

Exploring Religious Literacy in Children's Museums: Some Whys and Hows



Introductions: Who we are & where we're coming from



Who we are

> dedicated to children birth-12 and their families since 1980
 > 1+ million served annually, including 250k in neighborhoods
 > audience reflects Houstonians
 > bilingual, English and English

> bilingual, English and Spanish



City of Houston's child population is one of the largest & most diverse in the nation.

- 1.35 million ages 0-12¹⁰
- 29% live in households below the poverty level¹
- 19% Black, 54% Latinx, 20% White ¹
- 28% foreign born¹



Project-based learning

linked to school standards

Exhibits

12 exhibits Tot*Spot SECRET spy missions

Learning labs

- Science Station
- Power Science Lab
- Maker Annex
- Library





Invention Convention Exhibit, Earthquake Table

Onsite >30% free annually

Free visit programs

- Free Family Passes
- Open Doors group visits
- Free Family Nights weekly
- Family Math Adventures

Open Doors partners

1,200+ partners:

501(c)3, local government, faith-based, school-based, WIC

Community programs 100% free to families

Out-of-school time programs

- Afterschool STEM
- Summer literacy camps
- Activity kits for home use





Cuney Homes Community Center

Parent engagement programs

- Parent/child workshops
- School family learning events
- Literacy kits for loan & to keep

Highlights



- Founded in 1913 by science teachers and professors
- Fostering child-directed play and learning through hands-on open exploration
- Visitor demographics
- Arts & Culture overview



Introductions: Who we are & where we're coming from

Activity

What's something you believe deeply?

3' free write

Activity

What's something you believe deeply?

Notice: how do you feel reflecting on this?

Activity What's something you believe deeply?

Notice: how did this experience feel?

Share Out

Wonder: what might visitors experience?





Faithful Friends

Exploring Religious Differences









🚱 Record

10 Responses

Mar 28

Aarav V



^{Mar 22} Student Keith W Mar 22

Tommy M



WHO

Mar 19

Lakshmy P

Search responses





What do you value? (prototype)





Religious Symbols (prototype)





How are we alike/different? (prototype)



What are your reasons for wanting your child to explore the values and traditions of different religions?

Reduce fear of unknown; Increase respect for others

Highlight shared values, like love and hope; Reduce misconception and stereotypes

Create helpful dialogue within families

People understand how to ask questions of others

to show support through well-wishes during times of special observances

Help make children better friends with people from different faith backgrounds

Learn about shared values like love and hope

Help children understand how to make friends with people from religious backgrounds different than their own

What are your reasons for not wanting your child to explore the values and traditions of different religions?

It is confusing for children to be exposed to different religions

The exhibit could show bias to another religion that I do not believe in

Religion divides

I choose for my child not to know about religion



Do you think it is important for children to be familiar with the values and practices of different religions? And, at what age?

1. Extremely important	66	56%	11-12 years old	2	2%
2. Very important	35	30%	13 years old or above	8	7%
3. Important	1	1%	5-6 years old	32	28%
4. Somewhat important	14	12%	7-8 years old	19	16%
·	14		9-10 years old	4	3%
5. Not so important	I	1%	under 5	51	44%



RESOURCES / INPUTS What we have to support this work	STRATEGIES / ACTIVITIES What we do to make progress toward outcomes	OUTPUTS The products we create and services we provide	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES The short-term changes that result from our work (satisfaction, knowledge, attitude)	MID-TERM OUTCOMES The mid-term changes that result from our work (action/impl., change in performance)	More families openly discuss religious	
Advisors (children, families, religious experts and	Faithful Friends exhibit 2 yr initial 1,800 sf installation, then refreshes and returns within 4 years	 No. of visitors Pct. free admissions No. of partner meetings 	Adults and children will be <i>satisfied</i> with their experiences.	Families will increase their <i>skills</i> in discussing religious	differences.	
lay leaders) Partnerships (interfaith organizations and places of faith)	Workshops, Performances Event series timed with religious observances throughout the year	 No. of events No. of participants No. of partners No. of faiths represented 	Children will be engaged with the exhibit and programs. Families will discuss	topics. Children will increase their <i>interest</i> in learning about religions.	Families are knowledgeable about religions	
Physical facility (Museum gallery, workshop, and performance space)	Seasons of Sharing Annual Nov/Dec exhibit and programs dedicated to showcasing family traditions of 7 religious observances	 No. of visitors Pct. Free admissions No. of faiths represented 	religious beliefs, similarities, and differences. Adults and children will gain <i>knowledge</i> about	Children will <i>develop</i> alliances and friendships with	other than their own.	
People (educators, developers, exhibit	People Faces of Houston resource (educators, 900 sf resource space housing	No. of visitors	religions and how Houston families practice them.	children who practice religions other than their own.		
contractors, workshop leaders) installations on rele	components and temporary installations on relevant topics	 Pct. Free admissions No. of faiths represented 	Staff will understand the basic characteristics of the major world religions and the	Staff will develop skills for facilitating visitor dialogue related to religion and difference including	Houstonians hold respect and/or love for others	
(children and families) Funding (Lilly Endowment	children and families) Dedicated facilitator to engage with families in the exhibit and during programs (Lilly Endowment) Dedicated facilitator to engage with families in the exhibit and during programs	 No. of hrs facilitating No. of visitors 	project's importance for Houston. Partners will be satisfied with how the	difference, including conflict resolution. Stakeholders will understand the	who have religious beliefs and traditions different from their own.	
(Lilly Endowment implementation grant and sustainers)	Offsite Outreach 120 activity kits circulating through 38 Houston Public Library neighborhood locations	No. of circulations	project addresses the needs of faith communities.	importance, approaches, and impacts of the project.		













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The Beginnings of Religious Literacy at Boston Children's Museum



Religious Literacy Orientation

Framework #1: Mona Abo-Zena, Assistant Professor, College of Education and Human Development, University of Massachusetts, Boston

- Cognitive "Is God bigger than a dinosaur?"
- Social "Why does grandma wear a prayer shawl?"
- Physical "Why don't we eat pork?"
- Emotional "Where did the dead dog go?"



Religious Literacy Orientation

Framework #2: Diane L. Moore, Founding Faculty Director of Religion and Public Life, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts

• In order to reduce stereotypes, prejudice, and violence, it is critically important to recognize the great diversity within religions.

- An embodied understanding of the ways religion has enacted structural violence, particularly towards marginalized communities.
- A tool for examining the positionality and power structures inherent within institutions.



The Cost of Religious Illiteracy





Religion and spirituality is embedded in each person's development, lived experiences, and culture

The omission of religion and spirituality limits our ability to reflect the reality of children's lives and engage families.

Mainstream [white, western] religious beliefs and values are threaded into everyday experiences, and can uphold structures of oppression





Mission

The Religious Literacy Initiative supports families by **providing opportunities to develop a curiosity** about the ways in which religion is embedded in identity and culture. Through various platforms, including exhibits, programs, object-based learning and community collaborations the goal of this initiative is to help children, families and caregivers feel more comfortable talking about their religious identities and **develop skills to practice empathy towards other people.**

The overarching goal of the Religious Literacy Initiative is for children, families, and caregivers, regardless of belief systems and practices, **including those with no religious beliefs or affiliation**, to feel supported in engaging with topics that affect children's identity development and wellbeing.

The Religious Literacy Initiative is designed to provide children, **and the adults who care for them**, opportunities to:

- Understand how beliefs and values develop as a facet of identity
- Develop a sense of curiosity and comfort around differing belief systems and lived experiences
- Celebrate religious, cultural and familial traditions



Vision

Our vision is to establish Boston Children's Museum as a model for other cultural institutions to **center the lived experiences of children and families with diverse identities, beliefs and religions**.

We do this through:

- Generating ongoing learning opportunities about religious literacy from experts in the field, and offering staff professional development
- Serving as a resource to other museum professionals by sharing materials, tools, research and facilitating convenings
- Defining new ways of integrating a religious literacy lens across our work, policies and procedures



Religious Literacy Application



Share knowledge and build cultural wealth



Encourage play and curiosity



Explore values that connect with religious ideas



Reflecting on Religious Literacy at Your Museum



OR VISIT

pollev.com/religionacm125

Based on what you've heard today, what might be some ways that you can start approaching Religious Literacy within your museum?

- Individual reflection: 2 minutes
- Pair and share: 4 minutes
- Group of 4 share: 8 minutes

Questions

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19