naeyc

Creating Meaningful Partnerships With Museums

SARAH ERDMAN

There are over 35,000 museums in the United States (Institute of Museum and Library Services 2014). From large art museums full of priceless masterpieces to small historic houses telling the story of one particular family, they are found in large cities and small towns. Thanks to the Internet, many are accessible to anyone regardless of where they live. For many people, museums have a reputation for being a "must do" when traveling—see it in its entirety, and check off the list.

But what does all this mean to you, as an early childhood educator? None of these descriptions make museums sound like places you would want to bring a baby, toddler, or preschooler. High energy and limited attention span meets priceless works of art—no, thank you!

Misconceptions about museums—too formal, boring— prevent many early childhood educators from accessing the diverse and unique resources museums can provide. Young children and their teachers can gain much when teachers add museums to the curriculum. With the increase in community-based and digitally based resources, barriers to access are coming down.

Learning about the goals of a museum; the benefits it provides to young children, early childhood educators, and families; and the different types of partnerships that exist make it possible to envision how a museum and its resources can fit into your curriculum.

A museum's purpose

At their heart, museums are collections of "stuff"— objects that someone felt were important. Any young child with a precious rock collection can relate to this concept. There are three primary reasons why museums gather and display collections:

› **Collecting.** Whether they are obtaining a representative sample of a type of painting or a comprehensive catalog of documents related to an era, museums are building a group of objects to help make meaning or tell a story about a subject (Alexander & Alexander 2007). For example, the Sewall-Belmont House and Museum in Washington, DC, is the home of the National Woman's Party. To tell that story, the collection features objects related to the fight for suffrage and equal rights for women such as banners, newsletters, and political cartoons.

› **Preservation.** Museums preserve and protect unique objects to ensure they survive for future generations to learn from (Alexander & Alexander 2007). The National Museum of American History, for example, spent years painstakingly restoring the American flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Star Spangled Banner," which is now displayed in a specially designed, climate-controlled exhibit. It will last for generations to come because of these steps taken to preserve it.

› **Education.** Museums help people learn, make meaning, share stories, and understand individual and communal cultural heritage through objects and resources developed through scholarship (Hirzy 2008). Being able to visit the actual space shuttle Discovery at the National Air and Space Museum makes space travel more vivid and personal than seeing a printed image in a textbook.

Museum education

Education is such an important part of the mission of museums that within the past 30 years, museum education has emerged as a new branch of study (Hein 1998). Central to museum education is the idea of object-based learning—that "every object tells a story" (Shaffer 2015, 110). While the goals of museum education may be similar to those of classroom education, the learning itself can look very different:

› **Onsite.** These types of interactions center on activity happening at the museum—for example, exploring exhibits, taking a tour, listening to story times, engaging in family workshops, and participating in educator trainings.

› **Outreach.** Recognizing that it isn't always possible for everyone to visit their facilities, many museums have developed outreach initiatives, such as workshops and exhibits in the community. Some museums have partnerships with schools and community groups, which can foster in-depth, long-term learning. A great example of this is the City Vision program at the National Building Museum, in Washington, DC. A class of middle school students visits the museum every week for an entire semester to learn about design and what it takes to shape a community.

› **Virtual.** The Internet offers another venue for outreach. By digitizing collections and making them available online, museums provide patrons who may not be able to come to the brick-and-mortar museum the opportunity to see and read about objects from their collections. Many museums with an online presence also provide educator resources like lesson plans, and connect with patrons and community members through social media. Virtual visits enable teachers to find the perfect museum to complement what children are learning—no matter where their classroom is located. (See "Online Resources," p. 15.)

Benefits of museums

The variety of programs may appeal to those who love museums, but are they beneficial to educators working with young children? Do babies and toddlers really get something out of a museum visit? Can preschoolers absorb unique stories of culture and history? The answer is a resounding yes. Museums have much to offer young children.

Infants

From high-contrast objects and bold images to the familiar form of the human face, teachers working with infants have seen firsthand how babies respond to this kind of stimulus (Toledo Museum of Art, n.d.). Museum collections have a wide variety of sizes, colors, textures, and movement, making them perfect for expanding the visual and tactile horizons of the youngest visitors.

Museum exhibits can also help advance language development. Teachers are reminded during professional development to talk to babies using rich, varied vocabulary. The unique offerings of a museum's collection offer teachers new opportunities for describing and naming objects that may be unfamiliar to the children. They also provide interest and stimulation for the adults in the group, keeping them engaged in meaningful conversation with one another and with the babies.

Museums also fit well with infants' schedules. Because of their consistent and generous hours, they may be explored at a time and pace suitable for infants and often have spaces set aside for baby care. Larger museums can often accommodate strollers or buggies and smaller museums may offer special tours and visiting times for infants. Museums are becoming more accustomed to working with visitors with young children and are working to make relevant information easily available.

Museums speak directly to a toddler's ability to connect with concrete objects.

Toddlers

Toddlers are full of curiosity and vary in their physical needs and social skills. Toddler teachers know they have to be flexible and patient as they introduce new concepts and guide toddlers' development.

On the surface, toddlerhood seems like a terrible time to visit a museum. Toddler teachers may think to themselves, "Priceless, possibly unsecured objects? New environments and strangers? How will this work?" The flexibility of being able to visit on your own schedule and with your own agenda allows you to create an experience that works for the class.

Museums also speak directly to a toddler's ability to connect with concrete objects. Things that children only read about in books have size, context, texture, and (possibly) light and sounds when viewed in a museum. The diversity of museum objects can also help toddlers understand that familiar objects come in many forms— for example, houses can be made of many materials and come in all shapes and sizes. Children begin building an understanding of more abstract concepts.

Preschoolers

Most museum programs advertised for young children are written with a preschool audience in mind. These programs enable preschoolers to participate in activities, engage with interactive elements in exhibits, and ask the staff questions. Preschoolers' growing abilities to selfregulate, lengthening attention spans, and increasing capacity for complex and abstract thinking make it possible for teachers to expand the interaction. For example, at school, a class could read the book From Head to Toe (1997), by Eric Carle, and talk about ways bodies can move. Then, they could visit sculptures at an art museum and try to move their bodies in the same way the statues are posed. Back in the classroom, children could use clay, pipe cleaners, and other art materials to create their own sculptures, showing how they like to move. These activities tie their learning to the concrete things they see (the sculptures), but also to the more abstract concepts of bodies and movement.

The object-centered, concrete nature of museums complements the way that preschoolers absorb information and build understanding. Museums are also well positioned to support the in-depth quests for information that frequently grip the minds of some preschool children. Whether children are interested in rocks, dinosaurs, art, or princesses, they can explore their interests in comprehensive, cross-disciplinary ways through the collections and with staff expertise.

Educators and caregivers

Discussions of museum visits and programming for young children often overlook the benefit they can give to the educators and caregivers as well. Museums not only give adults a safe, climate-controlled place to explore with children, they also have resources adults can use in their teaching. Exhibits provide context for subjects teachers and children are exploring, while museum staff serve as resources for gathering more information and exploring further. Digital resources allow educators to access and incorporate these benefits into their classrooms.

Incorporating museums into your program

You have a better understanding of why museums do what they do, and you're convinced that they can benefit the children you work with—now what? Figuring out the best way to incorporate museum resources into your classroom practice is an important step. Museums can be included in your curriculum in different ways and still let you be respectful of time, budget, and other requirements of your school program.

Virtual access

Many museums are embracing the potential of a digital museum, using social media to engage directly with visitors and putting high-resolution images and resources like lesson plans on their websites.

Taking advantage of these virtual museums allows teachers to look beyond their immediate geographic area for resources. Don't hesitate to reach out to nationally and even internationally prominent museums. Although it may take time to receive a response (many are operating with a small staff), museum professionals are usually eager to connect with virtual visitors and many international museums have materials and staff to accommodate English speaking patrons.

Informal visits

Many people arrive at a museum with the intention of seeing everything, but this is usually the least successful type of visit. Even the smallest museum will have more than you can absorb in one visit, and you don't want tired feet and bad moods to be everyone's most enduring memory! More informal visits with a slower pace and lighter agenda are often preferable and work well for very young children as long as educators prepare in advance. Select a few key objects that relate to the children's interests, and spend time focusing on those.

Programming

Museum programs can happen in the museum or out in the community. A majority of programs for young children use a story-time format or incorporate art making. Some museums provide activities that visitors can do on their own (scavenger hunts, activity totes, etc.) or set up stations with objects and a knowledgeable staff member who can chat casually with visitors and answer questions. Participating in scheduled programs can be a great way to use a museum's resources. Programs take some of the planning pressure off educators preparing for a visit. In addition, if the museum comes into the community, the burdens of cost and logistics are often eased. Some downsides to programming are less flexible times, fewer content options, and multiage grouping—frequently due to the reality that few museums have the financial resources to have a dedicated, trained early childhood educator on staff. (See "Examples of US Museums Offering Early Childhood Programming.")

Ongoing collaboration

For educators with convenient access to a museum, it is possible to make collaboration with a local museum part of the curriculum. Getting to and from the museum easily (walking, reliable transportation, etc.) and having a willingness to integrate visits and museum resources into the curriculum are necessary for this relationship to work. One early childhood education setting in Washington, DC, "adopted" a museum, with the teachers deciding what worked best for the individual classes. Some will be visiting regularly; others will use online resources.

Many museums are looking for ways to connect with the community. The next section will detail how to find and connect with a museum to form a meaningful collaboration.

Beyond a field trip—Creating a partnership

Collaboration with a museum takes planning to ensure the process is effective for everyone. As with any aspect of education, goal setting and reflection are key. The following steps will help you establish your own partnership.

Identify museums in your community

› From art galleries to historic houses or large-scale institutions, you'll be surprised at the resources your area has to offer. Town directories, the American Alliance of Museums website, tourist board, visitors' bureau, families, and friends can help you create a list.

› It may be helpful to create a community map that shows these places in relation to your school, and to create a spreadsheet to collect notes about transportation options, any connections you already have, what is unique about the location, and contact names and information.

Establish goals

› Consider how much time you can devote to creating a project or partnership. Developing something new is a commitment, so it is important to be honest with yourself about how strongly you feel about the project.

› Think critically about your goals for a museum partnership. Whether you are planning to make regular visits or only use online resources, or are doing this primarily for children or for educators, having a specific and realistic vision of what you want out of the collaboration will help you find the right partners.

› Compare your goals to your list of museums and their resources. Consider the resources, available programming, operating hours, and other factors relevant to the children and the topics you are interested in.

Identify what you have to offer

› Many museums operate with tight budgets and a small staff. They are eager to connect with the community but have to be aware of how it benefits them as well. Going into a conversation with a clear sense of what you have to offer will be more productive for both sides.

› Remember, the cost of admission is not the only thing that you bring to the table. Educators and their classes may be able to assist museums by participating in pilot programs and new initiatives. Providing field trip photos of the children (only with parental permission, of course) to be used in the museum's marketing efforts can be valuable for an institution. There are also a number of grants and funding opportunities for early childhood programs, and they usually need community partners. Think outside the box to identify skills and resources you can provide.

Make contact

› Once you have established your goals, determined what you can offer, and identified a museum to work with, it is time to reach out. A personal contact on staff—if you have one—is the best place to start; however, if you don't, there are a few key phrases to look for on a museum's website. Museum Education or Visitor Services are generally the departments that run programs, coordinate public events, and provide visitor information. Reach out to staff in those specific departments or get in touch through general information channels they have listed, like an "info@" email address or general information phone number.

› Another good way to connect is to go to the museum and talk to people in person. Look for staff or volunteers (sometimes called docents) in the galleries or running programs you are interested in. Introduce yourself, and ask whom you should get in touch with.

› It may take some time for someone to get back to you— stay patient and persistent. Just like early childhood educators, many museum staff have a lot of duties during the day that prevent them from responding to email and phone calls right away.

› Once you've made contact, let staff know what you are interested in doing. Lay out the goals that you've brainstormed, but stay flexible and open to new ideas. Being clear on what support you need from their staff is also important—it will help them gauge whether or not this is a project they can take on.

Implement your plans

› In the case of a more casual collaboration, in which the educator plans, develops, and leads the visits, having a museum contact and checking in may be all that is needed. If a more formal program is envisioned, creating a partnership plan with the museum—so everyone is clear on the goals and expectations—is recommended.

› Once you've discussed and made a plan, it is time to try it out. It is important for everyone to remember that this is a pilot and might not go exactly as planned. Stay flexible, have reasonable expectations, and treat it as a learning experience for everyone involved.

› One of the biggest pieces of feedback from other museum–early childhood partnerships is that everyone underestimated the amount of staff time needed. Make sure that you and your program administrator are ready to support the initial steps as needed.

Reflect, review, and adjust

› Stepping back and looking at what you've created is a critical (and often overlooked) component of any collaboration. Both sides need to reflect internally about whether the partnership meets their needs and have a conversation about what is working and what should be improved. Make these opportunities to review and discuss a regular part of the process.

› Don't be afraid to completely revamp the plan or to walk away. Sometimes an idea looks great on paper but doesn't work out the way you'd hoped. It is better for both sides to recognize this than have plans fade away or the situation become unpleasant.

› Don't forget to celebrate your successes. Make sure families, colleagues, administrators, and the community know what you are doing. Reach out to the wider early childhood education community to share what you did and how you did it. The National Association for the Education of Young Children feels strongly enough about community connections to include it as one of its core goals for quality programs (NAEYC, n.d.), and you can show fellow educators a different path to creating those ties.

Conclusion

Museums provide a unique, diverse collection of objects and stories that are accessible to young children and their educators. Many communities have a local museum, and the Internet brings institutions from around the world to your fingertips. Whether you are able to visit a museum regularly or rely on online resources, finding ways to consistently incorporate museums' resources into an early childhood classroom will enliven and inspire children and your own teaching. Starting in infancy, the wonders of museums can support a child's growth and development and connect her to the wider community.

Online Resources

This is just a sample of the many resources available online. Type "museum about" along with any subject into a search bar and see where it takes you!

Smithsonian Kids: Resources for children from across the Smithsonian Institution, including access to each museum's webpage. A separate educator page hosts activities and a forum. www.si.edu/Kids.

NGAKids: The National Gallery of Art's webpage offers resources, games, and interactive art projects. Children can download images from the collection search page. www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/education/kids.html.

Exploratorium: Resources for children include virtual science labs. Educator resources include Tools for Teaching and Learning. www.exploratorium.edu.

MoMA: The Museum of Modern Art offers a MOMA Learning section (www.moma.org/learn/kids_families/index) with classroom resources and an online search of the collection.

Children ages 5 to 8 can explore works of art, artists, and their techniques at the interactive Destination Modern Art (www.moma.org/interactives/destination/#).

British Museum: Among the many online offerings is Teaching History With 100 Objects (www.teachinghistory100.org), which includes information and teaching ideas. www.britishmuseum.org.

Examples of US Museums Offering Early Childhood Programming

North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, http://ncmuseumofhistory.org.

Naper Settlement, Naperville, Illinois, www.napersettlement.org.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, www.cmoa.org/kids-and-families.

Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma (featured in a Young Children article, "Museum Babies," by Goble, Wright, & Parton 2015), http://gilcrease.utulsa.edu.

Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama, www.artsbma.org.

Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, http://beach.k-state.edu.

National Building Museum, Washington, DC, www.nbm.org.

United States Botanic Gardens, Washington, DC, www.usbg.gov.

Examples of US Museum Preschools

Stamford Museum and Nature Center, Stamford, Connecticut, http://stamfordmuseum.org/early-ed.html.

Lincoln Nursery School at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts, http://lincolnnurseryschool.org.

Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center, Washington, DC, www.si.edu/SEEC.

Museum Preschool at Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, Fort Worth, Texas, www.fwmuseum.org/museumschool-preschool-program.

Hundred Acre School at Heritage Museum and Gardens, Sandwich, Massachusetts, http://100acreschool.org.

References

Alexander, E.P., & M. Alexander. 2007. Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums. 2nd ed. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press. Goble, C.B., S. Wright, & D. Parton. 2015. "Museum Babies: Linking Families, Culture, and Community." Young Children 70 (3): 40–47.

Hein, G.E. 1998. Learning in the Museum. New York: Routledge. Hirzy, E.C., ed. 2008. Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.

Institute of Museum and Library Services. 2014. "Government Doubles Official Estimate: There Are 35,000 Active Museums in the U.S." www.imls.gov/government_doubles_official_ estimate.aspx.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. N.d. "The 10 NAEYC Program Standards." http://families.naeyc.org/accredited-article/10-naeyc-program-standards#8.

Shaffer, S.E. 2015. Engaging Young Children in Museums. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. Toledo Museum of Art. N.d. "Baby Tours: How Babies Respond to Art." www.toledomuseum.org/learn/babytours.

Further reading

American Alliance of Museums. N.d. "Museum Facts." http:// aam-us.org/about-museums/museum-facts.

Erdman, S. 2015. "Locally Sourced Culture." Teaching Young Children 8 (2): 18–20.

Making Teachers Nerdy. 2015. "Best Online Interactive Museum Exhibits for Students." http://mrssmoke.onsugar.com/Best-Online-InteractiveMuseumExhibits-Studen....

National Building Museum. "CityVision." www.nbm.org/familieskids/teens-young-adults/cityvision.html.

Sewall-Belmont House and Museum. www.sewallbelmont.org.

Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. "Welcome Discovery." http://airandspace.si.edu/explore-and-learn/topics/discovery/.

Smithsonian National Museum of American History. "The Star Spangled Banner." http://amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/default.aspx

Photo © iStock

Audience: *Teacher*
Age: *Early Primary*, *Infant/Toddler*, *Preschool*
Topics: *Subject Areas*, *Creative Arts*, *Art*, *Social Studies*, *YC*

SARAH ERDMAN

Sarah Erdman is an experienced early childhood educator and museum professional in Northern Virginia. She teaches at FB Meekins Cooperative Preschool. scerdman@gmail.com