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## In the Eyes of a Child: What do They Think about Diversity?

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Diversity:

*1. the condition of being different*

*2. an instance or a point of difference*

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1973

On November 17, 2006, 400 children and adults came together at the Children's Museum of the Lowcountry (CML) to take part in the museum's bimonthly, Junior-League-sponsored Free Friday Family Fest. These families played together, learned together and shared a meal together. Free Family Friday Fest was started in 2005 to attract a more diverse audience to this nearly four-year-old children's museum. A CML board member, who attended the event with her six-year-old son, relayed to me her son's back-seat observations as they traveled home together:

*"That was so fun, mom. It was different at dark time. The place smelled good [part of the festival—fabulous food!] and there were so many kids to play with. Lots of them were brown like my friends at my new school. I also liked the man playing the little guitar [banjo]. That was fun. Can we do it again?"*

What did I take away from the comment made by this six-year-old? I was struck that he noticed the difference among the children at the event (*Lots of them were brown...*), that he reacted so enthusiastically to the difference (*There were so many kids to play with*) and that he appreciated the difference and associated it with other exciting, new parts of his life (*...like my friends at my new school*). Among children, is the issue difference or their response to the difference? In children's museums, cultivating an environment full of "different" people contributes to the growth of positive attitudes among the many "different" children who visit.

Dexter Scott King, the son of Martin Luther King, Jr., states in his book, *Growing Up King*, "Children are more than human." This is a tremendously powerful statement and one that demands that we remember how special all children are, what long and deep memories they have, and yes, how much "more than human" they are. In his book King also writes about his own childhood and the attitudes formed at a very young age: "At Washington Park, we had cookouts. As children, we didn't know we were "Negroes," or if we did, we didn't know exactly what that meant. We didn't realize we lived in "segregation," didn't know there were better pools than the one we crowded into at the Y, or that we and our friends would be considered "have-nots" if our father wasn't the co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. We weren't aware that we could and would be turned away from public accommodations, educational institutions or turned away from desirable living spaces by the real estate restrictive covenants. We weren't aware that we were shunned by society, murdered over mere glances, made to feel less than human. We were children, and children are more than human." Today, I believe there are children everywhere who may

still experience the harsh reality of being different, and some without the support and comfort of a community like the one Dexter King grew up in.

Every child enters the world with a beating heart and a heavenly scent. Some come quietly, others come screaming, some come with a head of hair, some with none, but each one emerges bearing gifts. The greatest of these gifts is the individual soul—the self—the kernel of who they will become over a lifetime and the person they will be in relationships with others. Their life circumstances and every human encounter will shape how they interact in their worlds. Will they encounter environments that welcome them or ones that shun them?

Children, these special souls, are also the keenest observers of human nature—they see and feel everything: smiles, scorn, pleasure and sternness. They observe facial expressions, hand and body movements, voices and even silence. They filter these observations and interactions to determine how others perceive them, but more significantly, these encounters shape how they see themselves. Are we fully welcoming all children into the museum with our eyes, voice and touch in a way that says, “Your being here makes me happy”?

There are many issues to address relevant to diversity, but most critical to me is how the myriad aspects of this challenging subject play out among the children who walk through the doors of children’s museums around the country.

The population of Charleston, South Carolina, is about 50% Caucasian, 50% minority. At the Children’s Museum of the Lowcountry, 90% of our weekday visitors are Caucasian (That ratio shifts to about 75/25 on weekends). Throughout the week children of color typically visit the museum as part of a field trip group. As a group they stand out. Sometimes their presence has an impact on the general population in the museum, not necessarily because of racial differences, but because of the very fact that they are a group, rather than an individual child and a parent. Field trip groups tend to be a bit more rambunctious because of the uncontrollable excitement at being in this new place.

Let there be no doubt, the children and their difference are noticed. While the CML staff is committed to making everyone feel welcomed and to make every child feel special, accomplishing this task requires one’s whole being to be cooperative—the heart, the mind, the body, the face. We are not always successful in achieving this goal, particularly if we are irritated by a late field trip arrival, or agitated by a teacher who claims to have paid a certain amount and the staff thinks there is a balance due. When these things happen, children—the silent observers— ingest every movement, every tone in every voice, and they pay very close attention to the resolution. We all know children often blame themselves for disagreements or tension in their families. In sticky situations that can happen in museums or even the most straightforward ones, does the child who falls under the category of “different” recognize in the tone of the welcome that they are “different”? They shouldn’t. When they return to their schools following their trip to the museum, what do they think? What do they say to each other or to their families? What are they confused about or too embarrassed to talk about and so keep to themselves? What do they remember? What remarks, glances, stares remain on their skin or in their minds, some for a brief period but some for a very long time?

For the purposes of this article and in the interest of gaining greater insight into how children experience diversity, I asked two staff members, one an African-American father and the other a Caucasian mother, both of whom have four-year-old sons, to ask their children about diversity. I told them if their children did not know what the word meant, to simply say it means to be different. The following captures their point of view.

*African-American father: Do you know what the word diversity means? Have you ever heard it before? Emmanuel: No. Father: It means to be different. Do you know anyone who’s different than you?*

*Emmanuel: Yes, Sofie and Jack at school.*

*Father: How are they different?*

*Emmanuel: They’re different because they’re a different color than me, but they’re the same color as each other though.*

*Father: How else are they different than you or each other?*

Emmanuel: *That's it. Well, Ben is a different color than me, too, but he's my friend. He likes me and I get to go to his house, and we play. But that's it.*

Emmanuel's honest response highlights his recognition of being different because of his skin color and even suggests that his color influences the way his peers engage or do not engage him. Emmanuel, although a different color than Ben, sees Ben as someone who accepts him as a friend.

On several occasions in different museum settings I have observed children being greeted with frustration, with curiosity and sometimes even with disdain. Why? Because they fall into a category they might not yet even be aware of—children who have a scholarship to attend, or the group whose teachers were hard to work with because they've never been to a museum before, or the children from a low-income neighborhood. These differences have marked and labeled them everything but “more than human.” I've watched them enter and exit museums and I have wondered if they felt engaged, if they felt valued, did they know we were happy that they had come, or did they leave thinking they didn't belong, that they were trouble, or that they'd never be welcomed or even come back here again.

This questioning is not intended as a condemnation to anyone in the children's museum field, but as a reminder that the recipients of our efforts to diversify don't always get to weigh in on the subject, and far too often become the subject. Like many of my peers in the children's museum field, I advocate for a greater representation of people of color in positions of leadership, for more exhibits and programs that reflect a variety of cultures and people, but first and foremost I advocate for respectful treatment of all children. CML has not yet designed a mechanism for getting feedback from the children regarding their experience, but we are working on it. Weekly field trip debriefing meetings with the education staff might be a useful tool to explore their experiences, feelings, challenges and strategies as they engage with children. It would serve all of us in the field to create ways to capture our young audience's thoughts, ideas and feelings following a visit to the museum.

Caucasian mother: *Do you know what diversity means?*

Jack: *What?*

Mother: *It means different.*

Jack: *Different?*

Mother: *Yes, different, not like you.*

Jack: *Not like me? Mother: Yes, not like you. Do you know anyone not like you?*

Jack: *Mommy! You are tall and I am little.*

I am moved by the innocence and simplicity of Jack's response to difference. Primarily because the response suggests another way in which people can be different: hair color, weight and height. One might think that Jack didn't get the true intent of the question or doesn't understand difference. Quite the contrary—he understands that we all are different and that being different isn't good or bad. It just is.

As an African-American woman who has raised three extraordinary children, and to my knowledge currently one of a small handful of executive directors of color in the children's museum field, I share an awareness and sensitivity to the experiences of all children, but to African-American children in particular. I am committed to exploring, understanding and addressing the hard issues. It is imperative to ensure that more and more children recognize difference as unique, good and natural while more adults examine their hearts, check their responses and value every child they encounter.

In closing, one of the greatest challenges CML has faced since its opening is the ability to reach and consistently engage diverse audiences. I am pleased to share that the *Junior League Free Family Friday Fests* has been an effective strategy for increasing the ethnic and racial diversity CML strives for on a day-to-day basis. And based on the comments and observations of the six-year old author that began this article, progress is being made. Children are noticing the difference.

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