



## Reaching Nontraditional Families

This report highlights how children's museums can best serve nontraditional family units such as kinship and foster care families, many of which face challenges that prevent children from developing to their full potential. Many nontraditional family units face similar obstacles, such as poverty, isolation, reduced access to educational resources, and instability, which are critical to address at multiple levels, from local to international.

Many children's museums consider it to be their mission to engage underserved populations, including these nontraditional families. Museums can play a critical role in addressing societal challenges by providing special services to at-risk children and serving as a source of continuity, acceptance, and emotional support. Children's museums have the opportunity to use their expertise in child development to support goals of equality and advance the mission of helping underserved children and their families.

With this report, we seek to describe the specific challenges faced by nontraditional family units and provide recommendations for how children's museums may best engage and support the children, as well as those raising them.

ACM TRENDS:

#1.6

## ACM Trends #1.6

Our first five Trends reports took a historical perspective on the children's museum field, using data from the 2010 ACM Membership Survey to characterize museum operations and understand their accomplishments and challenges. We used our conclusions to make predictions about how the children's museum field could change in the future and how individual institutions might capitalize on these trends.

This report takes a different approach, instead seeking to describe a specific population – nontraditional family units, such as kinship and foster families – which represent an important audience for children's museums. Children in nontraditional family units often encounter challenges such as poverty, instability and lack of overall support, that prevent them from developing to their full potential. Children's museums provide opportunities for transforming the lives of families of all types and many specifically aim to serve at-risk children and promote diversity and inclusion among visitors. We provide insight into how they could best engage and support learning and development for this underserved population.

### Mission Alignment

Children's museums are dedicated to engaging children and families in transformational experiences that are fun, foster critical skills, and help them to develop a foundation for lifelong learning. Embedded in most children's museums mission statements is also a deep commitment to increasing diversity and encouraging families to learn together. Dedication to this mission challenges institutions

to identify the diverse types of families they serve and understand the specific needs of those families to ensure that the museum is supporting their inclusion in outreach, visitation, and programming. Kinship and foster families represent underserved populations that face specific, and similar, challenges to engagement. It is important to reach these children by addressing their specific needs as well as the needs of their caretakers.

Many museums are already making special efforts to broaden their visitor base through outreach to underserved populations, which likely include nontraditional family units. Indeed, the 2010 ACM Membership Survey indicated that almost three-quarters of the 172 respondents facilitated programs targeted specifically at underserved families. It is likely that increased awareness of these populations' needs will further motivate museums to undertake this important work.

### Kinship Families

Kinship families are formed when parents are unable to take care of their children and place them under the care of relatives or close family friends. Children enter kinship families under a variety of circumstances – arrangements may be informal, private arrangements between parents and caregivers or formally arranged by public agencies, such as departments of social services or family and children's services. Kinship arrangements may involve physical custody only or both physical and legal custody (Children's Bureau, 2016).

According to the AARP, almost 7.8 million children in the US live in kinship families; nearly 75% of these kinship families are made up of grandchildren living with their grandparents. Even though children in these families maintain family ties by living with relatives, these family structures may still be characterized by instability, financial stress, and contact with the foster care system or child welfare agencies.

Financial hardship may be particularly important challenge for kinship families. More than one in five children – or approximately 1.3 million – living in relative-headed households live below the federal poverty line (Children's Defense Fund) and many grandparents and other

## ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children's Museums (ACM) is the world's foremost professional member service organization for the children's museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children's museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

caregivers report that they “struggle with the costs of providing for the children under their care” (Children’s Bureau, 2016). Grandparent caregivers have expressed that they find it taxing to find and access financial resources and benefits that could help them meet their needs and consequently, many struggle with day-to-day expenses (AARP, 2017; Children’s Bureau, 2016). Given the prevalence of financial hardship for these “grandfamilies” and their limited connections and access to resources, they may be at particular risk of becoming socially isolated, which can further exacerbate the problem of poverty.

In addition to financial struggles, kinship families may face additional social challenges. For example, children living in kinship families are particularly likely to face emotional and learning obstacles, such as learning disabilities or a history of abuse or neglect (Children’s Defense Fund). Additionally, caregivers may need emotional support, education on benefits, and help with childcare. Both children and caretakers may face social stigma by living in a nontraditional family unit that may not always be recognized by social services and other community organizations. Fostering connections to adequate social services and enrichment activities for both children and caregivers may be the first step towards mitigating some of these challenges (AARP, 2017).

### Foster Care

In 2014, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) reported that there were 415,129 children in the US foster care system, with about 29% living in relatives’ homes. The federal budget for supporting children in foster care is approximately \$22 million per year (ABC News, 2006).

Children in foster care face many of the same struggles as children in kinship families, with the potential for more instability due to repeated placements changes (McKellar & Cowan, 2011). Children in foster care may also be at increased risk of having experienced abuse, neglect, or trauma, which can lead to emotional, social, and behavioral challenges (McKellar & Cowan, 2011).

The Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care (2000) described the most important

threats children in foster care face, including difficulty developing relationships and attachments, the negative effects of abuse and neglect on brain development, and a compromised ability to deal with stress and changes. These challenges highlight the dire need to create positive experiences for foster children.

### The Role of Museums

Community organizations and local institutions, like children’s museums, can play a vital role in supporting nontraditional families simply by providing a safe and supportive place to play and learn. These institutions can serve as a normalizing force, providing support and skills that can help at-risk children cope with immediate stressors and thrive in the long-term. They are a powerful voice in normalizing different types of family units through inclusive practices and programs.

Camps and other recreation programs provide invaluable experiences for the children they serve as well as a break for their caregivers (Children’s Defense Fund). Museums interested in engaging nontraditional families can take several steps to make sure that programming activities are designed for the specific needs of these children. For example, children who have experienced instability in their lives can benefit from structure, routine, and clear communications about expectations (McKellar & Cowan, 2011). These are all factors that can be built into museum programs, especially those that encourage repeat visits in which the children have the opportunity to build relationships with facilitators.

These types of programs offer benefits for the caretakers as well as the children. Indeed, “respite care” programs provide caregivers with a short-term break from full-time child care, either on a regular schedule or on an as-needed basis, such as when the caretaker has an appointment or travel obligations (Children’s Bureau, 2016). Despite demonstrated need, the current availability of respite care is limited. If museums cannot provide these services directly because of limited staffing or resources, they can connect visitors with resources and information and develop partnerships with social service organizations to ensure that more families are getting needed services.

In addition to designing programs that accommodate the needs of children and caretakers in nontraditional families, children's museums may also serve as meeting places for these groups. Museums may consider hosting events in which foster or kinship families can connect with the institution and with each other, thereby providing a sense of community for a marginalized population.

Many nontraditional families struggle to cover basic financial needs, so museums may also consider how they can incorporate free and reduced-price opportunities into their normal operations. For example, *Play for All*, a program at the Minnesota Children's Museum, reduces barriers to accessibility by providing free or reduced-price family memberships to low-income or foster care families and free admission on certain days (Minnesota Children's Museum). This program reaches thousands of people, including many underserved children and families in both the local and broader communities.

Museums may need to use alternative means of communication to access nontraditional families, thereby emphasizing the importance of thinking broadly about communication and outreach strategies. Forming partnerships with local social service organizations, libraries, schools, afterschool programs can provide a helpful way to promote museums resources and programs to audiences that may not hear about them through more traditional channels. Museums should also consider whether developing promotional and programmatic resources in non-English languages may increase accessibility.

Given the importance of promoting feelings of inclusion among marginalized communities, museums should also consider how to increase normalization of these groups. Methods may include broadening the way they describe member opportunities, and the resources they provide to

ensure accessibility to all kinds of families. talking openly about different types of family structures can be a supportive measure in itself, reducing stigma by acknowledging that nontraditional families deserve the same rights and opportunities as other family groups.

Children's museums have the opportunity to use their expertise in child development to support populations that may not be receiving adequate attention. Their influence can go well beyond attendance numbers, by advancing goals of equality and the mission of helping children and their families develop to their fullest potential.

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