

Investing in Systems for Learning: Facilities, Audiences, & Partnerships

February 28, 2018

Children's museums uniquely offer kids a place just for them: a place where they can learn, grow, and play. In this ACM Trends Report, we explore 2016 ACM Member Survey data to understand how children's museums invest in the systems that enable children's learning: programs and audiences, the design of their facilities, and partnerships with other leaders in learning. Building on ACM Trends Reports #1.1 and #1.7, this report reveals how institutions of different sizes and locales approach systems for learning and the opportunities for advancing the field's work to help young people grow.

First, we discuss how children's museum facilities' design supports learning. Design decisions in exhibits, classrooms, and other program spaces shape how visitors explore ideas and interact with each other.

It's also well-known that children's museums prioritize youth, but the data gathered from across the field demonstrate that there are distinct audiences that these organizations target with programming. The report delves into programming at ACM member institutions that is inclusive of a variety of age groups. In particular, we explore three special groups that may be unexpected audiences: early childhood (infants to preschoolers), teenagers, and adults.

In Trends Report #1.8, we discussed how children's museums engage with their communities. Here, we examine one facet of community engagement related to programming: partnerships with other leaders in learning, such as schools and libraries.

In this report, we continue to use size and locale categories established in Trends Report #1.7 to understand patterns in children's museums' learning investments. To make the data clearer and help us make comparisons, we clumped some categories. We compared: Large museums versus Small and Medium museums; and City museums versus those Outside of Cities (i.e., Rural, Town, and Suburban museums).

ACM TRENDS:

#1.9

ACM Trends #1.9

Where Learning Happens

The design of a children's museum can determine the types of learning experiences visitors have. On one hand exhibits can engage children and their families in free-choice exploration that can be largely independent or intermittently social. On the other hand, space allocated for programs is likely to more directly target social learning. Outdoor spaces may offer kinesthetic and spatial learning, as well as a connection with nature. While many types of learning can happen in any space, we explore how certain types of spaces may generally influence learning experiences in children's museums.

ACM member institutions devoted the highest proportion of their facilities to exhibits, although 2016 data demonstrate that there were differences across sizes and locales of museums. Exhibits in City children's museums occupied 44% of total facility space, while Large institutions allocated a similar proportion, 41%, of their space to exhibits. Meanwhile, children's museums Outside of Cities, as well as Small and Medium museums, featured nearly double the proportion of space for exhibits, respectively devoting 77% and 78% of their total space to this purpose (Figure 1).

Compared to exhibit spaces, children's museums set aside a smaller proportion of space for classrooms, with only 2-8% of their space allocated to this purpose. When Large and City museums have classrooms, they typically reported having 3-4 rooms. Museums Outside of Cities and Small and Medium institutions were more likely to

have 1-3 classrooms each. While many museums likely host their programming in classrooms, we expect that some present programs in exhibit spaces. Use of non-classroom spaces for programming may be especially common in resourceful Small and Medium museums.

If there aren't many classrooms, why wouldn't City museums and Large museums have more exhibit space, compared to other museums? Museums that are Large are much more likely to include other types of program spaces. Nearly half of Large children's museums have performance theaters (49%), about one quarter have IMAX theaters (23%), and a fifth have planetariums (20%). Those alternative programming spaces were found in only a fraction of Small and Medium museums and institutions Outside of Cities.

Finally, we found that children's museums are investing substantially in outdoor learning experiences for visitors. More than half of Large and City museums have outdoor exhibits, and about a third of Small and Medium museums and those Outside of Cities have outdoor exhibits.

All types of museums added depth to their offerings with outdoor exhibits, providing kinesthetic and spatial learning and opportunities to play in nature. When children's museums had outdoor exhibits, they seemed to do it in a big way: for many institutions, the space allocated for outdoor exhibits exceeds the space in their entire building (Figure 1). These outdoor exhibits may offer more opportunities for kinesthetic learning and learning related to nature spaces than do indoor exhibits.

There is a variety of ways children's museums used their space in 2016. Large and City institutions offered learning experiences that appear to be more social in nature, often facilitated by staff and volunteers. Meanwhile, Small and Medium museums and those located Outside of Cities were more likely to focus on visitors' self-guided exploration.

Learning for All Ages

Many people perceive that children's museums specialize in engaging young children with exhibits and programs to provide opportunities for learning. Indeed, children's museums excel in reaching the youngest learners, an

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.

audience that's often missed by other museum types. But

to explore how engaging sub-audiences can further their

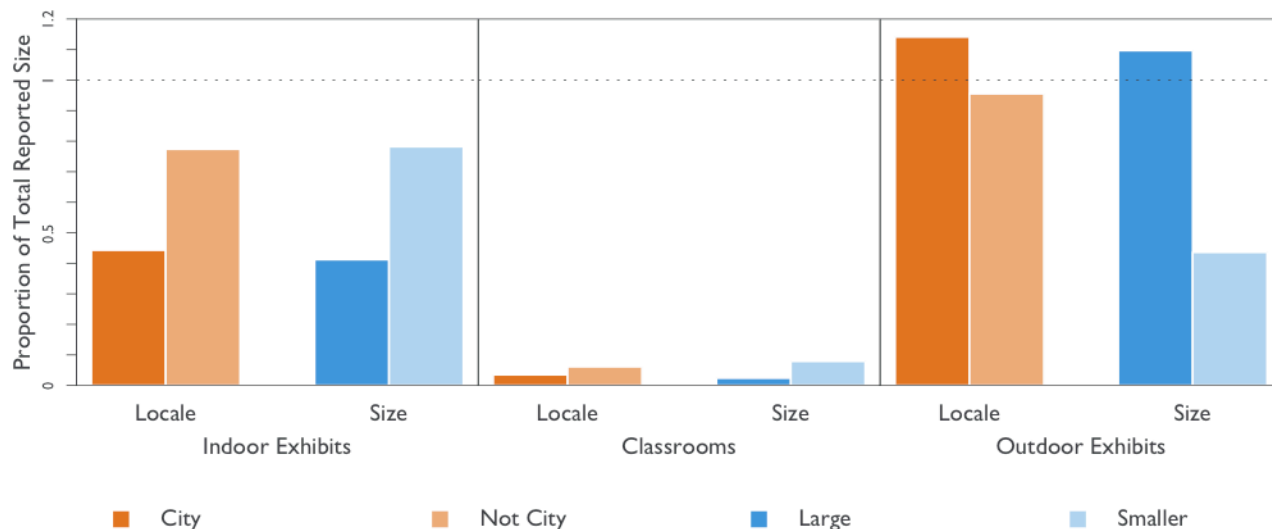


Figure 1. Proportion children’s museums’ total square footage, compared to different types of spaces in and outside of the museum building (indoor exhibits n = 98; classrooms n = 69; outdoor exhibits n =52). The dashed line indicates the total square footage of indoor space, which is exceeded by outdoor exhibits in some types of museums, as indicated by the bars that reach above the dashed line.

children’s museums also offer programs that engage a wide variety of age groups.

In 2016, the vast majority of children’s museums, regardless of size and locale, offered early childhood programming. Over 90% of Large museums featured programs for young children, while 75% of Small and Medium museums served this audience. We found a similar pattern when we compared City museums and those Outside of Cities (Figure 2).

ACM members are also thinking about how programs for other age groups can support their missions, which research has shown to be a successful approach (Beane, 2010). The 2016 ACM Member Survey revealed programs that aim to engage adolescent and adult audiences as well. Both teens and adults can find programming in more than half of the Large and City children’s museums. Small and Medium institutions and those Outside of Cities are working on teen and adult programs too, but to a lesser extent (Figure 2).

Across all categories, Large museums were the most likely to create early childhood, teen, and adult programs. This trend likely points to the capacity of larger organizations

objectives for children’s learning. These programs, which require substantial investment of space and staff time, may exceed the capacity of some smaller children’s museums.

Opportunities: Onsite + Partnerships

Partnerships are critical to expanding museums’ capacity to support child learning and development. Children’s museums shine with partnerships that help them extend their resources. In turn, partnerships are also likely to strengthen a collaborators’ offerings. This work can have the cumulative effect of producing vibrant networks of community organizations that prioritize children’s development.

While partnerships are desirable, all museums contend with budget and space limitations. In Trends Report #1.8, we discussed how children’s museums commonly consider partnerships as a form of outreach. In 2016, over half of ACM members worked with schools and more than two thirds collaborated with libraries. City museums and those Outside of Cities had similar rates of partnerships with libraries (72% and 63%, respectively). Meanwhile, 61% of City museums partnered with schools, while only 45% of institutions located Outside of Cities

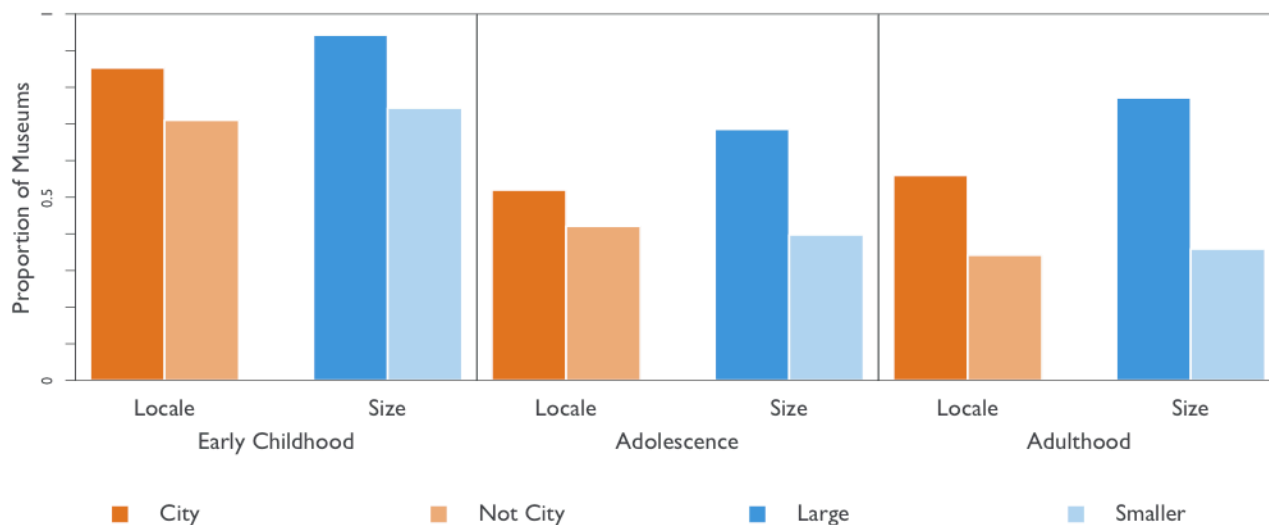


Figure 2. Proportion of museums that offer programs for different age groups, compared to museum size and locale (N = 113).

had these partnerships. While children’s museums are collaborating with other types of institutions, they are less likely to host non-museum programs onsite. Out of 113 ACM Member institutions that provided data in 2016, only nine had a preschool, and only five were accredited. Similarly, only four museums have public libraries onsite.

Partnerships with Head Start, a national program in the US, aimed to prepare kids for kindergarten, was an area of moderate success. A third of all ACM Members offered or partnered with Head Start programs in 2016. Large, Medium, and Small children’s museums were equally likely to be associated with Head Start. Meanwhile, Head Start programs were much more common in City museums than those Outside of Cities.

Becoming affiliated with Head Start programs represents an important opportunity for children’s museums to increase their impact. Across the country, Head Start

programs significantly improve preschool-age children’s cognitive, social-emotional, health, and parenting outcomes, compared to kids who are not in Head Start (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2010).

Considered together, there seems to be an opportunity for Small and Medium-sized children’s museums to explore use of outdoor spaces for learning and a parallel opportunity to partner with local organizations like Head Start without expanding current facilities.

References

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2010). Head Start Impact Study, Final Report. Washington, DC.
- Beane, D. (2000). Museums and Healthy Adolescent Development: What We Are Learning from Research and Practice. *The Journal of Museum Education*, 25(3), 3-8.

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