

A purposefully open-ended discussion prompt (at left) asks visitors, "What are your toy memories?" in the 2020 exhibition, *Let's Play: New England Toy Stories* at Heritage Museum & Gardens in Sandwich, Massachusetts.



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Who's in a Family?

Confronting Assumptions About Children and Their Caregivers

Margaret Middleton

Children's museum professionals often say, "Children don't come to the museum alone." We use this mantra to remind one another that children may be our primary focus, but adult caregivers are an equally important audience. Caregivers play a pivotal role in a child's museum visit. Not only do they choose to bring their child to the museum in the first place, they also facilitate their visit, decide the pace, interpret the content, and recount the experience with the child after the visit.¹ These significant adults may be parents, the parents of friends, aunts or uncles, grandparents, nannies, or teachers. Regardless of the specifics of their relationships, significant adults are trusted people who share a past and a future with the children in their care which makes for a powerful learning dynamic.²

But museum spaces do not accommodate all these multigenerational visitor groups equally. From text and imagery that presumes the relationships between visitors to the size and quantity of seating, exhibit design choices communicate assumptions about who the museum staff expects their visitors to be. This article identifies common expectations about visitors' identities and relationships, demonstrates how these expectations manifest in exhibitions, and offers recommendations for how exhibit professionals can confront assumptions and make exhibitions less biased.

Who Are “Family” Exhibitions For?

In 2014, I created the “Family-Inclusive Language Guide” (fig. 1),³ a tool for choosing words that avoid labeling the identities and relationships between museum visitors. At the time, I was working as an in-house exhibit designer at a children’s museum, and I wanted to share some of our field’s inclusive practices with the larger museum community, like using the word “grownup” to describe adult caregivers instead of “parent.” I also saw room for improvement at all museums, such as accommodating families who do not share a single household. My initial inspiration for the guide came from the many ways my queer community creates family and raises children: in families of choice, through adoption or with babies conceived with donor sperm, headed by single parents or many parents.

The more I shared the chart, the more discussions I had with people who found personal meaning in its messaging: older parents presumed to be grandparents, mothers mistaken for nannies, sons with long hair misgendered as girls. I quickly realized that the issues addressed in my chart were relevant to most museum visitors, serving as another reminder that the “family audience” is not a monolith.

In traditional museums aimed at a “general audience,”⁴ exhibition developers frequently focus family offerings on children (usually eight years old and up), not adults. Despite having a vital role in their children’s museum visits, caregivers’ needs and experiences are often an afterthought. When exhibit teams do consider caregivers, they broadly refer to them as “family.” Though a seemingly inclusive word, “family” comes with a set of assumptions that reflect

dominant cultural ideas. “Family” is commonly used as shorthand for “nuclear family” which connotes a family with children and two heterosexual, married parents, with a father who works outside the home and a mother who does not.⁵ However, data shows that most American children do not have a family that reflects this model.⁶ Family configurations also vary by race and culture. For example, most Indigenous and Black children are cared for by a single mother; Asian and Latinx families cultivate multigenerational households (defined as including two or more generations of adults) at higher rates than other families; and same-sex couples are more likely than other couples to foster or adopt.⁷ To be truly welcoming to children and their caregivers, exhibit developers must confront their own biases about what a family looks like and expand their vision to include families who do not fit the nuclear model.⁸

The unconscious privileging of the hegemonic nuclear family is part of a larger museum legacy steeped in colonialism and white supremacy.⁹ Black feminists and disability activists have long argued that justice does not trickle down and that true equity work does not just “include” but center people who experience systemic marginalization.¹⁰ In a museum setting, this means choosing language, imagery, and accommodations suited specially for visitor groups historically marginalized by the museum. Because the needs of some families conflict with the needs of others,¹¹ some will be privileged over others, and that decision should be intentional, not incidental. The final design decisions should result from research and community partnerships and, done effectively, will look different for every venue.

Fig. 1. The Family Inclusive Language Guide is a set of language swaps for more inclusive communication between museum staff and visitors.

Family-Inclusive LANGUAGE

avoid	why?	instead
<p>“parents” “mom” “dad” “mom and dad”</p>	<p>Not everyone accompanying a child is a parent. Grandparents, step-parents, and nannies may not identify as parents.</p> <p>Not all children have a mom and dad.</p>	<p>“grownup” “adult” “caregiver”</p>
<p>“son” “daughter”</p>	<p>The children in someone's care could be grandchildren, nieces, nephews, godchildren, etc.</p> <p>You may also not want to assume the gender of a child.</p>	<p>“children”</p>
<p>“extended family”</p>	<p>This term is usually meant to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins but for folks of many cultures this isn't "extended" family- it's just family.</p>	<p>“family”</p>
<p>“family resemblance”</p>	<p>We're conditioned to look for similar features in family members so you may see resemblance where there is none. Many families include step-parents, adoptive parents, or parents who conceived with donated eggs or sperm.</p> <p>Inversely, don't assume that a child who doesn't look like their caregiver is adopted- many multi-racial children resemble one parent more than the other.</p>	<p>keep it to yourself</p>
<p>“members of a household”</p>	<p>Families don't always live together. For example, families with divorced parents or incarcerated parents.</p>	<p>“family members”</p>

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Who Is Excluded?

Because the hegemonic nuclear family skews white, straight, and wealthy, many visitors of color and queer visitors are excluded in the museum. Though education and visitor services departments are more likely to be tasked with carrying out DEAI (diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion) goals, the exhibit department can also contribute.

In 2010, Boston Children’s Museum published the findings from “The Adult Child Interaction Inventory,” a study with the goal of better understanding how family members interacted with one another during a museum visit.¹² Researchers found corollaries between who brings a child to the museum and the family’s cultural background: Black children were often brought by an aunt, Asian children by their grandmother, and Latinx children were often accompanied by a multigenerational family.

Even when children are brought to the museum by their mother, the “expected” caregiver, the age and expectations of that parent can vary by demographic. For example, the age of first-time birth mothers in the United States correlates with race and education. First-time birth mothers without college degrees are more likely to be in their late teens and early 20s (Generation Z), while those with advanced degrees are more likely to be in their 30s (millennials), and first-time mothers over 35 (millennials and Generation X) are more likely to be white or Asian.¹³ Though Americans are earning college degrees at higher rates than ever, there is evidence the wealth gap is actually growing between those with college degrees and those without.¹⁴ When exhibit developers create exhibits for families optimized for a millennial mother and child, they reveal the

imagined visitor they are designing for: white, straight, and wealthy. With just a few changes and considerations, we can make museum experiences work better for families who do not fit this narrow definition.

Changes and Considerations

Here I outline specific recommendations for changes to make to current exhibitions and considerations for future exhibitions. Intended as a starting point, these recommendations are not meant to be comprehensive standards for universally inclusive practice; rather, they focus on minimizing practice that excludes. By keeping these in mind, exhibit developers can begin to notice our implicit bias and how our assumptions make their way into the exhibitions we create.

Use Inclusive Language

Word choices in interpretive labels can communicate assumptions about the identities of people in a visitor group and their relationships with one another. When analyzing exhibit text for underlying assumptions, look for words that imply relationships, gender, age, and heredity. The Family Inclusive Language chart is a helpful resource for beginning this work. For example, labels that refer to adults as “caregivers” or “grownups” instead of “parents” or “mom and dad” include visitor groups with adults who are not parents, single parents, and same-sex parents.

To avoid excluding caregivers who do not fit the wealthy, millennial, birth-mother archetype, be wary of language that communicates a visitor’s presumed economic status, age, and relationship to their child. For example, an exhibit about

climate change that suggests visitors install solar panels on their roof assumes that a family owns their home and can afford the update. The label could instead offer multiple ways to participate in greener energy that includes renters, working-class families, and children. To better serve adopted children, families with same-sex parents, stepparents, and single parents who are often left out of exhibits about heredity, label writers can focus on chromosomes and body parts instead of “parents.”⁵ Though the terms “mother,” “father,” and “parent” are used in biology, they are also colloquial terms with cultural significance and it is safe to assume that most visitors think of these terms culturally and not scientifically (fig. 2).

In 2019, I worked on *Let’s Play: New England Toy Stories*, an exhibition for families at Heritage Museum and Gardens in Sandwich, Massachusetts. Our exhibit development team wanted to invite discussion between visitors. We considered writing prompts about specific objects in the exhibition (for example, My Little Pony figurines or a chemistry set), but since many toys are linked to specific decades, we risked privileging some ages over others. Because we wanted our prompt to be evocative for visitors of multiple generations, we settled on the open-ended question, “What are your toy memories?” (intro image).

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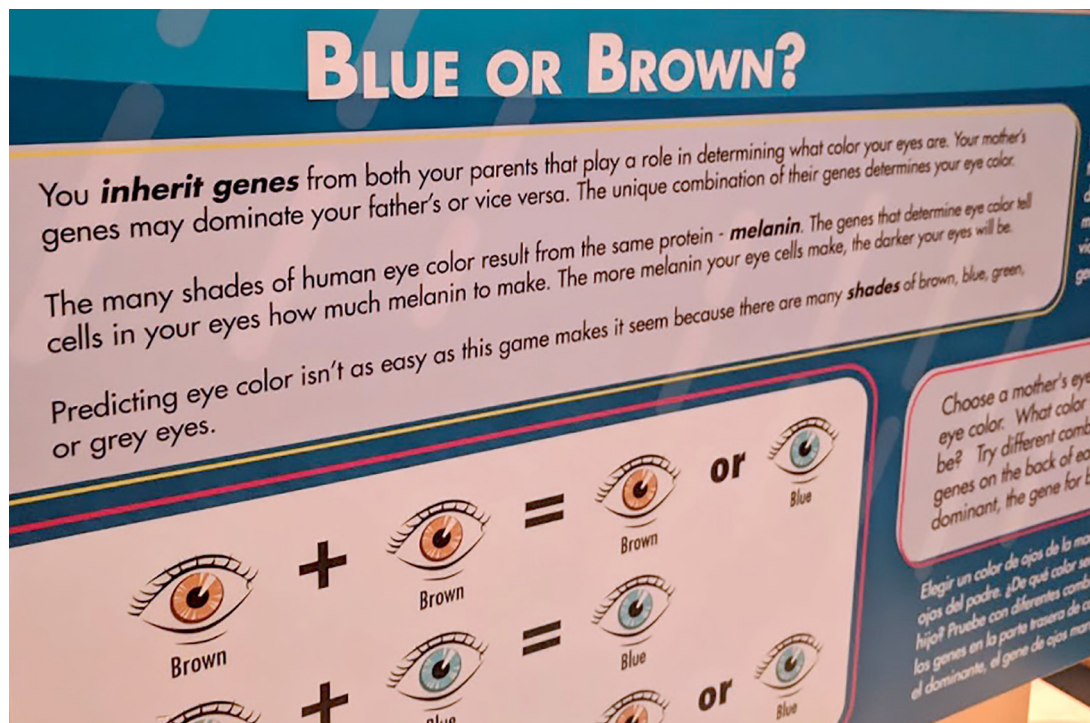


Fig. 2. In this science museum exhibit about heredity, the label excludes adopted children, families with same-sex parents, stepparents, and single parents.



Fig. 4. The ubiquitous “family icon” exemplifies the nuclear family as default.



Fig. 5. A graphic silhouette might have more personality than an icon, but the details can reinforce the expectation of who is in a family. This icon suggests a white, different-sex couple through raced and gendered hairstyles, body types, and facial features.



NEW CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

Fig. 6. The New Children’s Museum of San Diego, California illustrates their membership tiers with symbols that represent only the quantity of people, not their genders or racial identities. By communicating only quantity and not age distribution, this membership category welcomes families with one adult with three children as equally as three adults with one child.

Choose Visuals Intentionally

Visual communication is an important part of inclusive design in general, and is especially important for visitor groups with children because it transcends language and engages pre-readers. Exhibition designers often depict families visually when illustrating content, demonstrating an interactive, showing wayfinding, labeling restrooms and care rooms, or depicting membership tiers. The most common way to do this is through symbols, illustrations, and photographs. One of the most ubiquitous symbols is the icon for a family bathroom: male and female figures hold hands with a child between them. This icon implies that the expected family is a heterosexual family with a mother and father (fig. 4).¹⁶

Graphic silhouettes are sometimes used instead of standard iconography to express personality and fit a museum’s unique graphic identity. Typical graphic silhouettes, however, use details that can make them even less inclusive than standard icons. Like the standard family icon, graphic silhouettes communicate gender through clothing and often depict a family with a mom and dad. They also often communicate default whiteness through hairstyles, body types, and facial features (fig. 5).

It has been observed in the informal science field that using images of girls in exhibit labels helps girls feel welcome in museums.¹⁷ Similarly, choosing graphic styles that help visitors of color see themselves in the exhibit could communicate a sense of belonging. When depicting families, exhibit developers should resist reinscribing expectations of who a family is by choosing styles that either specifically depict families of color and non-normative family structures or show abstract representations of people that are not gendered, aged, or raced (fig. 6).

In signage, it may not be necessary to focus on the identities or relationships of the museum’s visitors at all. “Family restrooms” are typically also wheelchair accessible, and

the best ones offer baby changing as well as changing tables for disabled adults, so these are most accurately labeled with icons of what is inside, not who they are for – for example, an icon of a toilet. Rooms for feeding infants are sometimes called “lactation rooms” or “mothers’ rooms” but can be made more inclusive of caregivers of all genders and identities by being labeled “baby-care rooms” with an icon of a babe in arms (fig. 7).

Make Room for Families of Multiple Sizes

When I visit museums, I often see four chairs around a square table or big chair/little chair sets that seem to anticipate a nuclear family (fig. 8). According to the Adult Child Interaction Inventory, Latinx visitors visit museum in larger groups than white visitors, and Asian visitors are more likely to have an elderly person in their group. The number, types, and sizes of chairs in an exhibit suggest an expectation of how many are in a family group, their abilities, and the ratio of adults to children in that group – and favors the families who fit that expectation. To address this miscue, consider not only providing seating with backs and arms for anyone who might need extra support, but also including lightweight stools and ottomans that visitors can rearrange themselves to accommodate a wide range of group sizes and numbers.



Fig. 8. This big chair/little chair pair at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England would make a single parent and their child feel right at home in this nook, but if space allowed, accommodating a wider variety of family sizes would help more visitors feel welcome in the museum.



Fig. 7. This signage at Orlando Science Center in Florida welcomes all caregivers who need to feed or care for an infant by avoiding terms like “mother’s room” or “lactation room” and including a symbol of a non-gendered figure holding a baby.

To ensure larger family groups have the affordances they need for a pleasant visit, give galleries extra space for more than two people to enjoy activities at once. Include environmental graphics and labels large enough for multiple people to read at a time. For multiplayer interactives, consider creating experiences that can scale from two participants to more. Offer

more manipulatives: costumes, magnifying glasses, headphones. Make sure photo ops accommodate more than two people. Pairs of visitors will still have enjoyable visits and large family groups will be thrilled to finally all fit.

Conclusion

Designers have a saying: “Good design is invisible.” In a museum, good design means experiences and environments that do not make visitors feel excluded. Whether intentional or not, the choices we make as exhibit developers communicate our assumptions of who the visitor is and exclude visitors who do not fit those assumptions. By reexamining the biases inherent in our language choice, visuals, and accommodations, we can make the museum a more welcoming place. Though these may seem like small changes and considerations, they are not insignificant. To truly welcome and support children in museums we must make space for the adults who love them. Every opportunity to decenter the hegemonic family is worth the effort, and our youngest visitors will benefit. ■

1 Barbara Wolf and Elizabeth Wood, “Integrating Scaffolding Experiences for the Youngest Visitors in Museums,” *Journal of Museum Education* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 29–38.

2 Lynne Dierking, “What is Family Learning?” Engage Families, <https://engagefamilies.org/family-learning-101/what-is-family-learning/>.

3 Margaret Middleton, “Including the 21st Century Family,” *Incluseum* (2014), <https://incluseum.com/2014/07/07/including-the-21st-century-family/>.

4 In her recent book, Laura Raicovich describes the general audience as “a fiction,” explaining that it is “raced and classed as ‘neutrality,’ which begs for a further reassessment of what and how institutions exchange knowledge with their publics.” See Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (London, New York: Verso, 2021), 60.

5 Rose Paquet Kinsley, Margaret Middleton, and Porchia Moore, “ReFrame: The Case for New Language in the 21st Century Museum,” *Exhibition* 36, no. 1 (2016): 56–63.

6 “The Majority of Children Live with Two Parents, Census Bureau Reports,” The United States Census Bureau, April 10, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html>; Gretchen Livingston, “Fewer than Half of U.S. Kids Today Live in a ‘Traditional’ Family,” Pew Research Center, December 22, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/>.

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9 Joanne Jones-Rizzi, and Stacey Mann, “Is That Hung White?” *Museum* (Summer 2020): 26–31.

10 Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989, Iss. 1, Article 8.

11 This is comparable to the concept of competing access needs, developed by the disability justice field.

12 Lorrie Beaumont, “Developing the Adult Child Interaction Inventory: A Methodological Study,” *Informal Science*, 2010, https://www.informalscience.org/sites/default/files/Preschoolers_Parents_and_Educators-Developing_the_Adult_Child_Interaction_Inventory.pdf.

13 Gretchen Livingston, “For most highly educated women, motherhood doesn’t start until the 30s,” Pew Research Center, January 15, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/15/for-most-highly-educated-women-motherhood-doesnt-start-until-the-30s/>; “New Demography of American Motherhood,” Pew Research Center, last revised August 19, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2010/10/754-new-demography-of-motherhood.pdf>. According to Pew, Gen Xers were born between 1965 and 1980; Millennials between 1981 and 1996. Gen Z includes anyone born after that.

14 Fabian Pfeffer, “Growing Wealth Gaps in Education,” *Demography* 55 (2018): 1033–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-018-0666-7>.

15 See “Gender-Inclusive Biology,” accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.genderinclusivebiology.com/>.

16 Not all families with a man and woman in them are heterosexual. Bisexual people can have different sex partners, and not all adults in a family are parents.

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