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Wakanheza: Supporting Parents in Public

MetLife Foundation & Association of Children's Museums Promising Practice Award Profile by Joe Olson, Senior Director, Visitor Services & Volunteers, Minnesota Children's Museum

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All parents have horror stories about parenting in public. Mine involves my (then) one-year old son and a red-eye flight home from a trip. It's always tricky balancing the needs of a baby with those of the rest of the passengers. But, when the crying begins at 2:00 a.m., your son gets sick and vomits all over you and the flight attendant appears to be incredibly annoyed with it all, the situation deteriorates quickly. That memory, especially those feelings of helplessness, come rushing back when I see adults struggling with their children in public.

Parenting in public is challenging. Parents feel pressure to keep their children in line for fear of the "tsk-tsk factor"—those looks, sighs or even feigned indifference from people we assume are judging our parenting skills. (They probably are.) That apprehension can accelerate into "losing it" when a child exhibits challenging behavior in public.

Staff at the Minnesota Children's Museum have developed a way to help parents and their children deal with highly charged situations: the Wakanheza Project. Wakanheza is the Dakota word for child. Its closest English translation is "Sacred Being." The goal of the Wakanheza Project is to lend parents a hand and, by doing so, protect the children in our community.

The Wakanheza Project began a few years ago in Minnesota through the Ramsey County Department of Health's Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities. The principles of the project are simple yet powerful, and they have been incorporated into policies that have changed the atmosphere at libraries, government agencies, shelters, clinics and here at Minnesota Children's Museum.

At the museum, Wakanheza is a comprehensive program led by a committed team focused on staff training and recognition. Practices and procedures are aimed at creating a welcoming environment for families. Training is centered on practical ways to assist in difficult parent-child situations — ones that occur on-site as well as outside of work. The workshop format, jointly established by the museum and Ramsey County, constitutes the same model that is now used at libraries and other local institutions.

Last year, the Wakanheza Partnership (Minnesota Children's Museum, Ramsey County, The Minnesota Department of Education and others) introduced a school-based Wakanheza initiative. Participants in Wakanheza were taught the founding, simple principals of the project. However, simplicity doesn't diminish their effectiveness. In fact, its basic focus on empowering individuals to help people is its strength.

The three principles of Wakanheza that come into play in a children's museum setting are judgment, empathy and environment.

JUDGMENT: It is natural to judge and it's incredibly easy to make assumptions about a parent who is struggling with an out-of-control child. To be of any real help, however, we need to recognize our rush to judge and put it in "park." Most staff can recall a situation where they wanted "to set a bad parent straight." They can also recall how that actually made matters worse and, in reality, left the child in a more vulnerable position with an even angrier or more frustrated parent.

At the museum, we catch only a glimpse of any parent/child relationship. In the Wakanheza training, staff are asked, "Do you recall a time when you were judged unfairly?" and "Can you recall a time when you said or did something you weren't proud of in front of a child?" This leads to some intense discussions and usually to the conclusion that none of us would want the occasional bad experience to be the defining moment of our parenting. If we are truly going to be of assistance in difficult situations, we need to be aware of our judgments and willingly set them aside.



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Distracted for a moment, the mom was able to gather her senses and finish bundling the baby while his brother was engaged. Sincere words of encouragement and something fun to see on the way out got them on their way quickly and calmly. Pretty basic, but suspending judgment and having empathy was key for David to apply Wakanheza.

Simply understanding that parenting in public is hard work is a healthy and powerful perspective that we can easily forget. I recall my airplane ride during our workshops and just wonder what a little empathy and understanding would have done to improve my family's trip.

ENVIRONMENT: People respond well to welcoming environments. Our industry is exceptional at creating engaging hands-on experiences. We think we are experts at keeping children involved and stimulated. Yet during training sessions, our staff challenged this assumption. Yes, we have a beautiful, busy and colorful lobby that says "wow" to adults. But staff noted that parents had their hands full keeping their children occupied when waiting in line to purchase tickets. Our great looking lobby offered nothing for children to do, and we were creating extra tension for families worried about losing track of

EMPATHY: "Children understand our museum, it's the parents who don't" is an easy frame of mind to slip into. Many of our staff are young and have high expectations for parents. I recall a staff meeting that focused on what parents weren't doing. Staff criticized parents who read the paper, sat down or let their kids run wild. This concern isn't raised as much anymore since the start of the Wakanheza Project. Through exercises and discussion, participants discuss the sheer effort and work required to get a toddler or multiple children dressed, fed and transported to the museum. We role-play and ask staff to try to accomplish some these tasks while weighted down with strollers and all the other parenting paraphernalia a mom or dad takes along. Staff quickly develop a deeper empathy for parents.

Empathy is defined as "the capacity for participating in the feelings or ideas of others." We all have this capacity and when practiced, it helps us get into the proper frame of mind to assist. David, a floor staff member, tells of a moment when he intervened. A mother was trying to leave, bundling up an infant in a stroller when his toddler brother decided that it was the right time for a temper tantrum. The mother was approaching the boiling point, so David simply and intentionally engaged the boy in a bouncing ball activity while chatting to the mom that it is "always a challenge" to leave the museum.

their child. Our team brainstormed and came up with a few ideas. Props and toys were added to our counter area, and the “Funstigators” were created. A Funstigator is a volunteer who, on busy days, uses hula hoops and other tricks to engage children while their parents wait to purchase tickets.

These are very simple ideas but they have made a big difference in reducing flash points for children and parents especially during the complicated arrival and departure rituals that our visitors must perform.

How culture plays a role in our hesitation to get involved and how violence arises from an actual sense of powerlessness are other principles of Wakanheza that lead to lively discussions and thoughtful reflection. When we set aside judgments, show understanding and empathy and are in the proper state of mind we can do very simple things that have a big impact on relieving stress. Comments such as “Wow, your son has so much energy, I could use some of that” and “You are showing so much patience” can go a long way in expressing compassion and understanding to a parent.

Distraction is a powerful tool, too. A comment from staff or a stranger can deflate an escalating situation, redirecting a parent’s attention for a brief moment, which allows a parent to calm down and regroup. Jay, another floor staff member, spoke at a session about using Wakanheza in a parking lot. He and his wife were heading towards their car and heard shouting and screaming coming from a mother attempting to strap her child into a car seat. Jay was concerned and approached the car. He tapped the struggling mother on the shoulder. She turned in fury and yelled “What?!” just waiting to lash out at anyone who dared to challenge her. Jay asked, “Do you know how to get on the freeway heading south from here?”

The mom visibly relaxed, smiled and answered their question. They struck up a conversation about the neighborhood and made some positive comments about the little girl. Jay and his wife didn’t know what occurred before they entered this scene, what might have occurred if they hadn’t approached, or what would take place later— what they had was a moment. Their actions calmed the situation between parent and child. The child was safely strapped in, parcels were tucked away, and everyone drove home calmly. And that’s Wakanheza—intentionally making efforts to reduce parental stress, lending a hand when we can in difficult situations, and taking strides to make our museums and our communities more welcoming places for families.



If you are ready to bring Supporting Parents in Public to your organization, there is an online tool kit, made possible by the *MetLife Foundation and Association of Children's Museums Promising Practice Replication Award*, that includes an Implementation Guide, a Facilitator’s Guide with worksheets and sample scenarios and a Power Point presentation to help you navigate your workshop.

The tool kit is posted at www.mcm.org and a link to the kit can be found on the Awards page of ACM’s Web site, www.ChildrensMuseums.org.