

Family Spaces and Activities: A Low Tech Possibility

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When the Denver Art Museum opened its Just for Fun Family Center, the program for that space had to meet several objectives related to the museum's overall family program package. The family program package was built to make the Denver Art Museum a worthwhile destination for families, those with adults who were used to visiting art museums and those who had never visited art museums. Among families who had never visited, one memorable mother was interviewed about the difference between visiting the art museum and the Denver Public Library next door. She basically said that she got more and more comfortable as she approached the library door, expecting that there would be all kinds of assistance inside for her family. As she approached the art museum door she grew more and more anxious as she worried about how her children would fare in what she described as an antiseptic environment. This small incident in visitor evaluation was an important moment in developing the concept and role of the family center in an overall family visit.

Our key program for families happens in the museum's galleries (our most fragile and "antiseptic" spaces). It is a backpack program which families use on their own, often sitting on the floor in galleries. Making in-gallery backpacks the centerpiece of the family program allowed us to make the family center a side bar and a time out area. The family center needed to be a great place for children and adults to come when they needed a "non-antiseptic" environment. The family center was planned to be a place where families would feel the comfort that can only come from not being with precious art works, not being observed by security officers. "Adults, relax, take a load off your feet. Let your kids play or play with them. Kids, plenty of play things here!"—that's the affective message of the Just for Fun Center.

The center is in space that has multiple uses—making it critical that the family center activities can be put up and taken down in 45 minutes. The family center is open the same hours as the museum is for 160 days each year including weekends, and school vacations. The rest of the time the space is the school entry foyer (120 days a year). This means that no custom architectural design contains the family center. The center is essentially a group of activities (currently 7) that each sit on a custom designed carpet or at custom tables. As you watch people use the center their attention is almost solely focused on these activities and they, literally, have their backs turned to the space that contains them. Fortunately that space is full of light, with floor to ceiling windows, blonde wood floors and comfortable benches around the edge of the space. But the family center could move anywhere.

There are no digital or computer components in the Just for Fun Center. This decision was driven by some pretty simple factors. First, the education staff wanted to be able to maintain and create the center's activities on their own without drawing on the resources of what was a small technology staff. The space was a new kind of thing at the art museum so we decided it should

be well within our capacity to maintain in a good state with minimal resources, or the space might fall on hard times, get shabby and die a slow death.

Second, education staff who were inventing the activities had a great deal of experience teaching summer camps for children, camps in which connections to the collections were important as was the raw physical and emotional engagement of the children in art making and other group activities. The family center was to work well for children 6-12 and younger siblings but an early decision was made to focus on the middle age in that range, making the classic 8 year old the practical target for the activities. Summer camps for 8 year olds, from 9am until 5pm, must keep a group of 15 children fully engaged moment by moment. They call for variety of activities to suit the interests of different children and to create variation in pace throughout the day. Some of the educators teaching the camps had great success with using play, rather than school type teaching, as the basic approach to learning. Imagination also proved to be one of the great skills of the 8 year old. Summer camps did not use technology but relied on physical engagement in playful activities including art making.

Third, education staff decided to look at common popular play activities in the commercial toy world. Visits to toy stores, watching kids play on their own, also contributed to our choosing low-tech as the way to go. Dictionary.com defines toy as “an object for children to play with” and it was the “object” that we decided to focus on for family center activities. We wanted to make physical things that came to life when a person began fooling around with them. We wanted these objects to attract users and for the way to play with them to be intuitive to family visitors, especially children. These “toys” needed to engage fingers and hands, muscles and bodies, eyes and skin, brains and emotions.

In summary we thought the Just for Fun Center could be built on:

SIMPLE THINGS

+

A SIMPLE SETTING

+

SIMPLE MAINTENANCE NEEDS

+

COMPLEX CHILDREN AND THEIR ACCOMPANYING ADULTS

Our battle cries became “get rid of instructions” and “make it intuitive.” We went from early designs for signs for each activity area that included lots of text and pictures (like a small book on a stand-up banner) to what we called Key Moment Banners showing, for example, a child holding 2 matching shells and saying “It’s a match!” These brief cues are all that was needed as long as the toy/game was one that children already knew, such as matching card games, magnet boards, or dress up costumes. By customizing common toys and games we made activities that were unique to the art museum but which only took a glance, an exploratory hand or just watching others at play to feel totally comfortable using the activities. So the family center has a matching game played with clam shells decorated inside with pretty details from the museum’s Japanese lacquer collection.

Family center activities were initially invented by the education department Master Teachers, each of whom is assigned to a collection much as curators are. To add rigor to our thinking as we thought of new toys/games we asked each inventor to consider their collections and to invent 4 activities in 4 categories of play: challenge play (you win or complete the activity in a pre-defined manner), small world play (like anything from Hello Kitty to Barbie and G.I. Joe), dress-up imagination (where you actually become the thing you dress as), and art making play (making things with plenty of room for doing it your own way). Each of these play types was based on low or no tech toys and games.

Finally, all activities were tested in formative stages of development. If the game did not work it needed to be improved or tossed. We watched real kids play using our paper and felt marker mock ups. And we learned a lot! We made inventing family center activities similar to the tried and true method we had used in summer camps where poor activities really flopped right before our very eyes as kids did not engage, went a little wild and made you want to tear your hair out. Real families using our activities, a bit of structure for our observations and willingness to change any detail to make it work better—this was critical to developing successful family activities.

With this low-tech framework and formative testing we created such things as:

Chairs to Build and Mark: I designed it!:

These are blackboard chairs with interchangeable arms and backs and plenty of fat chalk sitting on floor covers illustrated with patterns from our furniture collections. From testing, we learned that thin chalk was not as good as fat chalk because it tended to get crushed under feet, and that having a small tray with a lip under each chair helped keep the fat chalk where it needed to be for next use.

Egyptian Animal Dress Up: I'm a Nile crocodile!:

These are exquisite costumes made by a local costume designer based on animals in the hieroglyphs on our mummy case, where lots of dads seem to like being the Nile crocodile. From testing, we learned that many kids do not want to put a mask entirely over their head—hot and scary in there—and prefer instead to have head pieces in which their faces show through.

Japanese Shell Game: It's a match!:

This game consists of 36 matching shells on a low round table marked with the simple instruction, "Play Memory." From testing, we learned that using 52 pairs of shells (as in a card game) made a game so big that small kids had to risk crawling across the playing table to turn up a pair—and that 36 shells (16 pairs) was plenty to create a challenge.

The implications of words like "toy" and "play" carry two meanings. One focused on the inherent and pleasurable way that people play with toys. The other is expressed in phrases like

“boy toy” or “they are just playing”. These phrases express the careless sense of the words. But play is serious, especially for children. Who among us can deny leaning social skills, sharpening memory, and vividly remembering the things we did while playing. As museum try to provide traditional school learning in their school group and teacher programs, it seems we would be wise to also serve children and their adults in leisure time mode also. The leisure feel was important to the family center. Using backpacks in the galleries does require more discipline and carries more responsibilities for parents and children in those fragile spaces with fragile objects in an art museum. The Just for Fun Center is for relaxation and ease, for freedom from duties and responsibilities. Each activity is based on something from the collection. And at each of those art works in the galleries there is a 3-foot high A-frame sign telling visitors that we have made this art into a game in the Just for Fun Center. Parents told us they wanted all the fun things to be art related but they also told us not to name the space “the family learning center” because this would not suggest a good leisure time space for them and their children.

Low-tech? High-tech? Certainly both/and and not either/or is the wise course here. But whether the activities are low or high tech, they should fully engage the intended audience, be intuitive in terms of how-to, be pleasurable in memory, and relaxing for all concerned. At the Denver Art Museum we had more capacity to do this using low-tech options. So, for us, low-tech toys, games, and play are on the top of our list.

For details on the Denver Art Museum Just for Fun Center and other family programs, please refer to the Denver Art Museum web site where a full report to the field can be found.