

DISCOVER THE MAGIC OF MUSEUMS

This article is based on the practices of Museum as a Resource, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to define and test new ways to use museums to support parents and teachers of young children.

Museums are excellent resources that provide wonderful and exciting learning opportunities for Head Start students. They also create an excellent environment for innovative staff training and parental involvement activities. Unfortunately, many Head Start professionals equate visiting museums with taking children on exhausting field trips that take more effort than they're worth. The complex logistics of scheduling buses, making bathroom stops, and keeping children busy can quickly cloud the original intention of the field trip—to learn and have fun. Well, learning is fun. And with a few simple tips from this article, you can discover how to use museums to easily expand the scope of your Head Start program.

The first step to taking advantage of museums is to learn exactly what they are and what they can offer your program. This knowledge will give you ideas for trips and provide you with information to motivate other staff members and parents to find the magic in your local museums.

What is a museum?

To many people, museums are stuffy old buildings crammed with boring objects that you are not allowed to touch. While it's true by strict definition that museums are places that house only objects of art, history, or science, this article will expand the definition of museum to include all places where children

and adults can go to learn and explore. It is helpful to think of these places not just as museums, but as "museum resources."

Besides specializing in preserving and exhibiting art, teaching history, or displaying scientific objects, museums can contain a wide range of interesting items, including trains, stamps, dinosaurs, dolls, jewels, ships, photographs, inventions, maps, and artifacts. And that's just the beginning.

Places that study living things can also be thought of as museums. These include arboretums, botanical gardens, aquariums, and zoos. Planetariums, farms, nature preserves, libraries, and historic buildings can also be considered museums.

Despite the many different types of museums, most have four elements in common: collections, educators, programs, and mementos. Learning to identify what museums offer in these four areas will help you better identify what the museum can offer your Head Start program.

Collections. All the objects on display or preserved by a museum make up its collections. The objects are collected and displayed to stimulate interest, share beauty, and educate visitors. In an art museum, the collection might consist only of paintings and sculpture. At a dairy farm, the collection would include cows, tractors, the hay barn, and many other items.



Searching for animals in paintings as part of a museum animal hunt, Head Start students and the parent involvement coordinator from the Miami Valley Child Development Head Start program in Dayton, Ohio, take advantage of The Dayton Art Institute.

Because collections are the most visible part of any museum, people often assume that these are the only things that museums have to offer. But collections are just the starting point for discovering all that exists in museums.

Educators. The staff members and volunteers who lead tour groups through the museum and explain the exhibits in



The education coordinator at the Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm in Dayton, Ohio, demonstrates how to examine insect homes to Head Start parents from the Miami Valley Child Development Center in Dayton, Ohio. The parents will return to the center to teach what they have learned to their children.

detail are educators who can bring the museum's collections to life. They are well-trained and make visiting museums much more fun for children, parents, and teachers. Educators can also discuss specific museum programs and opportunities that are designed for young children.

Some museum educators especially enjoy working with parents and children and can provide exciting programs for Head Start programs, while other educators specialize in academic work. Before you sign up for a program, be sure to ask about the educators' strengths so that you can be sure to get a good match between your interests and theirs.

Programs. Museums have a wide range of programs that highlight or describe a museum's collections. Specific programs include: demonstrations, lectures, concerts, films, parent-child classes, family days, and orientation sessions for teachers and other adults. Many programs are free. Those with fees generally offer a discounted rate for groups, and many will make special arrangements for Head Start.

Family days may be particularly useful for Head Start. Typically these are multimedia festivals, with some combination of music, mimes, puppets, face-painting, or other games, designed for children of all ages.

Mementos. Mementos are souvenirs that double as learning tools. Posters and postcards are examples of inexpensive

mementos that can be found in most museum gift shops. Postcards are a great physical link between the museum and the classroom because they're portable, child-sized, and sturdy. They are wonderful reminders of what the children saw and learned at the museum. Plus, postcards can be used to play matching games or as a springboard for launching stories.

In small museums, which rarely have posters or postcards of their collections, you can take photographs and then reproduce the photos on a color copier.

Seeing is enjoying

The key to learning in a museum (and also the trick for truly enjoying yourself) is to take the time to really discover what the objects in the collection are all about. You've heard the saying about people who look but don't see. Well, this concept applies perfectly to museums. You can walk through a museum and look at everything, but if you don't work at it, you won't see a thing. When visiting a museum, take your time and don't worry about looking at everything in the collection. Have fun viewing a few objects carefully and leave the rest of the collection for future visits.

Visiting a museum with children

Children need extra help taking advantage of museums. It's important that you don't just walk them past exhibits and expect them to enjoy what

they are looking at. You need to help children get excited about the things they're seeing.

Teach them to use their imaginations to form an understanding of what they are looking at. For example, if you are observing paintings together, you can ask them; How many people are in the painting? What do you think they are doing? How do you think they feel? Can you tell me a story about this painting? If a painting doesn't tell a clear story, it probably shares a mood. Ask the children how they feel when they look at the painting and ask them if they know why they feel that way. Discussing museum pieces with children helps them enjoy the museum experience—it allows them to build a bridge from what they already know to discovering new worlds and ideas.

History and science museums, whether augmented by interactive exhibits or not, offer a set of props for conversation and discovery. Make connections between the objects on display and things with which the children are familiar. How is the Model T Ford like a modern car? What are the differences between an elephant and a rhinoceros? Is a palm tree like an apple tree?

Museums and Head Start

Opening your eyes to the wonderful opportunities museums offer will give your Head Start program a wealth of new opportunities. Not only can you take your students on exciting trips (that don't have to be exhausting), but you can use museums for staff training and parent involvement initiatives.

Talk to museum educators about arranging a tour for parents in which they learn how to better share the museum with their children. Arrange an evening staff meeting at a museum as a special treat and a way to spark staff members' interest. As parents and teachers explore new ways to use museum resources, they will discover their own creativity and become more effective educators.

Museums have been around for a long time, but for too long they have not been fully appreciated by the Head Start community. They are not boring, stuffy



To sharpen their observation and communication skills, Head Start parents from the Fairfax County Public School Head Start program in Fairfax, Va., play 20 questions at the Freer Museum of Art in Washington, D.C. In the game, a blindfolded parent tries to determine what a specific piece of artwork is by asking other parents yes and no questions.

old buildings, but community centers eager to collaborate with the Head Start community. Walk into your local museums with fresh eyes. Get excited and ask questions—lots of questions. Teach your students that museums are exciting community resources that are there to serve them. And most of all, have fun. Because using museum resources is an adventure. ☞

The photographs in this article depict activities run by Museum as a Resource, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to define and test new ways to use museums to support parents and teachers of young children. Initiated as a pilot project of the National Head Start Association, Museum as a Resource strives to bring out the creative spark in grown-ups to help them support and nurture their children's curiosity. For further information on how you can take advantage of the program, write to Museum as a Resource at P.O. Box 6286, Washington, DC 20015. Phone: (301) 654-2092.

Six tips for finding museum resources in your community

- 1. Call your state or local art and humanities council.** Every state, and some cities and counties, have a government agency called an arts and humanities council. Call directory assistance for the number of the council serving you. These agencies can offer you a wealth of information for expanding your museum resources.
- 2. Check the yellow pages of your local telephone directory.** Start by looking under "museums," and then turn to "zoos," "arboretums," "art," "parks," and "aquariums." The yellow pages are also a great place to find that special place to visit on a field trip, such as a farm, airport, radio station, or factory.
- 3. Look for monuments and outdoor sculptures in your community.** Outdoor monuments and sculptures allow you to introduce art and history to your students in an informal environment. You can also play outdoor games and have picnics while on your trip.
- 4. Contact other schools and teachers.** Take advantage of other child care professionals who have already set up interesting programs. There is a good chance they will be able to share unique resources with you.
- 5. Get on event mailing lists.** Call museums, theaters, and other cultural centers and ask to be put on their mailing lists. Most will regularly send out calendars that highlight their exhibits and events. They often include special notices on activities for children.
- 6. Ask for information at the museums you visit.** When you're on field trips, ask museum staff members to tell you about other places that would be of interest to your classroom. They are the experts who can lead you to untapped resources.