

Children's Perceptions of the Family Experience

by
Barbara A. Birney
Interpretive Planning In Nuce
North Vancouver, B. C.

In a 1988 study of 12-year-old children's perceptions of their social experience in museums and zoos, children were able to define the type of learning experience that most appeals to them. A subset of children who had been interviewed were also observed as they visited an informal learning setting in a structured group or an unstructured peer group. Children who were allowed to determine their own visit experience behaved in a manner highly consistent with the interview group's descriptions of what a successful family visit would include.

Kelly (1977) noted that the family unit is the most significant force in developing lifelong activities such as museum-going. Stronk (1983) found that while structured tours led to greater cognitive gains, unstructured experiences were associated in an increase in positive attitudes. These findings were supported by Birney (1986).

To probe for children's perceptions of the museum experience, 48 children were interviewed for 45-minutes each. An even distribution of Anglo, African-American, and Hispanic children was obtained. Transcripts of the guided interviews were then coded and a content analysis of the data was performed. Details on a wide range of topics are presented in Birney (1988). In brief, while 98% of the children suggested that the purpose of museums and zoos was to increase people's understanding of animals, 43% mentioned that fun was the primary purpose. Significantly more children from the Zoo treatment suggested that people visit to experience feelings of curiosity, fear, happiness, or wonder.

Children's perceptions of what constitutes a positive social environment appear contingent on the amount of control that they have over their visit experience. When asked to pick a desirable companion for a visit and describe why that companion was desirable, children's responses suggest that the adult- and peer-child interactions are qualitatively different but that one social context is more conducive to learning.

The most signal difference in children's views involved their perception of management versus companionship. While adults were described providing good companionship by only 15% of the group, 51% of the children said friends were good companions. Friends were cited as humorous (24%). Adults were felt to control the visit by 29% of the group, be useful in providing transportation (22%), and, at least, familiar (6%)!

Most revealing were children's descriptions of how their conversations with their parents differ from the conversa-

tions with their peers. While 40% of the children said that adults verbally manage and control their behavior, *none* of the children suggested that this was part of their experience when they visited with their peers. A typical example of parent conversation might be as follows:

Respondent: Look down, don't lean, look at the animals, and like if I'm turning around and the animal's doing something she (Mom) points it out.

Interviewer: What about your dad?

Respondent: My dad says basically the same thing. Stay right here. Don't get lost.

While 21% of the children said that adults spent time on exhibit-related or animal-related topics, 40% of the group said that their peers talked about these things. However, while 10% of the children said adults mentioned environmental issues, only 2% said that they talked about the environment with their peers.

Equivalent percents said that other conversational content included emotional exclamations, observations about other people or objects, and comments about moral behavior towards animals or teasing.

In sum, these children associated visiting museums and zoos with their parents with a lack of control over their own learning experience. Adults were described as managing which exhibits were viewed, the activities engaged in and the verbal flow of information. Children felt that they talked more about exhibit content with peers than with adults. As a final note, there were a couple of children who said that their parents would be the most desirable visit companions. These children also used the same types of descriptors for their parents that other children used for their friends.

References

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