

## AN EVALUATION OF PLAY: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Linda Snow Dockser, Evaluator  
Please Touch Museum for Children  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

To improve the design and implementation of future exhibits, The Please Touch Museum (PTM) for Children in Philadelphia, PA, scrutinized four aspects of its year-long special exhibit "Play: Past, Present, and Future." Two of these aspects questioned how the exhibit theme was interpreted and personalized by the audience and the extent to which the exhibit encouraged adult/child interaction.

Seventeen visiting units (56 people of various ages and relationships) participated in open-ended interviews as they exited the Play Exhibit. The average group size was 3; the average length of the interview was 17 minutes. Each unit remained together during the interview. Questions were initially addressed to children, with adults encouraged to help draw out the children's thoughts as well as express their own. Visitors were encouraged to return to the exhibit during the interview to refresh their memories. Asking children to return to the exhibit to point out what they had done and liked or disliked also kept the interview process active while minimizing the confusion caused by limited vocabulary.

Interviews explored which sections of the exhibit were utilized and the kinds of use that occurred. Children were encouraged to mention specific objects and activities, as well as to point out which exhibit areas had the most and least appeal. Adults were asked to assess exhibit elements which encouraged or discouraged adult /child interaction and recall whether anything in the exhibit required explanations for children. Adults were also asked to assess the benefits of the exhibit to themselves and their children and whether the exhibit had changed their thinking about the nature of play in any way. Adult accounts of their reading behavior was of particular interest because the museum had extensive labeling about the value of free play.

Benefits of this evaluation strategy included increased clarity in recalling exhibit participation, increased reflection on the part of visitors, greater depth of information and more opportunities to probe visitors' perceptions. Drawbacks included limitations placed on sample size, time-consuming interviews and complex data analysis.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

The Please Touch Museum had a very explicit message it wished to impart about the definition and importance of "free" play. This message was directly addressed through introductory labeling and "play bubbles" at the exhibit entrance. Only one visitor reported reading the bubbles and none reported reading the introductory labels. Reasons adults reported for not reading introductory material included distractions caused by their children, confrontation with an unfamiliar environment, and a plethora of stimulation. These distractions plus adults' pre-existing conceptions of play probably explain why PTM's intended message was not effectively conveyed.

In probing whether the exhibit had changed adult conceptions of play, it was discovered that while the interviewed adults universally recognized the importance of play, they held very diverse opinions about what that importance was. Most adults also connected play with learning and within that context would stop their children's free play in order to explain what something was or how it should be used. This behavior was, of course, antithetical to the play concept the exhibit promoted. Of those adults who did not intervene, some believed their intervention would inhibit or halt play while others felt no need to involve themselves as long as the children were dealing with familiar objects. Still others enjoyed sitting back and observing their children's reaction to things.

No one factor emerged as a facilitator or inhibitor of adult/child interaction. The nature of a particular experience, its degree of familiarity, the mood, age and attention span of the child were all mentioned as factors. Unintentional mixed messages sent by the museum did curtail free play and touching to some degree. Broken toys and objects behind glass in display cases were frequently cited as inhibitions to touching. In addition, staff sometimes enforced rules which were contrary to those stated at the entrance to the Museum.

## CONCLUSIONS

A series of exhibit objectives vs. design dilemmas emerged from the evaluation. Identified discrepancies between objectives and design included:

- If the exhibit objective was to encourage adults to observe and learn about their children's play, then reading labels would interfere with this behavior.

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- If the signs were to be read by the adult to the child, then free play would not be encouraged.
- If children were attracted by activities and adults by labels, then adult supervision of children would be lax.
- If the exhibit intent was to give children a sense of the historical progression of play, then labels offered limited opportunities to manipulate the concept of time.

These dilemmas led staff to question whether signs and display cases should be considered the most educational component of an exhibit and to examine how the museum could display important artifacts and convey information, without giving preschool children and their adult companions mixed messages.

Following the exhibit, the Museum took several steps to clarify these points. The Child Life Center (which documents 20th Century childhood) was opened and the Museum's mission to collect artifacts and educate was broadcast through signs and the media. The Museum felt that through a clearer communication of its background work and signs designating the kind of touching appropriate for different objects, adults and children would get the message as to how they should behave. Within this Center, hands-on activities for children were incorporated to free adults to read and reflect. Physical modifications to offer exhibit spaces were made in order to enable staff to better monitor the potential abuse of objects. Better designed display cases with objects borrowed from prestigious institutions have been incorporated intending to convey the message that objects and childhood require respect.

The evaluation also led the staff to identify broader issues about the kinds of learning being promoted in the Museum and to question whether the concept of free play was appropriate in a museum environment. When and where were self-directed learning and controlled exploration appropriate? How could staff reconcile the theory of free play with the need for adult supervision? What was the ability of a single exhibit experience to alter a visitor's pre-existing conceptions? Staff concluded that encouraging adults "to free their children to play" was too abstract and idealistic an objective. While the Museum promoted play, it was not a playground. The nature of a museum did require adult monitoring and careful, respectful touching of objects.

For further information contact: Linda Snow Dockser, 90 Eunice Circle, Wakefield, MA 01880. □

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useful in appealing to different ages and holding visitor interest. Average duration of use at seven assorted exhibit stations ranged from 68 seconds to 226 seconds per station;

- although "estimating" is a difficult concept, it's obvious that people are having fun with it;
- the exhibit promotes group interaction;
- exhibit instructions were well-used, and for the most part they were effective;
- some exhibit stations were less effective than others, and were recommended to be revised or eliminated for the traveling exhibit;
- most exhibit stations tended to have a "single-use style" rather than a "multiple style of use," reflecting the arcade-type design.

Not only was this exhibit successful (in part, due to the thoughtful planning and pre-testing ahead of time), but the evaluation process was also successful. Highlights of the process include:

- information about visitors was used throughout the development process, extending to plans for revision;
- evaluation skills were successfully transferred to museum staff;
- information about visitor interests and understanding (or lack of) was considered simultaneously with educational theory used by the developer;
- the evaluation process stayed on time and on budget.

**References for this project:**

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