

The findings of this study support those of Borun et al. [4], Ash [1], and Ellenbogen, Luke, & Dierking [5] in that conversation does seem to have an important influence on family learning in museums. These findings have significant implications for museums that wish to engage families in learning experiences. Our research has shown that exhibit design and layout can have a considerable influence on the types of comments elicited by family groups. We have also shown that different types of comments can enable multiple kinds of learning within an exhibit space where language is used as a tool to enhance and promote learning.

Museums wishing to engage families should consider the ways in which their exhibits can elicit dialogue. For example, museums that want to create an environment that triggers sustained involvement with one or two particular topics over the course of the visitors' time in the exhibit space, may wish to create exhibits like the Amazing Jellies exhibit, at the New England Aquarium. In this exhibit, visitors are exposed to stimuli that encourage ongoing reflection about one particular topic – jellyfish. These visitors spend much time *naming* the jellies and commenting on their movement and appearance. Other museums may wish to elicit a greater range of comments within one exhibit. The “All Hands On Deck” exhibit at the USS Constitution Museum encourages families to move around, jumping between different prompts that elicit a range of responses. While they may not have memorized the details of a single topic, visitors are likely to leave this exhibit with a general understanding of sailor life, and with their curiosity and imaginations activated. Museums seeking to encourage knowledge gathering in combination with team building and self-awareness could learn from the design of the “Power Launch” exhibit at the Boston Children’s Museum. This exhibit encourages families to work together and coach each other towards achieving the goal of shooting the ball higher, which can push them to observe scientific principles together and provide positive reinforcement.

It is clear that the design of the exhibit affects not only the way families learn content-specific knowledge, but also the way they springboard into other learning categories from those initial prompts. In addition to seeking knowledge, families are using the exhibit to facilitate a range of social, emotional, imaginative and life-skill based learning. In addition, adults are often taking the opportunity to show their children how to learn by encouraging them to read instructions, experiment, observe, investigate, draw on past knowledge, and ask questions. When designing exhibits, museums should consider the potential for this type of dynamic and far-reaching family knowledge construction.

8. References

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