Connecting Kids to History
with Museum Exhibitions
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Connecting Kids to History with Museum Exhibitions

D. Lynn McRainey
and John Russick

EDITORS

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To Alan, who never forgot what it was like to be a kid
To Miss Ann and Archie
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List of Illustrations | 9
Foreword by Phyllis Rabineau | 11
Preface | 15
Introduction: Who Needs History? by D. Lynn McRainey and John Russick | 21

PART I  Valuing Kids | 27

Introduction to Part I | 28

1 Never Too Young to Connect to History: Cognitive Development and Learning • Sharon Shaffer | 31

2 It’s about Them: Using Developmental Frameworks to Create Exhibitions for Children (and Their Grown-ups) • Elizabeth Reich Rawson | 49

3 Experts, Evaluators, and Explorers: Collaborating with Kids • Anne Grimes Rand and Robert Kiihne | 75

PART II  Connecting Kids to History | 93

Introduction to Part II | 94

4 Finding the Story in History • Leslie Bedford | 97

5 Imagination—A Child’s Gateway to Engagement with the Past • Daniel Spock | 117

6 Playing with the Past • Jon-Paul C. Dyson | 137

7 A Sense of the Past • D. Lynn McRainey | 155

8 Are We There Yet? Children, History, and the Power of Place • Benjamin Filene | 173
PART III  Creating History Exhibitions for Kids  |  197

Introduction to Part III  |  198

9  Shaping the Space: Designing for Kids • Andrew Anway and Neal Mayer  |  201

10  Making History Interactive • John Russick  |  219

11  Is it Real? Kids and Collections • Mary Jane Taylor and Beth A. Twiss Houting  |  241

12  Write and Design with the Family in Mind • Judy Rand  |  257

13  In a Language They’ll Understand: Media and Museums • Gail Ringel  |  285

About the Authors  |  305

Selected Bibliography  |  309

Index  |  317
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables

2.1. Excerpt from Developmental Milestones from the World Brooklyn Developmental Framework.

2.2. Excerpt from a Developmental Framework of Children’s Historical Thinking by Mari Shopsis.

2.3. Excerpt from Research Conclusions from the World Brooklyn Developmental Framework.

Figures

P.1. Members of the Sensing Chicago project team at the Chicago History Museum.


3.1. A Sailor’s Life For Me?, USS Constitution Museum.

3.2. A Sailor’s Life For Me?, USS Constitution Museum.

3.3. A Sailor’s Life For Me?, USS Constitution Museum.

4.1. Remember the Children: Daniel’s Story, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

4.2. Remember the Children: Daniel’s Story, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

4.3. Remember the Children: Daniel’s Story, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

4.4. Remember the Children: Daniel’s Story, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

4.5. Noah’s Ark, Skirball Cultural Center.

4.6. Noah’s Ark, Skirball Cultural Center.


5.1. A Sailor’s Life For Me?, USS Constitution Museum.

5.2. Sensing Chicago, Chicago History Museum.

5.3. Tales of the Territory, Minnesota Historical Society.


6.2. Kidstory, Old Sturbridge Village.
8.1. Illustration from *Madlenka* by author Peter Sís.
9.2. Exhibition space planning using a shoebox.
9.3. A bubble diagram plans the visitor experience by thematic flow.
9.4. An experience map illustrates the pace and type of visitor experiences.
10.2 *Sensing Chicago*, Chicago History Museum.
10.4. *Imagining Chicago*, Chicago History Museum.
13.3. Chart of media experience.
13.5. Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site.
Among the variety of museums in the United States today, those interpreting history are the most numerous and, by virtue of their content rooted in the uniqueness of specific localities, also arguably the most diverse. Many museums devoted to preserving the past, or to capturing the ephemeral present as it quickly “becomes history,” take familiar form as historic sites, house museums, or free-standing state and local historical societies. Others are devoted to the histories of particular cultural groups or to exploring historical narratives associated with the development of industries, art forms, and businesses (motorcycles, music genres, transportation, flour milling, and computers are only a few recent examples). Still other history organizations preserve sites imprinted with meaning by virtue of their association with significant events or with memorable personalities. And as diverse communities have blossomed across the country’s social landscape, new museums have also taken root, nurturing historical memory with collections that document these communities’ origins, exhibitions that celebrate their achievements, and heritage programming that connects the generations.

Because they are so numerous and diverse, these history organizations collectively offer the public a broad variety of museum experiences and, because they represent the places, people, and events of our shared daily experience, they also have the potential to make significant connections with American museum audiences. Research indicates that, even more than the first-hand accounts of family members and others, museums are Americans’ most trusted source of information about the past. However, compared to other types of museums, attendance at individual history museums is quite low, indicating a substantial gap between their potential to engage the public and the fulfillment of that promise. Today, many history museum professionals are seeking to understand the factors behind this disconnect, looking for ways in which their organizations can become more resonant with the audiences who are not yet coming through their doors. Among the constituencies increasingly rec-
ognized as underrepresented in their audience profiles, children and families can be one of the most important opportunities for history museums to broaden public engagement with the stories latent in their collections. But until quite recently, many—indeed, perhaps most—history museums have extended only minimal gestures to reach these audiences.

For example, for quite some time (at least as long as we have collected systematic data, and likely much longer), the Chicago History Museum’s most numerous visitor segment has been older adults, primarily empty nesters who visit alone, in pairs, or in organized groups. Until quite recently, this visitor profile was presumed satisfactory: efforts to engage families with children focused primarily on once-a-month weekend programming and on an aged “Hands-on History Gallery” whose isolated and outdated demonstration units lacked any kind of unified storyline or purpose. Children were seldom if ever seen as the primary audience for new exhibitions and the museum staff had little experience with the interpretive and design tools needed to engage them. Our narrow audience focus shaped our exhibition processes and products in ways that are evident only in retrospect. We knew our collection and how to explain any one of its objects with no more than seventy-five words on an attractively designed label panel. We had honed our editing skills to encapsulate whole chunks of history into three-minute videos and posing Q&A issues on flip-up labels. Once in a while our budgets allowed us to develop an interactive computer program. We figured we knew which stories mattered, and since the way we told them was so interesting to us, we didn’t pay much attention to who else was listening. Almost (but not quite) unconsciously, we had chosen to make exhibitions for ourselves, relying on teachers, chaperons, parents, and docents to do the heavy lifting for kids. This practice ignored the fact that about a third of our museum’s total attendance was comprised of student groups, the majority from elementary school classrooms.

Although, like the Chicago History Museum, most history museums’ attention to children may still be in its infancy, over the past twenty or more years some of these museums have instead been very engaged in audience development focused on issues of diversity, representation, and interpretive voice. While many museums (including most state and local historical societies as well as house museums) continue to enjoy enduring relationships with the traditional constituencies that have built their collections over generations, they also recognize that the demographics of their surrounding communities have changed. Many of their new neighbors feel an uncertain connection—or no connection at all—with the past that traditionally has been represented in history museum
exhibitions and programs. Recently arrived in a new location, families are focused on making that place a foundation for their future, and a history that does not include them seems peripheral to their concerns. In common with previous generations of Americans, these audiences look to the future and seek pathways to it. We envision a future lying before us. History lies behind, and we often struggle to see any value in looking back.

As history museums become experienced in audience research and more nuanced in its interpretation and application, data demonstrates that these museums cannot build effective and long-lasting bridges with diverse communities until they are attractive to these communities’ families and their children. Research shows that visitors’ most enduring connections with museums are based on their experiences as children during family visits. Reflecting on findings from a survey of museum attendance studies, John Falk posits, “Proactive efforts to involve more families in museum experiences will lead to increased attendance and support in the future.”4 Recent market studies by the Chicago History Museum also remind us that ethnically diverse audiences, like other free-choice visitors, are most likely to seek museums as members of intergenerational family groups.5 These families must have reasons to visit us, they must feel welcomed, and their experiences must be rewarding. To gain their attention, we must compete with myriad other scheduled commitments and attractive entertainment options. History museums need to recognize and embrace their opportunity to attract these families by offering unique leisure experiences that are not only entertaining but also meaningful for children.

A generation ago, natural history museums began to transform themselves, inspired by progressive work in British6 and American7 science museums. Borrowing scientists’ techniques for engaging visitors in a discovery process, natural history museums began to allocate space and budgets for interactive exhibitry that would encourage audiences to explore the context and meaning of anthropological artifacts and natural specimens. In a similar vein, exhibitions practitioners in history museums now look outside their institutions for models and practices to engage our audiences, particularly children and families. Today’s methodologies draw from a broader base of technology, utilizing not only museum precedent but also other applications from our media-rich environment. We benefit from the body of data that has accrued over several decades of visitor research, and a new generation of museum professionals embraces audience-centered thinking and recognizes the value of creative collaborations among museum staff from varied disciplines.
Several years ago, my colleagues Lynn McRainey and John Russick were asked to conceive an exhibition for children to be a centerpiece of the newly renovated Chicago History Museum, replacing the obsolete “hands-on” center with a more vibrant environment that would be engaging for young visitors and would offer coherent and meaningful history content. Lynn and John's thoughtful development process was a model partnership between gifted professionals with different but complementary experience and interests, and as they examined the opportunities inherent in their project, they looked for lessons and inspiration from colleagues throughout the country. Their research and wisdom gave life to a fun, new history exhibition for kids called Sensing Chicago. This exhibition became the cornerstone of a successful campaign to transform the institution's visitor demographics, and brought reality to our vision of the museum as a destination for families and children. It also inspired the current volume of essays, which coheres the knowledge and creativity of experts across museum disciplines and offers insights to inspire a new generation of history exhibitions for young visitors.

Phyllis Rabineau
Chicago History Museum

NOTES

1. While there is no definitive or “official” count of these organizations, the American Association of Museums estimates there are approximately 6,692 history museums and historical societies in the United States, and an additional 1,942 historic houses and sites. Collectively, they comprise more than 48% of the total number (17,744) of the country's museums. Elizabeth E. Merritt and Philip M. Katz, eds., 2009 Museum Financial Information (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2009), 22-23.


3. Data from participants in the American Association of Museums’ 2008 survey shows that median attendance for historic houses or sites is just 11,700 visitors annually; history museums fare even worse, with 10,000 visitors a year. Elizabeth E. Merritt and Philip M. Katz, eds., 2009 Museum Financial Information (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2009), 43.


5. For example, see Lipman Hearne, “Summary of Research: American History, Abraham Lincoln, Benito Juarez” (compiled for the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL, 2008).

6. Roger S. Miles et al., The Design of Educational Exhibits (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1982).

Is this for me?

Have you ever picked up a book, read the title, looked at the cover, scanned the table of contents, and wondered, Is this for me? Will I enjoy this? One can imagine that kids ask themselves similar questions when they go into our museums and exhibitions. Is this for me? Will there be anything for me to do? Will I have fun?

So how do you know if this book is for you?

If you are ready to see kids as a valued museum audience, requiring the same level of commitment from us that we give the adults who bring them, then this book is for you. If you recognize that kids are a unique and complex audience and that reaching them with history content demands that we approach our work differently, this book is for you. And, if you are looking for new ideas and new methods for engaging kids in experiences with the past, this book is for you.

It would have been for us too had it existed in 2003 when we began work on the premiere exhibition for a new children’s gallery at the Chicago History Museum. Opening in 2006, Sensing Chicago was produced by a team led by an educator and a curator. Throughout the exhibition development process we often lamented the fact that this book did not already exist and wondered why. We also discovered that our partnership was uncommon and we wondered about that too.

The complex and sometimes contentious history of educators and curators working together in American museums is firmly grounded in preconceived notions, often fueled by turf wars, and sustained by an array of stereotypes. So when a veteran educator and curator were paired to create an exhibition for children at a venerable history museum, there were far more questions than answers about our professional practice, desired process, and expectations for the final product. After all, what could an educator know about making exhibitions? What could a curator know about working with children? Dialog and debate became our means for understanding each other’s perspectives, for defining
our approach, and for discovering the competencies and capabilities of kids.

In late 2003, the conversation began. Not having worked together on previous projects, we started with shared experiences to initiate the dialog and to draw from as we advanced the project. To that end, we made site visits to museums across the country that had a tradition of reaching out to kids and family audiences. Although we found few successful history exhibitions specifically developed and designed for kids, we did experience a range of interactive spaces that targeted children. We were able to expand our conversations to include colleagues who had already grappled with questions similar to those we were facing. These individuals were all generous with their time and expertise, from helping us become versed in how to identify and accommodate kids’ unique characteristics, to educating us on ways to engage kids and their families so they could influence our work. Eventually these conversations extended beyond the museum profession to include others whose work was focused on kids: youth psychologists, education specialists, youth marketers, toy developers, designers, and classroom teachers. And of course, throughout this process we heard the same steady chorus from all these experts: go talk to kids.

Through a rigorous regimen of classroom visits, focus groups, testing, and prototyping, children became our experienced guides, leading us back to childhood and what it was like to be a kid. They were the wise sages who reminded us that they too can have meaningful experiences with history. And they became our willing partners, there to advise us when something was not working and propel us onward with their smiles of delight when they (and we) got it right.

The project also benefited from a continuous dialog between and among members of a highly dedicated and experienced team comprised of Chicago History Museum staff and external designers and media consultants. Team members were willing to deviate from the tradition of prioritizing content and collections in order to focus on audience. Instead of defining what “it” would be too early, our process allowed children to take the lead. The exhibition would be defined by watching, listening to, and interacting with more than one thousand children over the course of its development.

This book is a continuation of the conversation that began between an educator and a curator. The chapter authors were selected by the editors and invited to join in this discussion, and they brought with them their diverse perspectives and expertise on kids, history, and exhibitions. Read individually, chapters identify the range of opportuni-
ties available for reaching out to kids and recognizing their abilities to connect with history; read as a whole, the book presents an argument for assuming our responsibilities to create the spaces in which these exchanges can occur.

Since the focus on kids as a core audience for history museums is an emerging practice, the breadth of exhibitions for kids is limited. While a range of successful experiences are cited as examples, in some instances the same exhibitions are featured in multiple chapters. Authors examine these experiences from different perspectives to mine them for the insight and direction they can provide us as we consider how to connect kids to history. Practitioners in small and large museums can use these examples to spark conversations with their colleagues and to shift institutional thinking about kids.

We have chosen to focus primarily on kids and not the families or school groups they are a part of to emphasize kids as individuals and as an important museum constituency in their own right. While docents, gallery facilitators, teachers, parents, and caregivers play important roles in navigating children’s visits to museums, we have focused on unfacilitated exhibitions to show that museums can create experiences in which

**FIGURE P.1.** Dedication to the ideals of a project by both internal and external team members is central to its success. Members of the *Sensing Chicago* project team pose for a reunion photo in 2007. *From left*: Tamara Biggs, John Russick, Andy Anway, Dorrie Brooks, Sara Smith, Caleb Donat, Steve Bressler, Lynn McRainey, and Scott Rabiet. Courtesy D. Lynn McRainey and John Russick.
kids have meaningful encounters with history that invite them to take the lead, make choices, and be engaged. The chapters are organized into three parts:

I. *Valuing Kids*—understanding who they are, what they can do, and how to collaborate with them;

II. *Connecting Kids to History*—expanding our and their interpretive toolkit to include story, imagination, play, the senses, and place; and

III. *Creating History Exhibitions for Kids*—rethinking familiar exhibition elements of design, interactives, collections, labels, and media with kids in mind.

We are grateful to many individuals who have been part of this unfolding dialog. We benefited tremendously from the support and generosity of our colleagues in children’s museums, science centers, and art and history museums. In addition to helping make *Sensing Chicago* a success and an honorable mention in the American Association of Museums’ 2007 Excellence in Exhibition competition, these individuals challenged us to think differently about our audience and to see that the issues we were grappling with were bigger than those of a single exhibition project and needed to be shared with the larger museum community.

We are indebted to the contributing authors to this volume for their willingness to join our conversation and to ponder and reflect on the challenge of developing history exhibitions for kids along with us. Their collective experience is a testament to our profession; their diverse perspectives and valuable insights offer a range of possibilities for our future work with kids. We are grateful for the support of Phyllis Rabineau, vice president for interpretation and education at the Chicago History Museum, whose foreword offers a context for these and other conversations surrounding kids, history, and museums. We extend a special thanks to Michael Kress-Russick of www.kindredpixel.com whose artistic talent allowed us to put kids first even on the cover of this book. He captures them perfectly as ready, willing, and waiting for us to take action. We acknowledge the ongoing support and encouragement of Gary T. Johnson, president, and Russell Lewis, executive vice president and chief historian of the Chicago History Museum. Interns Elizabeth Leiserson, Lindsey Parker, and Angela Argentati assisted on a range of research and administrative details, and we thank them for their work. And finally, our thanks go to Jennifer Collier for her skills in the production of this book and Left Coast Press for ensuring that this conversation can reach others.
By committing to this audience, undertaking the research to know and understand them, and doing the hard work to create meaningful and memorable experiences with history for them, we do more than influence the lives of children. We engage our colleagues and ourselves in a conversation that is destined to reveal new ways of thinking about history. We push our museums to more fully embrace accessibility as a goal for all we do. And we challenge our profession to define and express the value of history for everyone, everyday. In the end, our museums and our audiences reap the benefits. And room is made for a younger voice to become part of the conversation.

Still reading? This book is definitely for you.
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**Who Needs History?**

Our lives are history. In fact, every moment we have ever lived is now a memory. At the same time it is our history that makes us real and gives our lives meaning. For both adults and children, our ability to reach back and connect to the past is the central mechanism in knowing and understanding who we are.

In *The Presence of the Past*, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen chronicle their experiences collecting the perspectives of people from across the nation about the value and meaning of history in their lives. In a personal afterthought, Rosenzweig writes about the challenge to history professionals from ordinary people both engaged in the ideas of history and passionate about their personal stake in it. In a passage about how these people viewed official history, Rosenzweig writes,

> our respondents were more interested in talking about the experience and process of engaging the past. They preferred to make their own histories. When they confronted historical accounts constructed by others, they sought to examine them critically and connect them to their own experiences or those of people close to them. At the same time, they pointed out, historical presentations that did not give them credit for their critical abilities—commercialized histories on television or textbook-driven high school classes—failed to engage or influence them.¹

The audiences for history are numerous and diverse, complex and thoughtful. They are interested in what we have to offer, but at the same time they bring a critical eye to our work. They are already invested in history and they know whether they have been invited into or excluded from the experience. And they are bored, even turned off, when it’s not done right. If history museums are to be successful they must understand their audiences in nuanced ways and be ready to provide meaningful points of access for them.
But what does the audience for history look like? Is it everyone for whom history could or should have meaning? If not, to whom should we direct our efforts? Who needs history more? Is it older adults who have the longest relationship with the past, recent immigrants trying to ground themselves in the culture and tradition of their new home, individuals with limited education looking to expand their horizons, or kids who are just becoming aware of their relationship to the past and who will be the leaders of tomorrow? Is there a group we can ignore? Are there people for whom history does not matter?

If history is important for all these groups then logic dictates that history museums have an obligation to provide meaningful experiences with the past for anyone who walks through our doors. We have to become accessible to all, and accessibility means more than conforming to the legal requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. From bilingual labels to free admission days, museums are mining the dimensions of accessibility. In recent years, several high-profile American historical societies have tried to appeal to wider audiences, some even shedding their founding title and incorporating words such as “center” or “museum,” including the Chicago Historical Society (now the Chicago History Museum). But if our goal is to expand audiences for history and champion accessibility and inclusivity we need to do more than simply change our names. We have to change the way we do business.

In “Interactivity and Social Inclusion” Jocelyn Dodd asserts that museums are not always as inclusive as we may hope. Dodd advocates for a more equitable approach to audience through “pathways to inclusion” that move our interpretive practice away from the authoritative voice of the specialist or scholar, to an interpretive approach that offers visitors of all ages points of connection, relevance, and cultural ownership. Dodd advocates dismantling “the barriers—physical, intellectual, sensory, emotional, attitudinal, financial, cultural and technological. The removal of these barriers is complex, involving a holistic approach by the museum.” Museum barriers limit more than just physical access. They are evident in the topics we select, the spaces we design, and experiences we create. They communicate who is welcomed and able to participate in the exploration of history. Whether young or old, if any visitor is unable to access the information or engage in the experience because of the vocabulary used, height of cases, or simply overall comfort in the space, the museum is to an extent communicating, You are not welcome, or at least, We didn’t make this with you in mind.
Do History Museums Get Kids?

When it comes to kids and history museums, our barriers are many and points of connection few. Our spaces are typically formal, our voice is usually authoritative, and our content loaded with ideas unfamiliar to most kids. Not only are our physical spaces ill considered in anticipation of kids, but also we create barriers through our expectations of their behavior.

For many history museums, kids represent a discrete and particularly challenging audience. We watch their behavior in our museums and they confirm our preconceived notions that kids do not have the patience or focus to grasp the depth of the content. Nor do they possess the reflective nature to spend concentrated time considering their place in our collective past. We are repeatedly told (and we echo the message) that kids think history is boring. Through this casual analysis, kids seem an unlikely target for our efforts.

Too often we see only the obstacles rather than the opportunities that kids represent. Although we were all once young, we forget what it was like to be a kid. Their interactions with and reactions to the world around them are quite different from our own—it is full of movement, noise, emotions, and energy; behaviors we have not considered or even imagined, let alone accommodated or encouraged in creating our exhibitions. We often seek ways to control and limit these traits through behavior management and the creation of tools to keep kids occupied rather than harnessing these attributes as means for engagement and points of connection. In terms of exhibitions, we often simply retrofit our adult-centered spaces with quick fixes such as scavenger hunts or a flip label to target younger visitors. While a dedicated gallery for children is a first step, it also segregates the experience to a confined area of the museum as if there were two histories, one for kids and another for adults.

If our goal is to connect kids to history with exhibitions, we are faced with the questions, What does a meaningful and memorable history exhibition experience for kids look like? How can we explore the “then and now” with an audience centered on the “here and now?” In opening our minds and spaces to children, we find ourselves struggling with the nuances of our practice—the tensions between scholarship and memory; education and entertainment; authoritative messages and personal meaning making.

Do Kids Get History?

In his autobiography, comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory shares many tender, funny, and heartbreaking stories from his impoverished youth in St. Louis, Missouri, including a wonderful anecdote
about the interpretation of history by kids. “We used to root for the Indians against the cavalry, because we didn’t think it was fair in the history books that when the cavalry won it was a great victory, and when the Indians won it was a massacre.”\(^4\) Writing as an adult, Gregory reflects on how his personal circumstances shaped his critical eye on historical events. As a poor African American child living in segregated America his identification with the people of color in the story upends the accepted lessons of history and anticipates the movement away from the portrayal of American Indian communities as a menace expertly and forcibly removed for a noble cause. In part because of his race, but also because of his youth and the fact that he had no investment in the traditional interpretation of manifest destiny, Gregory was free to imagine an alternative meaning for this widely accepted history.

Four decades after its initial publication Gregory’s story suggests how a child’s perspective can be more than simply unique. It can be instructive. The way kids think about the past can highlight opportunities for museums to make connections with them, to use their natural instincts and interests as the basis for creating experiences with history designed for them.

An adults’ consumption of history tends to be a reflective, contemplative act that draws on their personal inventory of life’s experiences, knowledge, and personal meaning. By contrast, children are still figuring out life and themselves through experiences that allow them to explore, participate, and play a part. While their consumption of history may seem quite different, they too are drawing on experiences, understanding of self, and personal meaning. Children are all too eager to make comparisons between how they do something and how others did it. Their imaginations can transport them to places in history and into the lives and circumstances of people of the past. While they are finely tuned into their own perspective of me, myself, and I, children can step into the shoes of another person through role-play that allows them to be an American Indian or a newly arrived immigrant, even the president. While their boundaries of time do not always fit neatly into the prescriptive framework of timelines, children are comfortable moving back in time, as their favorite stories of princesses or dinosaurs demonstrate. And kids can appreciate the firsts, the lasts, the bests, the worsts, and the mosts of history.\(^5\) Is this so different from the way adults experience or appreciate history?

**Experiencing History**

If kids are already equipped with the tools to make sense of the past then how do we invite them in? How do we make exhibitions that connect them to the past? What do those exhibitions look like?
As adults, we come to view history as something that is researched and composed by others and prepared for us. Adults expect to read or listen to or watch history; we tend to step back and leave the work to the experts. These passive experiences often fail to engage kids who learn in motion and through interaction. Moreover, historians are quick to explain, our interpretation of history is not and should not be fixed. In fact, history needs our ongoing participation. In “Why Study History? Three Historians Respond,” William H. McNeill explains,

Historians are always at work reinterpreting the past, asking new questions, searching new sources and finding new meanings in old documents in order to bring the perspective of new knowledge and experience to bear on the task of understanding the past. This means, of course, that what we know and believe about history is always changing. In other words, our collective, codified memory alters with time just as personal memories do, and for the same reasons.6

If history is open to new ideas and new perspectives, if it grows and remains vital because of new input and the participation of many, the opportunities to present history as an interactive work in progress has the potential to redefine the history museum exhibition experience. History is waiting for people—old and young—to bring their own perspective to bear on it and make it meaningful.

In our effort to illustrate history as a process, as an exchange between the present and the past, museums frequently claim our products “bring history to life.” This dubious phrase sends a very clear message; history is dead and needs someone to revive it. While we use it to imply interactivity and infuse the historical process with relevance, it brands the past as dormant, stagnant, as if it needs constant resuscitation to make it powerful, relevant, and accessible. But what if instead of approaching the past as a dead thing we occasionally bring to life, we bring history to our lives, and our lives to history? In this twist on the old phrase, the life of history is found equally in the scholarly research of an historian, the reflective contemplation of an adult visitor, or the active engagement of a child.

What if our exhibition development process began with the identification of desired experiences and behaviors we wanted visitors to have and demonstrate? Like life, the space would demand participation and invite queries, debate, and discoveries; and most of all, like life itself, every visitor—old and young, experienced and novice—would leave their mark and change the space just because they were there at that moment in time. Perhaps we need to start thinking about history as
something we do in the present rather than something someone else
did in the past.

This book is an elaborate argument for targeting kids with history
exhibitions. In these pages, multiple authors consider kids from diverse
perspectives and note countless opportunities, rather than endless ob-
stacles, for connecting them to history. The chapters in this book ex-
plor why, how, and when to connect kids with history content, and
the exhibition examples featured provide evidence that some museums
have begun to tackle the challenges of this underappreciated and un-
dervalued audience in meaningful and memorable ways.

D. Lynn McRainey and John Russick

NOTES

1. Roy Rosenzweig, “Roy Rosenzweig: Everyone a Historian,” in The Presence of
the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life, Roy Rosenzweig and David
2. Jocelyn Dodd, “Interactivity and Social Inclusion” (Conference Proceedings:
Interactive Learning in Museums of Art, Victoria and Albert Museum,
May 17–18, 2002), http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/research/conferences/
3. In “A Short Review of School Field Trips: Key Findings from the Past and
Implications for the Future,” Jennifer DeWitt and Martin Storksdieck review
the discrepancies in research literature on the effects that “attention focusing
devices” have on the student group experience. The debate surrounds the
tension between structure and choice when devices, such as worksheets,
are created as a means to manage behavior rather than stimulate discovery
and inquiry (Visitor Studies 11, no. 2 [2008]: 185–186).
5. Kieran Egan of the Imaginative Education Research Group (IERG) explores the
active engagement of a child’s imagination in learning through cognitive tools
found in different levels of understanding. The different “understandings” that
children develop over the course of their lives, as described by Egan, suggest
opportunities for connecting kids to history content. For example, Mythic
understanding (comes with oral language) draws on story and the affective
organization of content, and Romantic understanding (comes with literacy)
draws on the limits of reality, the extremes of experience in a child’s growing
fascination with the real world (“Cognitive Tools,” last modified November 5,
History? Three Historians Respond,” in Historical Literacy: The Case for History
in American Education, ed. Paul Gagnon and The Bradley Commission on
Why kids? In 2001, the American Association of Museums publication *Excellence in Practice* challenged museum professionals to explore the dimensions of accessibility to “provide multiple levels and points of entry into content, including intellectual, physical, cultural, individual, group, and intergenerational.” History museums have made considerable strides over the past two decades to break down barriers—mental, physical, psychological, and emotional—for ever-increasing subsets of the museum's potential audience. However, when it comes to kids, many history museums have failed to grapple with a host of formidable barriers that limit accessibility. We tend to justify why kids are not a fit for history exhibitions rather than exploring ways to make them feel welcome; we blame schools for giving history its bad reputation of being boring rather than taking a hard look at how our approach to interpreting history in exhibitions might engage younger audiences.

In “Interactivity and Social Inclusion,” Jocelyn Dodd writes about museums shifting to a more equitable approach to serving diverse audiences: “As museum professionals we are not well placed to understand the feeling of being excluded from museums, because of our professional interest, knowledge, and experience. Yet understanding this is an important step in meeting the needs of those who are socially excluded.” Although we all would like to think our museums are “socially inclusive” of children, our practices, as Phyllis Rabineau noted in her foreword to this book, depend on the adult companion to do the “heavy lifting” in providing access for children in their groups through identifying points of engagement and connection. The height of cases, length of labels, and even content selection weigh heavily in favor of adult visitors. Even our rhetoric when referring to children contributes to this dismissive attitude toward a younger audience. Perceptions that developmentally appropriate content is “dumbed down” and that interactive, whole-body experiences are not suitable formats for addressing serious subject matter and will lead to inappropriate museum behavior foster a culture in which children are not valued or taken seriously as a core audience. When staff members, confronted with the challenge of developing meaningful exhibitions about history for kids, claim “it will never work here,” they allow the museum to take a pass on kids, to rationalize why accessibility for younger audiences is not a priority. In short, by not challenging ourselves to create inviting environments and engaging experiences for children, we are telling kids and families, “there’s nothing for you here.”

 Appropriately enough, the chapters in this part of the book put kids first. Making history accessible to kids is no different than providing access to other audiences. To be successful with any audience we have to know them, understand them, engage them, and most importantly respect them. We were all kids once, have memories of being kids, and in some cases live with kids, but these personal associations should not lead us to make uninformed decisions or craft quick
solutions to serving younger audiences. Instead, our approach to understanding kids must be driven by research, literature reviews, developmental frameworks, and audience studies. Although children's visits to museums are always defined in terms of a group experience (family, school, and youth), younger visitors are complex individuals who come with their own set of needs, expectations, interests, and desires that warrant experiences beyond the printed handout or the occasional flip label.

In turning to children, we can discover how they learn, explore, and understand the world around them, and the role history plays in their lives. The chapters in this part offer exhibition team members new approaches and models for making kids an institutional priority. Research into educational theories, designing developmental frameworks, and collaborating with kids are critical steps toward a more equitable approach for connecting kids to history. Children are part of the continuum of the past, present, and future and should be seen as active participants in the unfolding dialog and story that are at the heart of history. As the subsequent chapters will reveal, children have an active and logical sense of the past.

Recognizing the unique characteristics of children, in Chapter 1, “Never Too Young to Connect to History: Cognitive Development and Learning,” Sharon Shaffer challenges us to consider two important questions: Are children required to understand history in the same manner as adults? Do children have critical cognitive abilities relevant to understanding history that remain unrecognized? This chapter encourages us “to know them” by examining the educational theories on how children learn that apply to our field. All exhibition team members will benefit from this review, because it exposes learning as a dynamic process of personal meaning making through experiences, social interaction, and multiple intelligences. This chapter provides a context for familiar terms within the museum field—constructivism, learning by doing, and multiple learning styles—allowing practitioners to revisit these terms and their applications for connecting kids to history. Kids emerge demystified as an eager, viable, and desired constituency for history.

In Chapter 2, “It’s about Them: Using Developmental Frameworks to Create Exhibitions for Children (and Their Grown-ups),” Elizabeth Reich Rawson challenges readers to know their younger audiences as well as they know their content. Her charge, “to understand them,” puts theories into practice as projects shift from being about something to being for someone. With a commitment to audience, a developmental framework provides an exhibition team with the knowledge and insight to make choices that will empower kids during their museum visit. Rawson advocates for the rigor and discipline to research, design, and apply a developmental framework for every project. Through benchmarking kids’ social, cognitive, and physical milestones, exhibition teams can more effectively match experiences and content to desired messages and affective outcomes.

All team members become audience advocates as museums reach even farther
from exhibitions developed for someone to exhibitions developed with someone. In Chapter 3, “Experts, Evaluators, and Explorers: Collaborating with Kids,” Anne Grimes Rand and Robert Kiihne advocate for museum professionals to reach out to children and involve them in every stage of the planning and development of exhibitions, “to engage them.” From focus groups to prototypes, kids are given a voice to inform and define exhibition concepts, object selection, and design. This new model welcomes children as active agents as they inform and influence the creation of more meaningful and engaging exhibitions. Team members realize that planning does not occur behind closed doors but rather out in the galleries and in classrooms as they seek opportunities to observe, converse, and interact with kids, and to learn from and be inspired by them.

We must value kids. By knowing, understanding, and engaging kids, staff members become more skilled at creating experiences for them. In turn, the process gives kids a voice and a stake in our work, and our products become environments that provide them with physical, cognitive, and emotional access to history.

Why kids? The answer lies in a museum’s commitment to accessibility for diverse audiences and requires individual and institutional commitment to a process that puts children at the forefront of exhibition research and development. By focusing on children, museums are extending an invitation to children; an invitation to be engaged, to make discoveries, to contribute, and to feel welcome. By knowing, understanding, and engaging children, museums can fully embrace a practice that welcomes and expects kids, values diverse learning styles, seeks collaborations with kids, and makes content accessible through interactive experiences.

NOTES


American museums are recognized around the world as places of learning that have contributed to the educational landscape of our society. Most American museums were established on a commitment to subject or collections, and some even considered audience at their inception, but few recognized children as a discrete segment of that audience. In recent years, museum professionals have sought to develop exhibits and programs to address the interests and needs of children. With this increased commitment on the part of museums to reach a young audience, exhibition project teams are looking for best practices that will serve as models.

To engage a younger audience in a meaningful way, more museums need to embrace approaches to exhibition development that are grounded in what we know about how children perceive and construct meaning about their world, or what is often thought of as cognitive developmental theory. A strong theoretical foundation in child development and cognitive theory, which have been important tools in the development of models for learning in museums, increases the likelihood of developing effective educational experiences for this audience. This chapter reviews key theorists and concepts, setting the stage for subsequent chapters, which bring these ideas into museum practice.

A child's ability to connect to the past and construct meaning about history requires an understanding of the development of concepts of time, sequence, categorization, and classification as well as exploration of the role of experience, language, and culture in the learning process. Educators grounded in learning theory acknowledge that a child's understanding is qualitatively different from that of an adult. In making connections to the past there is a need to categorize and integrate information in a meaningful way, as well as think abstractly, skills not always identified as strengths of children. We ponder important questions: Are children required to understand history in the
same manner as adults to be viewed as learning history? Do children have critical cognitive abilities relevant to understanding history that are currently underutilized? To consider these questions, we must both revisit how we define and understand history and become familiar with how children think about and construct meaning of the past.

The Power of History

History is not simply an abstract concept. It is important to most individuals in daily life. Researchers Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen conducted a survey about Americans’ interest in history.¹ Their findings suggest that ordinary people are deeply engaged with the past and that the connection to the past develops through personal experience, interests, and family culture. What is this connection to the past and the role of history in the lives of ordinary people? Are the connections similar for children?

Historians recognize that history is socially constructed and that there is seldom consensus in interpretation. An individual’s interests, experiences, and culture play a pivotal role in constructing meaning about the past. History is never a simple record of the past, recounting details of ideas or events in time, but rather an interpretation from different points of view, often with varying degrees of clarity. “The fabric and design of history, like the threads of experience in our own lives, are woven in intricate and complex patterns.”²

From a child’s perspective, history is envisioned as everything that has already happened. It is seen initially in the broad context of the past and the relationships to people, places, and events that have occurred, rather than through a detailed sequence of events across a continuum of time. This ability to recognize and categorize events as present, past, or future is an early framework for a child’s capacity to think about history and typically is grounded in personal history. As children gain the ability to organize ideas about the past cognitively, a relationship to history is born. More nuanced appreciations develop as children see connections or common links among everyday experiences, thus creating an infrastructure for organizing ideas. It is through social interactions and everyday encounters with stories, customs, holidays, places, and even mainstream media that ideas about the past are introduced, later to be sorted and classified.
Educational Theory

For centuries, humans have pondered the wonders of the mind and posited theories of learning that continue to influence practice today. As we entered the twentieth century, the examination of learning theory expanded from the arena of philosophy to include psychology and education, bringing together perspectives of philosophers, psychologists, and educators to shape our current understanding of learning and advance our knowledge of cognition and effective teaching practice.

Within the museum field and history museums in particular, we seek a common language to discuss ideas relevant to informal learning and refer to the writings of respected theorists in an effort to shape practices for creating meaningful and memorable connections to the past for children.

Cognitive Theory: Biology or Environment

Theorists have long pondered the origins of learning and wondered whether an individual’s capacity to learn is most influenced by genetics or by experience. This discussion of nature and nurture continues to evolve. There is a strong indication by cognitive theorists that a blend of biological (nature) and environmental (nurture) circumstances predict cognitive growth and that, indeed, experiences are crucial to cognition. Nature is reflected in developmental stages, innate abilities, instinctual differences, and learning styles.

Although the biological factors are viewed as important to this discussion, there appears to be even greater consensus in recognizing the import of experience through interaction with the environment as crucial to the construction of knowledge. Experience becomes prior knowledge and serves as a building block for future learning.

Cognitive Theory and Children’s Learning of History: A Constructivist Framework

In an analysis of cognitive theory and its implications for teaching history to children through exhibitions, a broad theoretical framework can serve as the foundation for our understanding. A brief definition of cognitive theory, or educational theory, establishes common ground for further thought. According to George Hein and Mary Alexander, who discuss constructivist theory as it applies to museum work in *Museums: Places of Learning*, “an educational theory requires a theory of knowledge (an epistemology), a theory of learning, and a theory of teaching (a