



PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES IN CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

Including Recommended Standards for Professional Practice and Self-Study Questions

**Association of Children's Museums
Self-Study Task Force
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WHAT ARE CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS?

Children's museums are a pioneering and dynamic group of institutions that are challenging and redefining the boundaries of the traditional museum world and are still in the process of defining themselves.

Children's museums emphasize the educational role of museums, the visitor (children and families), and contextual interactive exhibit strategies over the more traditional museum focus on the preservation/research role, permanent collections, and non-tactile display or presentation of objects.

In these client-centered institutions, the needs and interests of the audience, the motivation to learn, and empowerment of the visitor through contact and direct experience with objects are as important as subject or content focus.

Children's museums are one of the fastest growing areas of the museum profession and the movement has burgeoned in the last two decades.

HOW SHOULD THIS GUIDE BE USED?

This document attempts to identify the unique characteristics, needs and concerns of children's museum and to avoid replication of standards commonly accepted as applying to the museum field as a whole. Therefore, it is the intent of the ACM Self-Study Task Force to encourage the use of several existing publications * as companion documents and references. All children's museums should be familiar with:

1. American Association of Museums Accreditation Self-Study - The criteria by which a museum should be operating are inherent in the questions.
2. MAP III Self-Study Questionnaire - This component of the Museum Assessment Program focuses on the public dimension of a museum.
3. Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums - The report by the AAM Task Force on Museum Education presents an expanded definition of the educational role of museums.

The standards recommended in this document are intended for use in several ways:

- as an educational tool for children's museums that are in the planning stages or newly opened so that they are aware of professional expectations commonly accepted by the children's museum field.
- as a guide for children's museums that are in operation and are striving to achieve higher levels of professionalism; the guide will be useful in long range planning processes and in staff and board orientation to the field of children's museums.
- as a benchmark for children's museums that are seeking accreditation from the American Association of Museums. These standards will be used by AAM visiting committees to help them evaluate the levels of professionalism found in the applicant museum.

Children's museums are commonly established as part of a grassroots community effort. Therefore, it is recognized that, for the majority of children's museums, the degree of professionalism will evolve and increase with institutional maturity and additional resources. While limited resources may preclude achieving certain levels of professional practice at different stages of organizational development, museum managers and professionals should still be aware of these standards and levels of quality as they strive for excellence in carrying out the museum's responsibilities to the public.

* Available through American Association of Museums, 1575 I Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 289-1818.

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DEFINITIONS

Children's Museum:

For the purposes of the accreditation program of the AAM, a children's museum is defined as an institution committed to serving the needs and interests of children by providing exhibits and programs that stimulate curiosity and motivate learning. Children's museums are organized and permanent non-profit institutions, essentially educational in purpose, with professional staff, which utilize objects, and are open to the public on some regular schedule.

Collections:

The children's museum field recognizes the following definition of types of collections adopted by the AAM Accreditation Commission:

Educational collections: support the mission of the museum and are held for public use in exhibitions and public programs

Permanent collections: have intrinsic value to art, history, science, or culture; and are held and curated on a permanent basis

Research collections: are held for comparative and study purpose.

Object:

As defined for children's museums, objects primarily serve as tools to motivate learning and address the developmental needs of children. They are instruments for carrying out the children's museum's educational objectives, and reflect these purposes. The mode of presentation is substantially interactive and contextual. Objects may not necessarily have intrinsic value to science, history, art, or culture, and can include constructed activity pieces and exhibit components.

MISSION/PLANNING

The mission statement defines the purpose of the museum and the means by which it achieves its purpose (what it will and will not do as an institution). A strong, clear mission statement is important in creating a foundation for a shared vision for the museum and in setting the stage for effective leadership of the institution. A workable and memorable vision, articulated in the mission statement, is a powerful catalyst for human action and can define a museum's focus and culture. As a museum evolves as an institution, there will be a need for the mission statement to evolve also.

A long-range plan is critical to any museum as a guide to future institutional development but especially for children's museums given the rapid and accelerated rate at which these museums tend to grow and expand. A long range plan establishes the desired direction and goals of the museum, assesses needs and resources (present and potential), and sets forth strategies to achieve goals. Long range plans commonly address a three to five year time span as a minimum with provisions for regular updates (such as on an annual basis).

Standards for Professional Practice

1. The mission statement should be a written document that has been formally adopted by the board of trustees or governing body. It must be in accord with the purposes of the museum as set forth in the museum's charter, articles of incorporation/bylaws, or other legal documents.
2. The mission statement should be reviewed periodically and revised when necessary.
3. All museum activities should be measured against its mission statement. Policies, programs, exhibits, and collections should reflect the mission.
4. A mission statement should specify children as the audience (and associated audiences if appropriate) since this is a major distinguishing characteristic of the field. It can delineate the visitor age group that the museum targets since this will determine or impact the focus of the museum and the expertise needed to appropriately serve them, i.e. ages 2-12 or the inclusion of adolescents. Because of the wide diversity of children's museums, it is helpful to know the content or disciplines that the museum focuses on in order to get a full picture of the museum's activities; some children's museums specialize in art, science, etc., while others are generalist and address a variety of subjects.

5. A long range plan and plan for ongoing revision should be written as a guide to the future direction of the museum and formally adopted by the Board.
6. Every children's museum should develop a philosophical framework encompassing its beliefs about education and learning theories and methods for stimulating curiosity and learning for children. This framework should help guide the determination of appropriate exhibit and program content, design and format.

PROGRAM

Exhibits and Programs

Children's museums place an emphasis on interactive and contextual exhibit strategies. Children's museums are encouraged to develop their own character and identity as they grow and mature. The beauty of participatory museums that are audience-based is that these institutions reflect their communities and the character of their audiences so as to meet specific needs and serve them well -- there is value to the uniqueness inherent in being "community specific." This uniqueness will also tend to be engendered by strong collaborative processes with community groups. Not every exhibit will be (or should be) unique since there are many, especially in the sciences, that are effective and are found in many children's museums because they do work.

Since administration structures in many children's museums are based on a collegial model, there is generally a strong internal commitment to broad-based decision-making and working together as a team, especially in the development and design of exhibits. Commonly the approach to exhibit development involves team coordination of staff representatives with expertise in areas of educational/child development theory, content/discipline specialties, and exhibit design. The team draws on other staff capabilities and outside resources as appropriate and utilizes some form of visitor input.

Children's museums rely heavily on staff volunteers to interface directly with visitors in exhibits and programs because of the active nature of the learning that these institutions are engaged in. Recent research has indicated the importance of facilitation, mediated learning, and apprenticeships in developing skills and understanding. Children's museums are labor intensive institutions because the application of these findings requires a substantial commitment of human resources. Training for staff and volunteers is critical to effectively enhance the learning experience for the visitor.

Evaluation is a necessary component for enhancing the effectiveness and success of a museum's exhibits and programs and should be given as high a priority as resources will allow.

Standards for Professional Practice

1. Children's museums should seize the opportunity to make an exhibit their own -- i.e., to customize it to their specific circumstances and community -- whether they develop an original exhibit or borrow the concept of another.
2. In duplicating or adapting an exhibit, acknowledgment should be given to the original developers when known. In such cases, a museum should also be aware of legal issues pertaining to copyrights, trademarks, etc.
3. There is a wide latitude for the definition of "interactive" but each museum must define it for itself and be clear about what it means. Since children's museums provide hands-on learning, the majority of exhibits should be interactive in a meaningful way.
4. Children's museums must have direct access to (preferably on staff, but also available through community resources, consultants, etc.) expertise in learning theories, educational methodologies for stimulating curiosity and motivating learning, developmental appropriateness, current scholarly research, and social issues impacting children. These bodies of knowledge should be incorporated and addressed in the development of exhibits and programs.
5. Children's museums are encouraged to have a "team" or shared process for developing exhibits and programs.
6. Exhibits should be built and serviced to withstand heavy interactive use with the development process addressing preventive maintenance. All efforts must be made to keep the exhibits in working order and repaired in a timely manner.
7. The overall maintenance, cleaning, and painting of the children's museum should be done on a regular schedule in order to reflect an overall attitude of respect for children and their need for clean, safe and welcoming spaces.
8. Precautions should be taken in exhibit design and maintenance procedures to minimize childhood health/sanitation problems, the spread of contagious diseases,

and injuries and accidents. Materials should be carefully selected to minimize safety hazards to children and visitors.

9. In attempting to best serve the needs of their visitors, responsive to a diverse audience, children's museums should establish and cultivate broad community based networks and relationships with other educators and child care providers, and social service agencies. These resources should be used in exhibit and program development and evaluation.
10. The role of staff and volunteers in facilitating learning for visitors should be clearly defined. Appropriate training in child development and informal and interactive learning in a museum setting should be provided on an ongoing basis.
11. Evaluation of exhibits and programs should be incorporated into the development process. Exhibit prototypes and testing are strongly encouraged. Information from evaluation should be utilized in the review and redesign of exhibits and programs.

Object Use

A number of children's museums have permanent collections in the traditional sense, that is they are not only used for educational purposes, but also for preservation and research as well. Other children's museums do not have permanent collections but utilize educational collections (see definition section). Whether or not a children's museum has a permanent collection depends on its mission and vision; moreover, a museum must have sufficient institutional resources to care for a permanent collection properly. Often, a young institution will decide to establish a permanent collection as it matures and grows.

For museums with permanent collections, a collections policy is a well-established prerequisite for professionalism recognized throughout the museum profession and already addressed through commonly accepted museum standards. Children's museums that choose not to establish collections are advised to adopt policies governing the care and use of objects since they may typically receive offers of donated objects, borrow objects or exhibits from other institutions, receive touring exhibitions, etc.

Standards for Professional Practice

1. All children's museums with permanent collections should have a written collections policy that sets forth the museum's professional standards regarding objects in its care. Policies should follow established museum guidelines and address acquisition, management and record keeping, storage and care, loans, and deaccessioning.
2. Children's museums with educational collections should have written object management policies which describe their philosophy toward the management of these collections. Policies should address donations, inventory procedures, storage, care, loans (of both objects and exhibits), and disposal of items in these collections.
3. Children's museums should be conversant in techniques for working with objects both in teaching and in exhibits that communicate their meaning or message to the visitor while maintaining the proper levels of protection and preservation as dictated by the institution's collection policy.

Children's museums should enter into written agreements when borrowing exhibits as well as objects.

PUBLIC DIMENSION

Because children's museums are client-centered institutions, their sense of responsibility to their community and the children and families they serve is central to their mission. Community and audience involvement, dialogue, collaboration, and participation are therefore strong values shared by children's museums. A deep commitment to these values is found infused throughout institutional operations and decision making (ranging from Board and staff selection to the exhibit and program development processes).

Meaningful involvement of children in the museum is an integral part of demonstrating and fostering a fundamental respect for children; inclusion of their input is both a means and end for children's museums in addressing the issues of public dimension. Their direct participation can take many forms and may take place on many levels depending on such factors as institutional philosophy and leadership, scope of museum activities, nature of the community, and level of the museum's resources. As an example, one form of involvement utilized by many children's museums is the establishment of a Children's Advisory Board.

Children's museums are committed to equity, i.e. reflecting the diversity of our society in terms of race, ethnic origin, age, gender, social/economic status, and education in all museum activities and at all levels.

Standards for Professional Practice

1. As the primary audience, children should have a voice in a children's museum. Meaningful involvement can take as many forms as are appropriate to individual museums.
2. A children's museum should have a profile and definition of its community which includes: population size; age range; ethnic and racial composition; economic levels; and other demographic information. It should understand its current audience and analyze potential audiences in order to develop museum activities with the widest possible impact.
3. The museum should incorporate accessibility for all visitors in its facility, exhibits and programs. "Accessibility" is used here in its broadest sense, including visitors with disabilities, non-readers, non-English speaking persons, visitors with diverse economic backgrounds, etc.
4. Given the nature of the audience, the children's museum must take extra precautions to protect the visitor from potential hazards. Safety of visitors within the museum should be monitored on an ongoing basis.
5. Children's museums should regularly provide training in evacuation procedures, first aid, and CPR for staff and volunteers, as appropriate, according to job responsibilities.
6. Children's museums must reach targeted audiences in creative and responsive ways. A museum should evaluate its effectiveness in reaching those audiences on an ongoing basis.

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM SELF-STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE
REVISED 11/92

(Note: Questions do not appear in prioritized order)

Mission/Planning

1. Does your mission statement identify children as your primary audience and recognize other audiences involved with children?
2. Based on your mission, how do you serve the needs of children?
3. Based on your mission, what subject areas/themes do your exhibits and programs focus on?
4. Describe the key educational philosophies and methods you use to stimulate curiosity and motivate learning for children?
5. Does your museum have a written long range plan? What is the time period that it covers? Has it been adopted by the board? What was the process by which it was developed?

Program

Exhibits and Programs

1. To what extent are your exhibits unique or customized to your museum's audience? Are the museum's exhibits and programs "community specific"? Describe the process you use to ensure they reflect your community's character and needs.
2. How does your museum define "interactive"? Are the majority of your exhibits and programs interactive, engaging the visitor in meaningful participatory activity?
3. Expertise: Explain how you obtain expertise in child development/learning (i.e. through staff or through others such as advisors or consultants, board members, etc.).

4. In the development of your exhibits and programs, how do you incorporate the following:
 - a) Learning theories?
 - b) Educational methods for stimulating curiosity and motivating learning?
 - c) Developmental appropriateness?
 - d) Current scholarly research?
 - e) Social issues that impact children (public policies, etc.)?
5. Describe your exhibit development process.
6. Describe how exhibits are built and maintained to withstand heavy interactive use.
 - a) Does the development process address preventive maintenance?
 - b) What percentage of the time are your exhibits in working order?
 - c) Are they repaired in a timely manner?
 - d) Do you have a maintenance schedule?
 - e) Are precautions taken in exhibit design and maintenance procedures to minimize childhood health/sanitation problems, the spread of contagious diseases, injuries and accidents?
7. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your exhibitions and programs? How is this information used to review and modify them?
8. What relationships do you have with other educators and child advocates in your community (i.e., schools, museums, child care providers, social agencies, etc.)? How do you serve these groups? How do you use these resources in your exhibit and program development and evaluation?
9. What is the role of the staff and volunteers in facilitating learning for visitors? Describe to what degree the exhibits are dependent or independent on staff/volunteers presence.
10. Training -- what training do staff and volunteers receive in:
 - a) Adult/child communication skills?
 - b) Visitor interaction?
 - c) Working with special needs populations?
 - d) Issues of multiculturalism, gender, age?
 - e) Developmentally appropriate expectations?

Object Use

1. How are objects used to stimulate curiosity and motivate learning for children? How are they integrated into exhibits and programs?
2. Do you consider your museum to be a collecting or non-collecting institution? (Refer to the definition of “collection” on page 1.)
 - If it is a collecting institution, how do you define collections in your museum? What types of collections do you have (i.e. educational, permanent, research)? Do you have written collections policy? Describe the nature of your collection(s) and how they are cared for.
 - If it is a non-collecting institution, describe your philosophy and practice regarding object care and use. Is the museum considering having collections in the future?

Public Dimension

1. Do you involve children directly in the operations, planning and/or decision making within your museum? If yes, how?
2. Accessibility: How does your museum incorporate accessibility for all visitors into both the facility and exhibits? (“Accessibility” is used here in its broadest sense, including visitors with disabilities, non-readers, non-English speaking persons, visitors with diverse economic backgrounds, etc.)
3. Safety: Given the nature of the audience, how does the museum take extra precautions to protect the visitor from potential hazards? How do you select materials for exhibits? What kind of training does the staff receive in safety and emergency procedures?
4. Explain how you identify and target audiences to market museum activities. How does targeting audiences reflect your mission? How do you reach these targeted audiences? How do you evaluate your effectiveness in reaching them?

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HISTORY

After over five years of planning and hard work we are pleased to be able to disseminate the final version of “Professional Practices in Children’s Museums.” We felt it would be important to provide some background and explanation about this project and its outcome for your clarification. This memo outlines our goals, process and results.

Background

During the course of the 1988 ACM meeting in Pittsburgh, a small “study committee” was formed to seek a means of addressing our desire for self-evaluation, as well as for meeting the needs of a rapidly exploding population of children’s museums. It was determined that we would try and define what distinguishes children’s museums from other types of museums, and look into creating a central source of technical and research information relevant to them.

At the next annual meeting in 1989, ACM began a dialogue with Patricia Williams (AAM Deputy Executive Director, Programs and Policy), then Director of the AAM Accreditation Program, who educated us to the possibility of working with the Accreditation staff in developing such a definition. Following a model adopted by other specialized areas of the museum world composed largely of non-collecting institutions (i.e. science and technology centers; art and nature centers; and planetariums) it was possible to formulate a series of questions that would provide direction for evaluation and help set standards.

The Self-Study Task Force was formed at this time consisting of Mindy Duitz (Chair), Jane Jerry (Co-chair), Barbara Meyerson, Karen Dummer, Diane Frankel, Nancy Glaser, Deborah Edward, Miriam Ingram and Kathleen Compton. A meeting was held in Washington, DC in January 1990. Following authorization from the AAM Accreditation Commission for the preparation of a supplemental questionnaire, the Task Force convened again in March. Bonnie Pitman-Gelles and Pat Williams also participated.

At that time, the Task Force drafted a definition of children’s museums indicating that *what most distinguished us from all other museums is our focus on children*. The definition was voted on and approved by the ACM members at the 1990 InterActivity in Chicago.

In the Spring of 1991, ACM submitted a proposal to IMS (Professional Services Program) to fund the development and dissemination of a self study document for the youth museum field. The goal was to assure active participation in developing standards and to provide for dissemination through publications and regional meetings. The grant was awarded in August 1991, permitting the Task Force to move ahead with the benefit of a Project Coordinator (Linda Edeiken) and insure broad involvement of ACM members in the process.

On October 11, 1991, the Task Force met again for a second time in Washington, DC with AAM facilitators Pat Williams, Kim Igoe and Susan Graziano. A revised definition based on ACM member input and a Self-Study Document were drafted by Mindy Duitz, Deborah Edward, Jane Jerry, Barbara Meyerson, Kate Bennett and Linda Edeiken. The document and definitions were then printed in the Spring 1992 edition of *Hand to Hand*. A conference session took place at the 1992 InterActivity, to further discuss the document.

Recommended standards for professional practices in children's museums were subsequently prepared by the Task Force based on the discussions by the general ACM membership and their responses to the questionnaire. The resulting document, "Professional Practices in Children's Museums," contains two components: recommended standards (each section is preceded by a written narrative providing a context); and the self study questionnaire. The publication examines three areas in relationship to the special nature of children's museums: Mission/Planning; Program (divided into exhibits/program and object use); and Public Dimension. Customized definitions of a "children's museum" and an "object" are also included.

During October and November of 1992, "Professional Practices in Children's Museums" was the focus of a conference session at each of the five AAM regional meetings held throughout the country. The final document has been submitted to the American Association of Museums Accreditation Commission for review and acceptance as a supplemental questionnaire for youth museums applying for accreditation.

Beyond the Project

The goal of this project was not merely to develop a tool or to create a supplemental questionnaire for accreditation. More importantly, it is to provide a means for open discussion and self-study about what children's museums are and where they are going. How does a new institution think about what comes next after opening its doors? How does the field foster internal dialogue about the quality and impact of work and guide

planning for the future? How do we interact with the educational and youth services communities outside our field?

The project is a significant one for children's museums and the process has been as important as the product. We are very pleased with the discussion and feedback this document has generated, both within our field and outside. "Professional Practices in Children's Museums" sets an especially important educational standard for start-up children's museums. Other types of museums have told us that the document provides a valuable basis of support for their educational programs and that it will have wider application beyond youth museums. The AAM Accreditation Commission has also expressed interest in the document.

The Association of Children's Museums and the Task Force have made a commitment to making "Professional Practices for Children's Museums" a living document which will systematically be reviewed and evolve to keep pace with changes in this dynamic field.

In closing I want to personally thank my colleague Jane Jerry for serving as Co-Chair, the Task Force, the ACM Board and Council, AAM Staffers and especially Project Director Linda Edeiken for making this enormous effort such a success.

Mindy Duitz
Chair