Connecting Families to Complex Content in Museums

Sometimes there is hesitation when it comes to families visiting museums to explore exciting yet challenging content, such as hard-to-conceptualize art and science topics, gender roles, culture, race, and civil rights. Adults may wonder: will I be able to support my child to process what they are experiencing? How will the museum handle sensitive and complex topics in a thoughtful and respectful way? The following strategies and exercise explore how museums and families can engage with multifaceted, complex content together.

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Things to keep in mind:

- These strategies can be applied to any museum experiences such as in-gallery activities, interactive exhibitions, family audio guides, art making programs, classes, performances, etc.
- Humans want to explore and make sense of the world, not just share facts.
- Often times, it may be feasible and relevant to use a combination of multiple strategies. Offering multiple entry points into the topic provides options for all types of learners (visual, aural, verbal, physical, logical, social, and solitary) to engage.
- Conversely, for some scenarios, certain strategies may be irrelevant, unfeasible, or even inappropriate.
- Be prepared to dive deep. If you’re offering complex content, this will be reflected in visitor response and these strategies can help navigate these experiences and challenges that arise with them.

14 Strategies:

1. **Ground Your Program in a Guiding Question** – What is at the heart of what you are exploring?

2. **Use Real/Authentic Artifacts and Objects** – Real objects are powerful tools to illustrate what the program is trying to address, practice skills like close looking, and encourage people to form questions and opinions.

3. **Recreate Experiences to Support Full Immersion** – When possible, build all-encompassing environments, allow families to use replica tools and high-quality props, provide thoughtfully-selected costumes for dressing up, and incorporate the senses. Immersive experiences can foster empathy and support the powerful impact of the content.

4. **Model Process of Exploring and Empowering Kids to Have a Conversation** – Asking scaffolded questions at appropriate times invites everyone to participate. For example, using the DAR (Describe, Analyze, Relate) method or similar questioning paths can navigate complex content in a manageable way.
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5. **Encourage Playing and Learning Together** – Encouraging visitors to explore content with staff and each other can lead to discovery moments and empowerment.

6. **Support Parents as First Teachers** – There are many kids, particularly younger kids, whose comfort level with their parents opens their minds up to information they might not accept from museum staff. Offer parents and caregivers suggestions for conversations and activities. Also, know that parents (or any adult caregivers) will take on a variety of different roles including co-learner, interpreter, facilitator, supervisor, and student (of the child).

7. **Imbed Humor** – When paced and playful, humor appeals to children and adults alike (think “Pixar” humor.) It keeps adults involved and lets terminology be introduced in a fun, rather than a weighty manner. The energy and attitude of the educator/facilitator/actors sets a tone that invites children and adults alike to join in, sometimes suspending disbelief.

8. **Use Art Making** – Art making activities provide an additional way to participate and support the creation of memorable experiences. It is ideal when the art making is integral to solving a problem or dilemma at the heart of your program or encourages personal reflection.

9. **Use Storytelling in Its Variety of Forms** – Reading children’s books aloud is a familiar practice for many families, and it can offer a comfortable entry point to engage with content. Storytelling performances (without books) are also very engaging, and letting the people who own the story tell the story ensures respect and meaningfulness. Finally, encouraging family members to share their personal stories with each other can add a powerful layer of meaning.

10. **Incorporate Movement and Music** – Many kids are kinesthetic learners. Furthermore, young children find security in rhythm, ritual, and repetition. Encouraging families to move and sing can help them channel their energy to make connections, build empathy, and express ideas.

11. **Use a Familiar Context** – Referring to things and situations in young people’s daily lives can support comfort and help them to relate to new ideas.

12. **Put Visitors in Role (Being Part of a Story)** – Role play gives visitors the freedom to speak and think as someone else, think of alternate perspectives, and have buy-in to exhibitions.

13. **Focus on Relevant Topics** – By not shying away from what audiences are thinking and talking about, the programs become more a real part of their world.

14. **Be Open to Improvisation** – Being prepared for improvisatory moments means the educators/actors/facilitators are able to meet the audience at their level and build upon their knowledge.

Try out some strategies!
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The following exercise is designed to help you think through some of the strategies presented that might be useful in various museum situations. Please feel welcome to use your own situation (one you have experienced or you may experience in future programming/content) OR work with a suggested scenario below. Use the prompts on the other side of the document to think through the 14 strategies listed and how they might serve your program or content.

Scenarios

1. You’ve been asked to plan a program or installation for families with children ages 7 and under that engages them with contributions of the LGBTQ community within your city.

2. Your museum has an exhibit about your city’s civil rights history, specifically focusing on the struggle for African American freedom and equity. You’ve been asked to plan a program for early childhood groups (preschools/daycares, children ages 2-5 and their teachers and chaperones).

3. You’ve been asked to have a program for families about the World’s Fair that took place in your city, specifically about the diverse people who were involved. The World’s Fair was a huge event that is famous in your city’s history, so many want to celebrate. However, you want to show multiple perspectives and even address that many people were brought to the fair from other countries against their will to be on display in living exhibits.

4. A funder has provided support for your museum to create a series of events connecting a neighbourhood cultural group serving refugees to the museum. The funder is especially interested in connecting the refugee families who have young children to your museum’s member families with children of the same age.

5. You’ve been asked to create an audio guide experience with a participatory/creative element for an upcoming textile exhibition that is gender neutral. It needs to allow for all visitors to freely engage and participate and not feel biased toward any one gender.

6. Your museum has recently opened a new exhibit of science interactives that demonstrate physics concepts. The interactive experiences are designed so that children ages 3 and older can manipulate them, but visitor feedback and entrance data shows the average age of child visitor is 12. Families who have younger and older children are only remaining a few minutes while families with only older children stay much longer. You don’t have funds to physically change any exhibit components.
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Name/idea of Experience (program, exhibition, guide):

______________________________________________________________________________

Grounding question for content (the why behind it):

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Short description of potential experience:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Two to five strategies that could fit well with the experience:

1.  

2.  

3.  

4.  

5.  

What success looks like/what visitors walk away with:

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______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
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