Children’s Museums Research Network
Key Points from “Your Child’s Process of Learning” by Lisa Brahams, Kari Nelson, Dawn Robles and Laura Stricker
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Quotes from CMRN’s open-ended survey questions and follow-up interviews with parents

- Parents discovered things about their children related to the process of learning. They observed details about how their children learn.

  …when you’re there with your kid you can see very readily how they are thinking about what it is that they’re touching and watch it. You can see exactly how they are manipulating things, what they’re looking at, what they’re going to, and I think it’s valuable to me because it’s something that maybe I don’t take the time to do at home.

  My daughter, who is going to be six, was playing with the electronics in the workshop. I tried explaining to her how the circuit needs to be complete … She wasn’t really understanding until we sat down with the wires and traced a circle-like shape over the circuit. Once we broke the "circle," the little fan didn’t work. The hands-on approach was more beneficial to her than my attempt at simplifying electricity verbally/conceptually.

- Observing their children in the process of learning gave parents a context to discover something about how their children learn.

- Parents reported they noticed how their children were learning as the child was engaged in the process of manipulating or using objects and materials; as the child was observing a phenomena or other children at an activity; and as the child was problem-solving or figuring something out. The context of process learning allowed these parents to observe their children’s development:

  The children’s museum is one of the only environments that is 100% focused on my child’s experience. Everything else is focused on adults and children. The only other place totally geared toward kids is school. The children’s museum is one of the only times I get to see them in an unstructured play and learning environment.

- Parents identified processes encouraged or brought out in the museum environment that allowed them to observe how their children learn.

- The survey respondents agreed that processes that are part of the mainstream children’s museum experience provided them the chance to see how their children learned. These processes included: the opportunity to watch their children play; to watch their children interact with other children; the opportunity to do activities that sparked conversations between themselves and their children; and activities that they worked on together with their children. In the context of these activities, parents learned about their children:

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1 In this summary the term “parent/s” includes “caregiver/s”.

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I think it’s a good place to notice [how she learns] because it’s geared towards them size- and engagement-wise. Other places are not often geared towards her. So here you get to see more what she is geared towards; or see her interact with other kids there specifically there to learn and enjoy and place with the activities.

- Parents felt that children’s museums offer a unique opportunity for them to observe how their children learn, unlike any other place or experience.

  I actually can see him learn in a lot of places. … What makes children’s museums unique is that the structure and the setting is designed for exploration and for children to experience things that are not as accessible in other venues. At the park on the slides or the swings or watching other children in the sandbox they learn. But when they go to the museum there are things there that support them and that encourage them that you don’t get in other venues.

  Well there’s more things to manipulate. Smaller things and buttons. I think at a park it’s more gross motor and at the children’s museum there’s more fine motor, tactile, cause and effect probably. I feel like there’s more cause and effect learning going on at [the children’s museum] because ‘what will happen if I push this?’ or ‘what will happen if I interact with this activity in this sort of way?’ A playground is more gross motor running and jumping …

- After the museum visit, parents said they talked with their children about something they experienced during the visit.

- Parents reported that they talked with their children about their museum experience after returning home:

  We discussed his favorite activities. I asked what he liked the most.

  We spoke about creating pottery and why it had to remain at the museum for a couple weeks. We talked about the ball drop ramp and what worked and what didn’t.

  [Our visit to] Kidopolis [at Thanksgiving Point] led to a wonderful discussion on city councils, government, laws, mayors and more.

*In this article the term “parent/s” includes “caregiver/s”.*