

Learning Value of Children's Museums Research Agenda

Introduction

The Association of Children's Museums is pleased to circulate the Learning Value of Children's Museums Research Agenda. While this document is called a research agenda, if you prefer to think of it as roadmap or a framework for research, please do so. What it's called is of less importance than what it represents: the summary of a field-wide process to identify and prioritize what needs to be known about children's museums, the learning that takes place in them, and the impact they have on the lives of the children, families, and communities they serve. This research agenda also represents a pivotal milestone in the children's museum field as it marks the starting point for developing a collective, evidence-based body of knowledge that can be used across institutions to improve practice, build theories of learning, and demonstrate the unique value of children's museums.

There is no question that children's museums are valuable learning institutions and make a difference in the lives of the children, families, and communities they serve. In a recent public opinion poll, 95% of parents strongly agreed/agreed that children's museums are valuable learning institutions¹. In the past four years, 30% of museums awarded the National Service Award—the highest U.S. honor conferred on museums and libraries that make a difference for individuals, families, and communities—were children's museums. Data collected by the Association of Children's Museums indicate that the majority of children's museums are conducting research and evaluation studies demonstrating the impact of their exhibits and programs². Research studies in the fields of child development, education, and neuroscience have informed and validated the work of children's museums. While this research has advanced the field, much remains unknown about how learning is supported and facilitated in children's museums.

With funding from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services and in partnership with the University of Washington's Museology Graduate Program (UW),



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the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) undertook the Learning Value of Children’s Museums Research Agenda Project in December 2012. The project goal: to generate a field-wide research agenda for children’s museums, an agenda that identifies and prioritizes the evidence most needed by the field to articulate and demonstrate the distinct learning impacts of children’s museums.

Definitions: Learning and Research

Rather than define “learning” and “research,” the project team encouraged participants to embrace expansive and inclusive concepts of learning and research throughout the Research Agenda development process. Thus learning is defined broadly to include cognitive development, emotional growth, social development, skill acquisition, attitude change, and more. Research was defined such that it included both basic research as well as evaluation, acknowledging that much of what we know about learning in the museum field has come from evaluation studies.

Building the Research Agenda

The project began with a literature review conducted by UW followed by a survey distributed to ACM museum members. The results of the literature review and survey were combined in *The Learning Value of Children’s Museums: Building a Field-Wide Research Agenda, A Landscape Review*³. The review set the stage for the Learning Value of Children’s Museum Research Agenda Symposium on September 10–11, 2013. During this convening, more than 110 participants—museum staff, academic and independent researchers and evaluators, and policymakers—worked collaboratively to identify what they perceived as the most pressing research questions that needed to be answered in the children’s museum field. Inspired by calls to action from several prominent researchers, participants engaged first in small group discussion to generate questions, and then in large group discussion to clarify and prioritize the questions. The Symposium produced lists of questions organized into categories to guide research and evaluation studies.

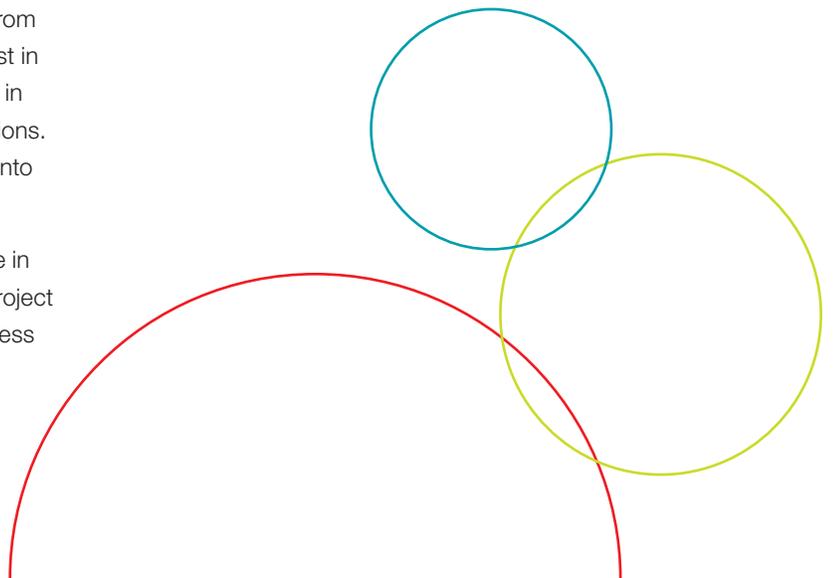
After the symposium, ACM invited the field to participate in one of four webinars that provided an overview of the project and its key activities, a synopsis of the symposium process

and proceedings, and discussion of the categories for research. While the agenda for each webinar was the same, the audiences varied: two of the webinars were for museum practitioners—research and evaluation as well as education staff, the third webinar was for independent and university researchers and evaluators, and the fourth webinar was for museum CEOs and executive directors. Participants in each webinar were asked for their overall response, whether anything was missing from the agenda, and what challenges they foresaw in implementing the agenda. At the end of each webinar the participants were asked to vote on the highest priority category, namely which set of questions should be addressed first.

Following the webinars, the project team took the sets of questions and organized them into three themes. By no means are these themes mutually exclusive. Organizing the questions into themes and grouping the sets of questions provides structure to the agenda, a way to easily find the areas of interest to your museum, and concentrates attention on the nature of the questions within each theme and sets of questions under the theme. The three themes are:

- **Characteristics of Children’s Museums**
- **Audience**
- **Learning Landscape**

The research agenda questions reflect the dual nature of children’s museums as both multi-faceted/functional organizations and as public institutions. In addition, the agenda reflects the nature of field as a community of learners, exhibiting high levels of engagement to craft questions that will guide research efforts and coalesce individual studies into a field-wide body of knowledge.



The Research Agenda

Characteristics of Children's Museums

Under the Characteristics of Children's Museums theme are the first three sets of questions: 1) The Value and Impact of Children's Museums, 2) Learning Environments and Strategies, and 3) Children's Museums as Learners. These sets of questions investigate the unique and long-term impacts of children's museums, the learning environment itself, and institutional culture—from beliefs about learning to the role of research in helping children's museums evolve and innovate. Research in these areas can be used to strengthen the mission of children's museums, identify best practices by demonstrating how specific elements in the children's museum environment support acquisition of specific skills, and gain increased support from funders and other stakeholders.

The Value and Impacts of Children's Museums*

- For a visitor, what is the difference between a children's museum and another type of museum with a children's area?
- What are the long-term benefits/impacts of children's museum visits on children/families?
- What gets people to a children's museum in the first place?
- How can we better communicate to adults the layers of experiences possible in children's museums?
- What do community members (e.g., parents, teachers, children, stakeholders) perceive the benefit/value of children's museums to be?
- Who do we want to be researching? And who is the audience for the researcher?
- How do we best capture our value [or, what is the best measure of our value?]
- Which definition of audience is most impactful to study?
- What is the life-long evidence of our impact?
- How can we show the unique value of children's museums to parents to motivate visits?
- What is it that's unique or important about how children's museums support learning?
- How are children's museum impacts distinct from other influences?

Learning Environments and Strategies*

- What at a children's museum promotes creativity and problem solving? What promotes cognitive processes, executive function, etc.?
- Which strategies produce specific outcomes and impacts?
- What are the factors (parent-child interactions, design, staff interactions) that influence the learning (critical thinking, creativity, innovation) in children's museums?
- What environments will support the development of civic values in children and families?
- What does high quality look like in a children's museum and how do we measure it? Does the experience have a lasting impact?
- What do children's museums afford or provide (unique qualities) to the individual, family, community looking through the lenses of museum professional, institution, children's museum, and informal learning.

Children's Museums as Learners

- How do beliefs about learning (ours, our staff, parents, teachers, board members, stakeholders, and funders) impact how children's museums support children's learning and how we understand the role of children's museums?
- What is the role of research in a children's museum? How can it help children's museums to adapt, evolve, innovate?
- How do we grow a culture of research in our museums, through partnerships, and in our communities?
- What theories/standards/vocabulary do children's museums use to demonstrate their value? How do we demonstrate the efficacy of those theories? What do we do to link the standards to better serve the community?
- Should children's museums rethink how they talk about/think about the role of play?

* Priority areas of research as determined by Symposium and webinar participants.

Audience

Under the Audience theme are three sets of questions that address 1) Children's Learning, 2) Adult/Child Learning, and 3) the Ecosystem of Learners. These sets of questions focus on the learning experiences of specific audiences who visit children's museums and aim to explore the types and nature of these experiences.

Field-wide, research-generated evidence demonstrating exactly what about children's museums facilitates and supports learning can be used to improve practice, expand learning in the museum, strengthen the learning ecosystem, and elevate the stature of children's museums. In addition, this research may lead to the development of a shared language to talk about learning in children's museums as well as the discovery of new types of learning.

Children's Learning

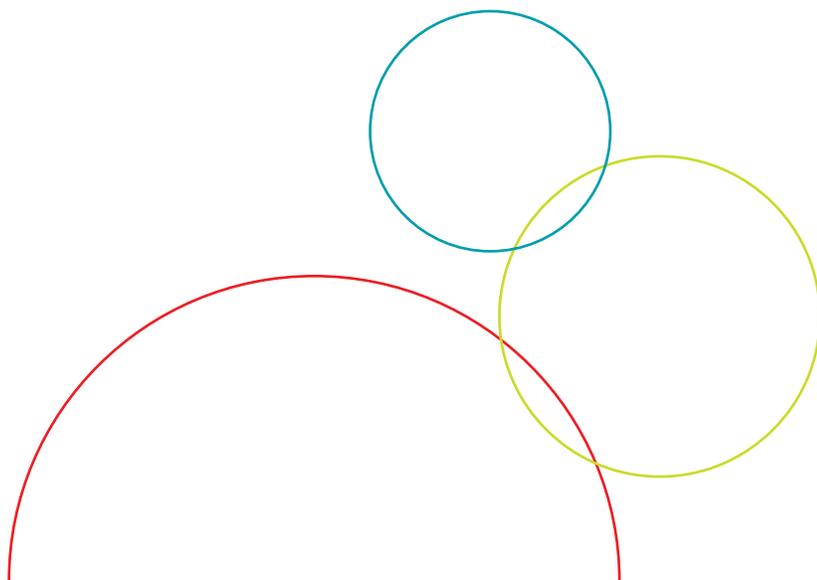
- What kinds of learning are effectively facilitated and supported in children's museums (e.g., cognitive learning, emotional growth, social skills, mastery of the physical environment, attitude formation)?
- What foundational knowledge, skills, and experiences for various domains (art, science, etc.) are important and necessary for success at age 5, 10, 15?
- What type of early learning experiences lead to foundational knowledge and skills needed for success?
- What is the role of children's museum in child development and learning outside of the museum (e.g., school readiness, lifelong learning, parent support, cultural competencies, etc.)?
- Are there disciplinary areas in children's museums where it is easier to measure learning (STEM, art, etc.)?
- What are the indicators and outcomes that are relevant to measure early learning?

Adult/Child Learning

- What is the role of strong adult/child relationships in children's development and which aspects of these relationships are children's museums best poised to support?
- What is the impact of children's museums on parents and caregivers?
- What is the impact of children's museums on the family as a whole?
- What are the most effective strategies for helping parents understand their roles?
- What are the most effective strategies for helping children's museums understand parent perspectives?

Ecosystem of Learners

- Who are the learners in children's museums: children of different ages, caregivers/parents, teachers, staff, others?
- How do the learning outcomes differ for each audience?
- What are the characteristics of an effective learning ecosystem?
- What relationships between children's museums and other learning environments create a healthy learning ecosystem? What is the nature of those relationships?
- In what ways are children's museums essential to the learning ecosystem?



Learning Landscape

Under the Learning Landscape theme are the final two set of questions, 1) Children's Museums and Cultural/Social Issues, 2) The Role of Children's Museums in the Community. The first set of questions explores how children's museums prepare children and families to be culturally competent and full participants in their local communities and our global society. The second set of questions investigates the nature of healthy communities and what about children's museums secures their position as community anchors.

Researching these questions can strengthen community ties—especially with schools and universities—further the work of children's museums as change agents, provide grounding for new partnerships with community service organizations, and enhance the profile of children's museums with local governments and stakeholders.

Children's Museums and Cultural/Social Issues

- What can children's museums do to equalize disparities in educational opportunity?
- How does the children's museum serve as a cultural broker?
- What is the role of children's museums in negotiating answers to major questions in society (e.g., technology, nature, cultural responsiveness)?
- How do children's museums help us understand cultural variations (e.g., race, ethnicity, language, class, ability) in learning and development?
- How do different cultural groups in a community identify with the children's museum (e.g., see it as "their" place)? And what role does authenticity play in that identification?
- Cross cultural engagement: how do multiple points of entry impact use by diverse audiences? How do we design to invite broad use?
- How can children's museums serve as cultural brokers?

The Role of Children's Museums in the Community

- What is the role of a children's museum in a broad learning ecology, including formal and informal institutions?
- What do our communities need in the future and how will we measure/benchmark how children's museums meet those needs onsite and offsite? What "play behaviors" will be needed?
- What is the relationship between children's museums and community in healthy community ecology?
- How do stakeholders value children's museums in terms of school readiness, family dynamics, and community health?
- What is the role of children's museums as change agents in communities as related to the influence of play?
- How do children's museum partnerships fill a role or a gap in larger community goals for children?
- How do children's museums serve as interconnected and responsive resources for communities?
- What are the possible impacts for a children's museum to have on a community?
- What is a children's museum's impact on community? What makes a children's museum a successful community anchor?
- What is the role of the children's museum in the larger educational system? Multi institutional vs. individual, multiple methods, intentional design, and feedback?
- Over the long term, what impacts can children's museums have on civics, culture, economic impact, connecting partners, building bridges and networks, community health?

Priorities

To identify immediate and prioritized access points within this broad agenda, both the symposium attendees and the webinar participants were asked to vote on what they perceived were the most important set of questions to address first. The combined votes of the symposium attendees and webinar participants ranked *The Value and Impacts of Children's Museums and Learning Environments and Strategies* as the top two priority sets of questions.

Call to Action

We encourage children's museums to align their research and evaluation efforts with this Research Agenda. We believe that such alignment will focus such efforts across the field, and result in field-wide evidence that begins to demonstrate the learning value of children's museums. Children's museums have been an important partner in supporting early learning and preparing kids for learning success—and are poised to play a greater role by providing a field-wide research and evidence base that facilitates change and improvement. Through evidence generating research, children's museums can demonstrate their impact and increase trust with other organizations in the learning ecosystem. The future of education is being shaped now, and children's museums have a very important role to play in what is to come.

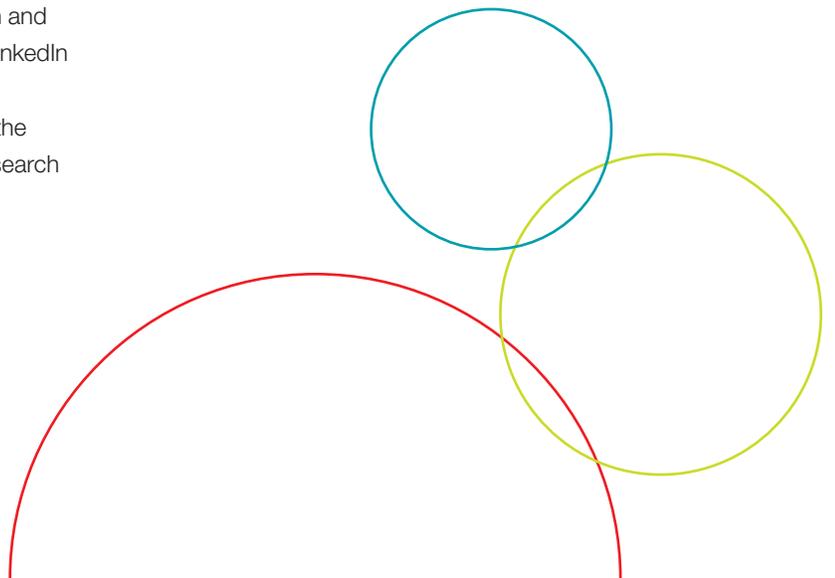
Taking action includes designing and conducting new studies as well as embedding research agenda questions into ongoing evaluation efforts. Indeed, there are many opportunities to engage with the agenda and to share research and evaluation results. ACM's online, self-service Research Exchange is the best place to upload your findings, reports, and articles on research agenda questions. InterActivity, ACM's annual conference, is the forum for in-person knowledge sharing and networking—attend sessions on research and evaluation and submit session proposals and workshop ideas. ACM's LinkedIn network can be used to find potential partners and other museums conducting similar studies. Most significant is the opportunity to participate in the second phase of the Research

Agenda project: Building a Practicing Research Network in the Children's Museum Field. Funded by IMLS, this three-year project will develop and cultivate a field-wide Research Network. A cohort of ten children's museums will form the initial core of the Research Network. Further information and applications to participate in the initial cohort will be available in early 2015.

Not only is this research agenda intended to initiate new research and evaluation studies and new ways of reporting research and evaluation findings, but it is intended to encourage public and private funders to underwrite specific research studies in this field, laying the groundwork for policy changes to support larger roles for children's museums in the learning ecosystem and in community capacity-building.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The Freeman Foundation Asian Culture Exhibit Series Public Opinion Poll, conducted by Caravan Omnibus Survey, 2013.
- ² Research Agenda Project Questionnaire, conducted by ACM, 2012.
- ³ The review was not exhaustive in nature, but rather a snapshot of current research and evaluation in children's museums vis-à-vis their learning value.