in informal learning settings. She has a MAT in Museum Education and an AAS in Early Childhood Development and has been teaching for over 10 years in formal and informal learning environments. She is one of the authors of *Trauma and Young Children: Teaching Strategies to Support and Empower* and the editor of *The Care and Keeping of Museum Professionals* as well as writing for the American Alliance of Museums and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. She is the founder of Cabinet of Curiosities, which provides professional development and educational consulting services for museums and early childhood institutions.

Acknowledgments

This book couldn't have happened without the help of so many.

Thank you to Shaleyn Amaio and Casey Stockstill for your guidance and expertise, and your willingness to use your talents and passion to make it the best it could be. Thank you also to Heidi Lowther for seeing the potential in this project and helping every step of the way.

Thank you to Chris Sancomb and Sara DeAngelis. I am grateful to have had such generous mentors to guide me in my children's museum career. What a gift to have teachers for bosses.

Thank you also to Natalie Tahsler for your invaluable contributions.

Introduction

Why young children in museums?

Introduction

Something drew you to this book. Is it because you've wanted to welcome young children into your museum for a while? Did you see something at another institution that made you wonder if it would work within your museum, gallery, historic house or cultural institution? Were you told to find new audiences? Regardless, of your initial motivation, now that you are here we can work together to make it happen. To start, we have to agree on the idea that children belong in museums—any museum.

It is a bold statement, the idea that any museum can provide benefit for children and the adults that bring them. Certainly, there are institutions that have it easier, places where children fit in quite naturally and others whose design or subject matter make it much more difficult to fold in age-appropriate content. What is perfect at a large natural history museum is not necessarily going to work for a small historic house. It also takes work to make your museum welcoming to young children and something that has to be embraced at all levels of the institution.

This book is meant to guide you through the process of discovering how to get your museum ready for young children and what that will look like in your space and with your resources. It is tempting to dive in and offer a program, but if you take the steps to figure out what it should look like and how it will be supported you will build a much stronger foundation that will lead to something sustainable.

Why?

The first question you might be asking yourself, or have well-meaning colleagues and friends asking you, is WHY children should come to museums? Those who are immersed in content scholarship might wonder what an infant or toddler can get out of the experience, those in charge of preserving and protecting the objects may cringe at the thought of boisterous bodies in the space. As a first step, let's delve into the value that children and families get from museums *and* the benefit this audience brings to museums.

2 Introduction

Value to children

For the purpose of this book, we are considering “young children” to be children from birth to 5 years old. This age range is at a unique learning point that differs from the elementary school years. Within this range are infants (birth to 1), toddlers (1–3) and preschool (3–5). While many of the lessons learned can be applied to early elementary school years (often 5–8 years old is included in the definition of young children), it is important to differentiate these earliest years.

Children are naturally curious and their brains are primed for learning. In the first few years of their life, more than 1,000,000 neuronal connections form every second (Erdman and Colker 2020). These connections are the foundation for all future learning since it allows the brain to take in new information and build on existing patterns and knowledge (Erdman and Colker 2020, 19). The way the brain can create these connections is through the sensory input a child gets, their ability to interact with and explore the world around them.

Museums offer the opportunity for incredibly rich sensory exploration and exposure to things that the child would not experience in their everyday life.

When my son was a toddler, his first interaction with a train was in the National Museum of American History. Being able to see the scale, colors, sounds and parts of a train, something that wasn't easily accessible in our community, brought to life what he had seen in his books.—Sarah

Preschool and early elementary aged children also have the chance to expand their concept of the world around them and they can challenge the views they have on everything from romanticized opinions of the past to what art can be. As children move from a very self-centered view of the world into a fuller understanding of being part of a community, museums can give them very tangible access to information through objects and interactive experiences.

Value to families

It is important to define early on what this book means when it uses the term “family.” There is a whole constellation of family groups that go beyond the US Census definition of “two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption who live together” (HRSA). This book defines families more along the lines of the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education in their policy statement on family engagement. A family is “inclusive of all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, to include biological, adoptive, and foster parents; grandparents; legal and informal guardians; and adult siblings” (HHS and DOE). We would add caregivers to this list, someone who is intimately involved in the day-to-day care of the child like a nanny, childcare provider or babysitter.

Young children do not come to museums on their own; they are brought there and accompanied through the experience by an adult. Because of this, it is

important to think about the value that the entire family gets out of a museum visit and not just the benefit to the child.

Families with young children are bombarded with information on the things they “should” be doing piled on top of the other responsibilities within the family and community. When it comes to the “shoulds” related to young children, much of them revolve supporting the development of language and social-emotional skills through exploration and interaction. Museums have an incredible chance to provide opportunities for language development, resources to help facilitate learning and discussion of topics the family does not feel equipped to handle on their own and ways for families to expand their experiences beyond what they normally have access to.

In addition, museums have the potential to “age” with the family, providing stimulation for multiple ages and being a place that can be revisited over and over again. They are able to validate the adults’ interests and needs with their desire to have an experience with the child.

Value to museums

It is important to note that the word “museum” will be used throughout the book as a short-hand to include museums of all content types (art, history, science, etc.) as well as galleries, historic houses, cultural institutions and the list goes on. The idea is to explore how institutions with specific content specialties and/or collections (both archival and educational) can approach this audience.

Many museums still adhere to the conceit that they are the sole providers of information and expertise. Museums have a long history of interpreting collections from a privileged position and clinging to the fiction that they can remain neutral (Autry 2019).

When museums make deliberate choices to openly dialogue with visitors and intentionally collaborate with new audiences, then they have the opportunity to become a valued contributor to the community and a place where exploration and learning can happen. Families with young children can be powerful collaborators since the adults are learning what they need for personal growth as well as what resources are necessary to positively influence their children.

In addition to these broader goals, making your institution a place that families feel comfortable is positive in more day-to-day calculations. Many families, when they find a place that their children enjoy and that they feel is worthwhile, will become loyal visitors. There is also an incredible network of sharing and recommendations through both informal social networks and writing often lumped together as “Mommy Blogs.” Finally, as more research and attention focus on the correlation between high-quality experiences in childhood and success later in life, the opportunities for sponsorship and funding related to early learning initiatives continue to grow.

A brief history of museums and young children

Children in museums is not a new concept. The Smithsonian Institution developed a “Children’s Room” in 1900 housing natural history collections in low cases

and without the Latin labels that were common at the time (Smithsonian Institution). The Brooklyn Children's Museum, which opened its doors in 1899 (Brooklyn Children's Museum), and the Boston Children's Museum, founded in 1913 (Boston Children's Museum), were pioneers in the concept of using museums as means of exploration and learning for children. While some institutions started with the express purpose of catering to young children, others were responding to need. The institution now known as the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood took shape in 1922 because the head curator noticed how often the space was filled with "bored, noisy children" and began to shape the collection to interest them (Victoria and Albert Museum).

This commitment to museums as a place of learning continued from the 1900s to post World War II (WWII) with institutions like the Newark Museum under John Cotton Dana and the Toledo Museum of Art developing specific initiatives and both families and schools utilizing museums as part of their learning experience (Shaffer 2016, 40).

Interactive exhibits and experiences, which are the most common visual for many when they think of children in museums, really took off in the 1960s with institutions like the Exploratorium and the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. During this time, children's museums, in the style of the Boston Children's Museum, began to gain popularity worldwide with the Les Musee de Enfants in Brussels being one of the first to open outside the United States in 1975 (Musee de Enfants). These "discovery spaces" continue to be a popular way method of engaging families with young children both in spaces deliberately set aside for young children and incorporated in the general exhibits (Shaffer 2016, 5).

With the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which was ongoing as this book was being written, museums are seeing a shift in how they incorporate touch and hands-on discovery. However, regardless of what changes, the strength of museums to reach young children lies in their ability to allow children to have a sensory and concrete experience through the objects they house.

Developing understanding of how children learn

The idea that children need training for adult life has existed in almost every culture in some form since recorded history, but the importance of early experiences and the connection between brain development and learning has only been in wide discussion since the late 1990s (Gordon and Williams 2008, 14–15). Throughout history, the importance of childhood and the amount of energy and resources that were dedicated to early learning has changed based on access, economics and a myriad of other factors. However, most contemporary educational theory is explicit that a lot of development and learning happens in the first few years and that the quality of interactions will make a big impact on outcomes for the child.

In different cultures across the globe what the care and education of children looks like will be different, but there are themes that have gained a widespread following. A primary one is that learning should be child-centered and children develop at an individual pace. A complementary idea is that children learn best

from hands-on or sensory approach with first-hand information (Gordon and Williams 2008, 16–18). Whether this learning takes place primarily in the home or in childcare settings, and how much oversight and input there is from government and society, depends on socio-cultural values and econo-political landscape of the area (Kagan 2020, 24).

What does it mean?

These evolutions in our knowledge of how children develop and learn, and what society expects in terms of early learning access, don't just affect primary caregivers or structured learning environments. Individual families and governments are looking for ways to support young learners and meet the changing needs for education. There is an opportunity for museums to capitalize on their strengths, especially in regard to first-hand and sensory approaches to learning, to bolster these efforts. Not only does it provide a necessary service for families with young children, giving them access to a completely unique set of learning opportunities, but it also gives museums a new avenue of relevancy and can renew the place and purpose that they have in the community.

However, when you put into the equation that young children and their families and the museum need to get value out of it, as well as the more refined understanding of what a high-quality experience looks like, it becomes clear that museums need to be thoughtful and deliberate in their approach to building this relationship.

That is where the “practical guide” part of the book comes into play. Rather than providing you with all the theory and pushing you out the door, or giving you the nuts and bolts but not challenging you to think about why you are doing it, this book will help you take each step logically and thoughtfully. Open-ended resources and planning documents will be provided so that no matter what stage of planning you are at, or what size and content your museum has, you will be able to make use of the information.

The general structure of the book is outlined in the following. However, our intention is that it will be flexible allow both cover-to-cover reading or the ability to dip in and reference sections that are relevant to where your institution is in the process.

Throughout this book, we lean heavily on the construction metaphor, the idea of planning being the “foundation” and building up from there. Honestly, it is because it really makes sense. A preschooler building with blocks knows the roof of their building needs something to hold it up. In our case, it helps us remember that we need to build methodically through the different steps, so we end up with something stable and sustainable.

We also tried to incorporate quotes, small vignettes and other anecdotes from professionals in the field. This will not only give you a different perspective and let you hear from other voices in the field but also show you “real world” examples of what we are talking about so that you can get a sense of what it looks like in action. Most of the quotes were gathered from professionals in the Emerging Museum Professionals Network Facebook group and also general queries on

6 *Introduction*

Twitter. They represent many different types of museums and generally draw on examples from the United States and Europe.

Chapter 1 will be a chance to reflect on what your end goal for bringing families into the museum is. It will provide information about important steps such as getting buy-in from all levels of the museum and assessing your resources and assets.

Chapter 2 is “early childhood education 101” and will lay out important information about how children and families learn and important things to think about when welcoming all the different families that may visit.

Chapter 3 explores what it means to make space for children, both physically and in the atmosphere of the museum.

Chapter 4 defines different program types that have been done in museums across the globe and logistic components to be aware of.

Chapter 5 looks specifically at exhibits both young child specific and incorporating families and young children in the exhibit design thinking from the beginning.

Chapter 6 focuses on staff training and the providing all professionals in the museum the tools they need to feel comfortable and provide a quality experience.

Chapter 7 is a chance to reflect on why you started this journey in the first place and hear first-hand accounts from families who have brought their children to museums.