

# Museums in a Pandemic: Collaborations with Cultural Institutions

June 30, 2021

The ACM Trends Report team has continued to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's museums. To understand these impacts, we conducted multiple surveys: the first in May 2020, the second from September 24 to October 18, 2020, and a third in spring 2021. The Museums in a Pandemic series of Trends Reports illustrates the ways children's museums have adapted to the evolving national and local situations surrounding the pandemic.

In the fall 2020 survey, 81 museums reported starting new collaborations or expanding existing collaborations since the beginning of the pandemic. Meanwhile, 15 reported no new or expanded collaborations. Those with collaborations started an average of two or three collaborative activities during the pandemic. In this Trends Report, we will explore collaborations that children's museums formed with **other museums and different kinds of cultural institutions**.

This is the second of three Trends Reports that tell the story of how children's museums have undertaken collaborative work during a time of crisis. These three reports are also part of Museums Mobilize, an initiative of the Association of Children's Museums that documents COVID-specific responses and innovations by children's museums.

ACM TRENDS

#4.10

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We asked museums whether they had expanded existing collaborations or initiated new collaborations with different types of organizations during the pandemic. Out of 96 museums, 52 museums or 54% reported collaborations with other museums and cultural institutions including aquariums, botanic gardens, libraries, and zoos. Participants were also asked about the goals for their expanded or new collaborations.

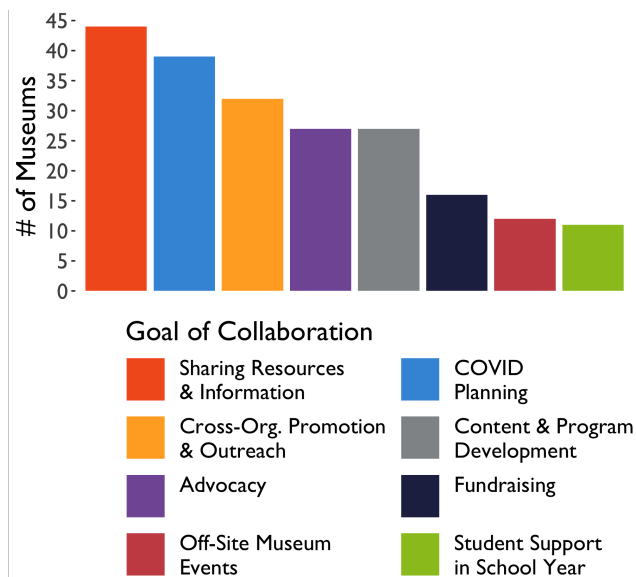


Figure 1. Goal of children’s museums’ collaborations with other museums and cultural institutions.

Partnerships with other museums and cultural institutions were most likely to focus on sharing resources and information and COVID-19 planning (Figure 1). This was followed by cross-institution promotion, with outreach as

the third most common goal. Supporting students during the school year was the least common goal for children’s museums. In contrast, museums that formed partnerships around social and health services were most likely to focus on sharing resources and information.

What follows are short stories from two children’s museums about specific collaborations they have developed with other cultural organizations.

### Educational Resources to Support Resilient Families at Building for Kids Children’s Museum

Building for Kids (BFK) Children’s Museum, located in Appleton, WI, is collaborating with the History Museum at the Castle, also in Appleton, on an initiative called *Museums in Motion: Responsive Community Engagement Toolkits*. The initiative is supported largely through funding from the City of Appleton’s Community Development Block CARES grant.

Through the program, the museums provide hands-on, non-virtual educational enrichment activities that can be done at home and are designed to support the educational and social needs of students in the community during the pandemic. Each kit contains materials and instructions for six projects. Three projects were developed by the History Museum, and three by BFK. Projects provide students with a chance to do things like learn about Harry Houdini, experiment with graphite circuits, and create mini robots.

In its first wave, Museums in Motion is distributing 1,200 engagement toolkits to first graders and their families in the Appleton Area School District. Kits will also be distributed to low-income households that have students in Kindergarten through second grade, with support from Pillars, a network of shelters for homeless persons, and Harbor House, which supports people in domestic abuse situations. Through this initiative, BFK is seeking to support the resiliency of students and their families during the pandemic and in the future.

BFK is also collaborating with Fox Valley Symphony Orchestra (FVSO) on the *Be a Percussionist* and *Meet a Musician* initiatives. These programs, offered on Facebook, provide live music education to children at home. In *Be a*

## 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.

*Percussionist*, audiences explore different musical concepts and learn about several kinds of percussion instruments. *Meet a Musician* features FVSO artists who discuss topics such as conducting, composition, and instrument families. The museum is also collaborating with FVSO and the Appleton Public Library (APL) on *Symphony Storytime*, which provides families with engaging and meaningful virtual programming. Under this initiative, FVSO musicians compose music to accompany stories read by librarians from APL. BFK provides puppets and other props that are used as part of story time.

Commenting on the value of the programming to the community, museum leadership noted the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education and development of children and families, and how cultural institutions can play a supportive role. *“Families with early elementary school-age children are especially impacted. With schools closed and students learning virtually from home, parents become educators tasked with delivering formal schooling with children that typically rely heavily on engagement from their teachers and peers,”* they said.

BFK’s leaders believe that museums can step in as valuable sources of out-of-school-time learning, engagement, and connection to the community: *“While visits to museums are limited, these non-virtual, hands-on learning toolkits help equip families with tools to mitigate this learning loss. Without investment in mitigating the disproportionate impacts on economically disadvantaged children and families, our community will experience an imbalanced and unequitable recovery from this crisis.”*

The museum’s virtual music programming is also intended to provide greater opportunities for families to continue to connect during the pandemic. One leader remarked, *“BFK’s mission is to inspire discovery and build resilience through intergenerational, play-based learning and exploration of the arts, sciences, and humanities. We feel that offering this programming connects us to families and exposes them to different concepts in music and fulfills our mission as an organization.”*

## Enabling Remote Learning for Underserved Families at KidsQuest Children’s Museum

KidsQuest Children’s Museum, located in Bellevue, WA, is partnering with various organizations to offer families in its community multiple options for virtual learning. The first program, called *Remote Learning Kits*, is offered in partnership with Boys and Girls Club of Bellevue, King County Housing Authority, Jubilee Reach, King County Library, Bellevue School District, and Kinderling. Best Starts for Kids, Schools Out Washington, Boeing, and Big Ideas Learning fund the program. These partnerships were formed through an initiative called the Eastside Pathways Collaborative.

With *Remote Learning Kits*, KidsQuest provides a way for families at home to take part in their favorite museum activities. Kits contain materials that can be used multiple times and in various ways. The activities are designed for open-ended learning that can be completed at each child’s pace. They are intended to support developmental learning alongside regular schoolwork.

These kits are part of the museum’s school-age and preschool programming. The kits are generally designed for children in preschool up to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and the museum has offered at least one kit, focused on science and art, for students up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Kits are circulated in two ways: as part of a free program in which the museum works with a local partner to distribute the kits, and as part of a fee-based program open to the general public. Available in both English and Spanish, the kits are typically dropped off at a site that families in the community use to access other kinds of services.

This particular partnership program existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but was offered only in person at partners’ spaces with museum educators. For the past three years, KidsQuest and its partners focused on supporting families that were experiencing homelessness. Following the emergence of the pandemic, museum leadership noted, *“We have shifted from just students experiencing homelessness to any family who may be struggling. How do we make sure there are not gaps in service and new families are getting learning materials that they need while at home?”*

A second KidsQuest initiative is the *Love of Learning* podcast. Each episode of the podcast features interviews with educators and community partners who share valuable resources and activities that help keep families connected through play. The museum has partnered with guests from other cultural institutions including a local library. Recent episodes have focused on various topics from STEAM areas including math, arts, and engineering. The podcast is designed for parents and caregivers with children ages 0-10 interested in encouraging and engaging in child-directed play, as well as fellow informal educators. All episodes are available on various platforms including Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

Commenting on the value of its educational programming for the children and families in its community, KidsQuest leadership remarked, *“We are able to put the power of play and learning into more people’s hands. A couple of new institutions are using our kits as their learning tools during therapy or in-home visits.”*

A third initiative called the *Tri-Museum Collaborative* involves three museums: KidsQuest, Children’s Museum of Tacoma – a program of Greentrike, and Imagine Children’s Museum in Everett, WA. This collaboration is funded in part by Boeing. The goal of the initiative is to promote play among children who do not have access to early learning opportunities. During the pandemic, this partnership was strengthened and used over and over again as the museums shifted to virtual programming. The partners share ideas, strategies, and resources on how best to deliver programming online to support early learning for children in underserved areas of their respective communities. KidsQuest leadership observed that being part of this collaborative effort *“allows us to learn what has worked for different populations and how we can continue to adapt our programs to fit the families.”*

## The Takeaway

The stories in this Trends Report showcase children’s museums that have collaborated with peer cultural institutions to combine resources, share insights for their practice, and develop new programming. The types of partner institutions vary widely, from other children’s museums, to history museums, to orchestras. The diversity of these collaborations points to an underlying opportunity for the museum field: joining forces with peers is often better than competing for funding and other resources. When institutions team up, they signal sophisticated organizing capacity and the promise of greater reach into their communities. Children’s museums can use this approach to not only deliver on their mission, but also to expand the ways they achieve their goals of supporting children and families.

## About This Research

Some of the data used in this report came from an online survey that ACM sent to US-based children’s museums. Overall, 96 museums responded to at least part of the survey. A subset of museums that indicated they had new or expanded partnerships received an additional set of questions that asked for more information about collaborations with other museums and different cultural organizations that they formed during the pandemic.

Started in 1962, the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. With more than 460 members in 50 states and 19 countries, we leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination.

Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world. Since 2012, the collective of scientists, writers, and educators has been dedicated to studying and untangling complex social issues.



This study was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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Knology Publication #IML.145.568.10

Recommended Citation:

Thomas, U.G., Field, S., Flinner, K., Voiklis, J., & ACM Staff. (2021). *Museums in a Pandemic: Collaborations with Cultural Institutions*. ACM Trends 4(10). Knology & Association of Children’s Museums.