

Parents & Caregivers Preferences for Virtual Programming

April 29, 2022

For this ACM Trends Report, we invited Scott Burg from Rockman et al (www.rockman.com) to write about his team's research during the pandemic around parents and caregivers' preferences for virtual programming by children's museums. Scott was a speaker at a discussion forum with ACM members focused on virtual programming in October 2021 (See ACM Trends Report 5.1 for details).

Due to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, museums had to make critical decisions about conditions for opening and closing as well as virtual programming based on limited evidence. This shift left children with limited options to engage socially with peers and an increased reliance on parents and caregivers to manage school activities and after-school opportunities. One outcome of the pandemic was an increase in online museum offerings, many of which were targeted at children.

Most museum studies during the pandemic focused on health and safety concerns and returning visits (e.g., mask wearing, social distancing, capacity levels, etc.). This report focuses on results of a study of the potential value of continuing to offer virtual learning activities following the physical reopening of museums. Researchers at Rockman et al (REA) wanted to learn what parents and caregivers felt about children's museums' virtual programming, and the types of virtual programs that children's museums could develop to address families' needs, interests, and concerns.

In the fall of 2020, REA collaborated with the Children's Creativity Museum in San Francisco to survey northern California Bay Area children's museums. The survey collected parent and caregiver feedback on the types of virtual programs they would like to see for their children. Following the first wave of data collection and validation of the instruments, a second wave expanded the research opportunity to other institutions in the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) network (https://bit.ly/REA-ACM_Blog). In total, 13 different children's museums across the country distributed the survey to their members and mailing lists.

ACM TRENDS

#5.2

Background on the Survey

The REA study focused on understanding the types of virtual programming that parents and caregivers want from children’s museums. Their preferences for types of virtual programs might be influenced by a child’s school or care situations, child age, amount of screen time, cost, and other factors. Each participating museum received real-time access to aggregate study findings as well as their own museum’s individual data through customized digital reports.

Between November 2020 and January 2021, REA gathered more than 1,200 responses from museum patrons. Not all survey respondents answered every question. The bulk of respondents were parents or caregivers of children aged 2-7 (Figure 1). School and care situations varied among participants’ children, spanning those attending school or daycare in person; and those attending virtually either in a hybrid solution (in-person and remote) or being homeschooled or cared for at home (Figure 1).

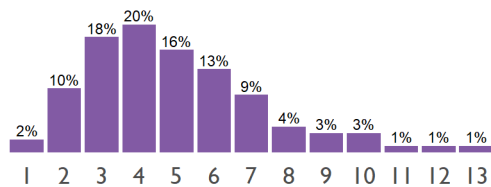


Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents by Child’s Age (n = 941)

Findings from the Survey

We found that parents and caregivers’ interest in virtual programs was mixed. About half of all respondents said they had “**no interest**” or “**slight interest**” in virtual programs. The other half expressed “**moderate**” or “**high**” interest (Figure 2). One overriding concern for participants was the amount of screen time their children were already exposed to. One in five respondents reported that their child spent more than three hours each day on a computer or digital device. Surprisingly, more screen time did not coincide with less interest in virtual programs. These findings suggest that everyone’s threshold for screen fatigue is different.

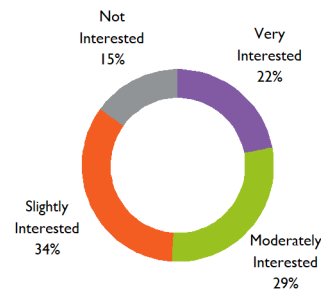


Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents by Interest Level (n = 945)

Our survey showed a correlation between parents and caregivers’ interest in virtual programs, and the type of schooling or care their child was receiving at the time of the survey. Parents and caregivers of children who attended school or daycare in-person were less interested in virtual programs than those whose children were being home-schooled, attended school online or were in a hybrid situation (Figure 3). A child’s age was not related to their parent or caregiver’s interest in virtual programming, suggesting that these issues are based on values rather than a common consensus on developmental concerns.

Despite concerns about screen time, the survey results showed that many parents and caregivers wanted to reconnect with their local children’s museum. They also wanted to replicate museum experiences either at home or in a remote environment.

ACM Trends Reports

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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.

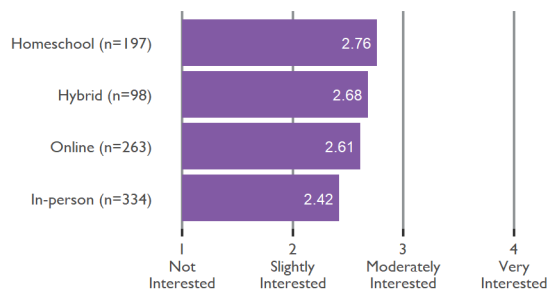


Figure 3. Parent & Caregivers' Interest in Virtual Programming by Schooling Type

Parents and caregivers prioritized museum approaches in both virtual and in-person settings that:

- Provide greater socialization opportunities for young children;
- Promote enhanced creative and critical thinking skills;
- Facilitate more kinesthetically oriented experiences; and
- Offer activities that promote independent learning while also furnishing time for caregivers to learn alongside their children.

Parents and caregivers also indicated an interest in programs that offered the kinds of experiential learning that children's museums succeed at. These included programs that actively engage participants (e.g., science, art) vs. activities that are more passive (e.g., read alouds, learning study skills). Parent and caregivers were not interested in activities that duplicated virtual school lessons. Nearly three-fifths of respondents said they would consider paying for virtual programming.

Most parents and caregivers preferred virtual programming scheduled on weekends. They indicated a slight preference for weekday virtual programming that allows independent child participation (Figure 4).

The survey did not reflect the many opportunities for children's museums to educate parents and caregivers on methods to regulate and participate with their child's virtual learning activities. Research suggests that when parents and caregivers participate and scaffold their children's activities (asking questions, extending play), this

results in higher retained learning (Takeuchi and Stevens, 2011).

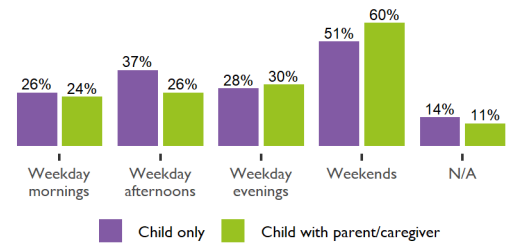


Figure 4. Parents & Caregivers' Interest in Virtual Programming by Time and Day

Anxiety over prolonged screen time can undermine this type of support. What it means to be an effective 'digital parent' can be perceived as contradictory, as parents and caregivers try to minimize the negatives of screen time while benefitting from the affordances of the technology.

Parents and caregivers need support to better understand the content of what their children watch and do on screens, the context of where they watch and do, and the connections they make (or do not make) while watching and doing (Livingstone et al, 2017).

This integrated approach provides more insights into the positive or negative impact of digital media use than a simple measure of time. Parents and caregivers need to be encouraged to think critically about how to support positive uses and minimize negative consequences. This is where children's museums can play a valuable role.

Looking to the Future

As the pandemic restrictions are lifted, the needs and expectations of museum audiences will evolve. This survey provided insights into the minds of audiences during the fall and winter of 2020, and but cannot predict what else may change as schools and museums continue to reopen. These data provide some insights that can support analysis and monitoring of how virtual programming is valued in the future.

Key Takeaways

To put these findings to work, virtual programming offered by children's museums can respond to these key takeaways:

- About 85% respondents expressed some degree of interest in virtual programming offered by children's museums. For children's museums considering investments in virtual programming as a core institutional activity, this finding suggests that such investments may be worthwhile;
- Some respondents were willing to pay for virtual programming. This indicates that parents and caregivers believe virtual programming can promote a child's educational and social-emotional growth and are willing to invest in those activities;
- Parents and caregivers value virtual programming but are concerned about the amount of screen time children experience. Children's museums are well positioned to help them think critically about how they can support positive uses of screen time and minimize negative consequences; and
- Parents and caregivers preferred virtual programs that actively engaged their children, like science and art activities. They were less interested in more passive activities such as read aloud sessions.

Next Steps

Are parents and caregivers tired of virtual programs, or has remote learning become a mainstay of education? Is virtual programming enabling visitors to form a new kind of relationship with children's museums? Can museums use virtual programs to extend their reach to underserved audiences, increase access to diverse communities, or add value to their institutions as trusted

sources of information and learning? Where could collaboration between children's museums or between museums and school districts strengthen both the informal and formal education landscape? What role can researchers and evaluators play in facilitating this discussion?

To answer those questions and build on this study of virtual programming that parents and caregivers want from children's museums, the researchers hope to expand the number of institutions involved in any future studies to ensure the data are representative and determine if regional variation or museum size influence perceptions. Ideally, future research will recruit a more inclusive sample of community participants including parents and caregivers who may not visit children's museums regularly or do not have access to virtual programming.

We also hope to encourage the development of research-practice partnerships, which can serve as a critical tool for generating actionable data that children's museums need to navigate the post-COVID world

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