

Audience Research: Understanding Families' Perceptions of Living Things in Their Communities

Interview and Questionnaire Results Report

**Prepared for Boston Children's Museum
Boston, MA**

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of a front-end exploration study conducted at Boston Children's Museum in September and November, 2010. Front-end evaluation is often conducted to provide exhibit planners with information about their audience during the planning stages of an exhibit. This front-end study was designed to determine visitors' existing knowledge of the living things and natural processes in their neighborhood, and more importantly, their level(s) of interest in finding out more about the animals and plants with whom they share their neighborhoods.

The goals of this survey included assessment of the following:

- Are museum visitors interested in learning more about the living things in their neighborhoods? How does their interest in this type of activity compare to their interest in other similar science and engineering-based family activities?
- How likely is their interest to translate into actually exploring their own neighborhoods to observe living things as a family?
- What do museum visitors already know or believe about the living things in their neighborhood and their habits?
- What type of information or programming would encourage families to seek out living things in their neighborhoods? What would make this activity more possible or more appealing?

METHODOLOGY

A survey questionnaire, which included two multiple-choice interest indicator questions followed by four open-answer questions, was administered to Museum visitors and Museum members in either a live interview or electronic survey format. All interest indicator questions were designed using a Likert Scale, rating interest level from 1-5. The scaling was conducted as follows:

- 5 = Very Interested
- 4 = Interested
- 3 = Some Interest
- 2 = Little Interest
- 1 = No Interest

The survey was developed with Randi Korn & Associates (See “**Families’ Perceptions of Living Things Survey**”, Appendix I). For the live survey, members of the Museum’s Teen Ambassador program were trained to approach visitors and ask them if they were willing to answer some simple questions that would aid the Museum in designing future exhibits and programs. The vast majority of the surveys were given in English, with a few administered in Spanish. Because the survey was relatively brief, it was generally conducted standing up while a parent or caregiver watched their child or children play in an exhibit. The Teen Ambassadors were encouraged to approach any visitor of adult age and to be accommodating and courteous in requesting help. Over the course of two different Friday night sessions, the Teen Ambassadors completed a total 126 questionnaires. Friday nights were chosen because they are reduced admission nights at BCM, when the most diverse audience visits the Museum.

Online surveys were administered to Boston Children’s Museum’s email distribution list (which includes member families and other parties) via the survey website Zoomerang on November 2, 2010. A total of 26 individuals responded by submitting completed surveys. The Zoomerang survey included not only the questions from the survey tool used in interviews, but also two questions addressing respondents’ use of cell phones, smart phones and related applications. These questions were added to assess the potential utility of developing a smartphone application around future exhibit content and family programming, but are not included in this report. For all presented data, “target zip codes” refers to respondents who live in urban areas:

Characteristics	# of respondents	
Interview survey respondents	In target ZIP codes	72
	In non-target ZIP codes	54
	Total Interviews 126	
Zoomerang respondents	In target ZIP codes	16
	In non-target ZIP codes	10
	Total Zoomerang 26	
Total surveys completed		152

SURVEY RESULTS

All Respondents:

Question 1: On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not interested and 5 being very interested, please rate these four ideas:

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean response
<i>Ideas</i>						
a. Learning more about the science of weather	3	2	16	13	21	3.9
b. Learning more about the living things in your neighborhood	2	1	11	16	25	4.1
c. Learning more about building and architecture	0	8	11	14	22	3.9
d. Learning more about rocks and minerals	3	8	13	12	18	3.6

Question 2: On a scale from 1-5, with 1 being “I would not do this activity” and 5 being “I would do this activity”, please rate the following activities:

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean response
<i>Activities</i>						
a. Look for living things (like birds, ants, flowers, etc.) along with your children	0	1	6	15	33	4.5
b. Keep a weather chart with your children over a month period	9	3	17	14	12	3.3
c. Build something with your children, such as a tower made of straws	0	1	9	17	28	4.3
d. Look for interesting rocks in your neighborhood with your children	2	6	14	19	14	3.7

Interview Respondents from Target Zip Codes:

Question 1: On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not interested and 5 being very interested, please rate these four ideas:

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean response
<i>Ideas</i>						
a. Learning more about the science of weather	2	3	19	21	27	3.94
b. Learning more about the living things in your neighborhood	1	0	18	18	35	4.19
c. Learning more about building and architecture	0	8	15	20	29	3.97
d. Learning more about rocks and minerals	2	13	18	17	21	3.59

Question 2: On a scale from 1-5, with 1 being “I would not do this activity” and 5 being “I would do this activity”, please rate the following activities:

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean response
<i>Activities</i>						
a. Look for living things (like birds, ants, flowers, etc.) along with your children	0	3	6	18	45	4.46
b. Keep a weather chart with your children over a month period	8	7	22	19	16	3.39
c. Build something with your children, such as a tower made of straws	0	2	10	17	43	4.40
d. Look for interesting rocks in your neighborhood with your children	2	8	17	25	20	3.74

Questions 3-6: Open-response questions:

Question 3: *Do any animals live in your neighborhood? What kinds?*

Responses to this question varied widely, with the most frequent responses as follows:

- *Birds/Pigeons (34)*
- *Squirrels (25)*
- *Dogs (21)*

- *Cats (21)*
- *Raccoons (12)*

Question 4: *How might you describe living things in your neighborhood?*

As in Question 3, respondents provided a wide variety of answers, including negative descriptors, positive ones, and everything in between. Some of the responses included:

- *Dirty*
- *Disgusting*
- *Filthy*
- *Friendly*
- *In danger*
- *Nasty*
- *Pests*

Question 5: *In what areas of your neighborhood do you think you might be able to see or watch living things?*

Again, responses were widely varied, but interestingly, the most common response to this question was “Boston Common”. This response is of particular interest because the Boston Common is not actually located in any of the respondent’s neighborhoods; instead it is situated centrally in downtown Boston. This would indicate that a significant number of respondents believe it is necessary to travel to a destination outside of their neighborhoods to view wildlife and living things.

Question 6: *What kind of information might help or encourage you to look for living things with your children in your neighborhood?*

With Question 6 arguably being the most open-ended of the questions, the responses were accordingly the most widely varied.

Some of the responses included:

- *Pretend you are walking with an animal. Have a thing to start a conversation – wear a costume on a walk*
- *Living thing hot spots; a map of the best areas to find interesting wildlife/plants*
- *An exhibit on animals in the city*
- *Kid-friendly*
- *Field guide for the area*
- *School, library*

CONCLUSIONS

The data and responses gathered through these surveys paint a picture of museum visitors who are eager to learn more about living things in their area and ready to explore with their families, were they provided with appropriate tools, information and support. Even more importantly, these results contradict the all too common misperception that urban dwellers lack the interest in or inclination towards family explorations of nature and natural habitats. To wit, 98% of both urban and non-urban respondents expressed interest in learning more about the living things in their neighborhoods, and 97% of urban and non-urban respondents stated that they would like to look for living things (like birds, ants, flowers, etc.) along with their children.

Given this overwhelmingly positive response to the idea of getting out and exploring as a family, we can conclude that providing programs and support that make it easy and appealing to get involved would yield a high level of subscription by local families. The responses gathered in the open-ended questions offer a critical insight into what families already know and believe to be true about living things in their neighborhoods, and the trends in responses to Question 5 indicate a growing need for awareness of living things and habitats in one's immediate neighborhood. Many of the responses to Question 6 remind us that effective outreach programming often does not have to be complicated or intensive to engage families and visitors effectively.

Appendix I

Families' Perceptions of Living Things Survey

Boston Children's Museum Survey

1. On a scale from 1-5, with 1 being no interested and 5 being very interested, please rate these four ideas:

a. Learning more about weather:				
No Interest		Some Interest		Very Interested
1	2	3	4	5
b. Learning more about the living things in your neighborhood:				
No Interest		Some Interest		Very Interested
1	2	3	4	5
c. Learning more about building and architecture:				
No Interest		Some Interest		Very Interested
1	2	3	4	5
d. Learning more about rocks and minerals:				
No Interest		Some Interest		Very Interested
1	2	3	4	5

2. On a scale from 1-5, with 1 being "I would not do this activity" and 5 being "I would do this activity", please rate the following activities:

a. Look for living things (like birds, ants, flowers, etc.) along with your children:				
I Would Not Do This		Some Interest		Very Interested
1	2	3	4	5
b. Keep a weather chart with your children over a month period:				
No Interest		Some Interest		Very Interested
1	2	3	4	5
c. Build something with your children, such as a tower made of straws:				
No Interest		Some Interest		Very Interested
1	2	3	4	5
d. Look for interesting rocks in your neighborhood with your children:				
No Interest		Some Interest		Very Interested
1	2	3	4	5

3. Do any animals live in your neighborhood? What kinds?

4. How might you describe living things in your neighborhood?

5. In what areas of your neighborhood do you think you might be able to see or watch living things?

6. What kind of information might help or encourage you to look for living things with your children in your neighborhood?