

# Caregivers' Perceptions of Learning in a Children's Museum

## Executive Summary

The Children's Museum Research Network (CMRN) was started in 2014 as a partnership of the Association of Children's Museums and the University of Washington Department of Museology. With support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, CMRN serves as a research community of practice to examine field-wide questions in the children's museum field. To address a fundamental question about the value of children's museums, the CMRN completed a study to examine caregivers' perceptions of learning during museum visits.

In 2017, eight children's museums across the United States surveyed and interviewed visitors to examine the questions: What do parents/caregivers learn about their children from their children's museum experience? What is it about the children's museum experience that parents and caregivers feel contributes to that learning? Two hundred twenty-three visitors were sent a survey 1-3 days after their visit to capture their perceptions of their children's learning and what supported that learning. Twenty of the participants also completed post-survey phone interviews approximately four to five months after the museum visit.

Seventy percent of survey participants reported observing something about how their children learn during their children's museum visit, such as their learning processes, preferences, characteristics, and skills. Caregivers also indicated that they learned about their children's interests (83%), how their children interact with others (70%), how their children solve problems (67%), and how their children think (64%). When asked what about the children's museum environment made it possible to observe how their children learn through play, the most common responses included having the opportunity to watch their child play (65%) and the unique materials / activities not available at home (61%). Only 5% of responses referenced staff guidance, while even fewer indicated support of printed materials such as signage or handouts (1%) as aspects that helped them observe how their children learn through play.

During interviews, caregivers were asked to rate, on a scale of 1-7, how important it was to them that they learned something about their children's learning during the museum visit. All of the participants indicated high levels of importance with scores of 5-7. This sense of value was related to observing learning experiences that they could replicate and opportunities to be an observer of their children within unique physical environments. Caregivers stated that children's museums are unique environments because of the variety of activities, spaces intentionally designed to support children's learning and development, and opportunities for purposeful, hands on play.

Study findings highlight parent and caregiver observations and point to the influence of children's museums' intentionally designed exhibit environments. When asked what they were doing in the museum when they noticed what they did about their children's learning, most participants named specific exhibits they were in, or materials and objects they used. This study underscores the importance of children's museums as spaces that both promote children's play-based learning and allow parents and caregivers to observe their children's learning in a unique way.

**Children's museums are ideal places for caregivers to learn about their children and see them learn.**



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