

**What's Mentionable is Manageable:
Dealing with Sensitive Topics in Children's Museums**

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Children's museums can offer us many gifts. One of them is the ability to deal with a wide variety of subject matter without necessarily having the collections material to back it up. We can offer ideas and experiences about "art" without owning a single Picasso. Even when we do own collections, we can do active cultural exhibitry based on ordinary contemporary objects. Like science centers, we can teach science and math phenomenon and skills with invented materials.

In other words, we can be opportunistic about our subject matter. We can bring to children and their adults ideas and experiences that are linked to the user and the user's current needs rather than exclusively to the museum's collection or some other predetermined institutional idea of what the museum is supposed to offer. If we dare, we can take on issues and ideas that are contemporary, provocative, emotional and possibly healing.

The Boston Children's Museum has been a ground breaker in doing these kinds of exhibits. For instance, in 1974, in response to new legislation concerning the education of children who have disabilities in an integrated setting with non-disabled children, Boston did an exhibit called "What if you Couldn't...? An Exhibit about Special Needs" The premise of the exhibit was threefold. First of all, it was felt that many adults had little idea of how to deal with the subject of handicaps with children and that this often included teachers. Second, it was felt that given the first premise, teachers, parents and therefore children would be confused, possibly frightened and that this discomfort would not be useful for any of the participants. Third, it was felt that an exhibit that gave simple information about disabilities to non-disabled visitors could help to ameliorate the situation.

To do this, the exhibit used the categories of disability described in the new legislation and provided three kinds of

information about each one:

- . an activity that tried to help the user understand what it might be like to have the disability; for instance, a "wheelchair corral" that challenged users to move across a variety of floor surfaces, learn to turn, and to move up and down a ramp.
- . an activity based on a tool or device that helps a person who has a disability, like a typewriter to use that creates brailled text.
- . label copy that suggested how best to interact with a person who had the disability, for instance, when speaking to a person who is deaf, face them, speak clearly but normally, and don't yell! Label copy came in two forms and sizes, one simple and bold for kids, and a smaller more complete explanation for grown-ups.

Though an enthusiastic federal funding agency was found almost immediately -- mostly because this kind of legislation was about to be enacted all over the country often with often little practical preparation -- the nay-sayers were many. Typically people said that:

. this is not appropriate subject matter for a children's museum. In childhood we are supposed to be protected and have fun. Yes, difficult or bad things occasionally happen, but it's better not to bring them up. You'll only frighten people.

. Or they said: You can't sell this. People will avoid the museum in order to avoid this subject. This is in bad taste.

. Or they said: disabled people will be offended by this display. You'll be invading their privacy.

Our Advisory Council, made up of specialists working with kids who had disabilities, disabled adults, and parents of disabled kids, persevered with us. In fact, this exhibit went on to have a long, exciting life. Spin-offs included kids books, a curriculum unit for in-school use, a national traveling show and copies in many other museums.

Of course, it also won a "Bad Taste Award" in Boston Magazine the year it opened.

The next exhibit of this kind opened in 1986. It was called "Endings: An Exhibit About Death and Loss." This exhibit came out of a staff member's passion. She was a gifted natural history teacher who was dying of cancer. No stranger to the many questions kids had about dead animals and taxidermied specimens, she now found herself grappling with the problems of how to deal with her own mortality with her own children, her friends and other family and, of course, herself.

Though she did not live to see this exhibition, we all felt sure she'd be proud of it. The exhibit activities and displays were organized around the developmental stages that children experience in understanding death as they grow and culminated in an overview of the many strategies various cultures use to deal with grief, care for the dead in the afterlife and commemorate the dead in the living world.

Even more controversy surrounded this exhibit -- after all, not everyone experiences disability but everybody dies -- but interestingly enough the three negatives were exactly the same as they had been for the "What if" exhibit:

- . we should protect children from bad news. If we don't mention it, they won't know about it.

- . it's in bad taste and won't get an audience.

. it will offend people who have experienced or are experiencing a death.

This time the media really had a field day -- even Ted Koppel's Nightline turned up smelling a controversy. But as before, our visitors were interested and grateful for a neutral forum in which to grapple with a difficult issue.

Another interesting exhibit of this kind to look at is "Remember the Children." This effort originated at the Capital Children's Museum in Washington D.C. It was converted to a traveling show and now, in its third incarnation, is installed as "Daniel's Story" in the new Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. It tells the story of the children who died in the Holocaust through the experiences of one Jewish child and his family from their comfortable home, to the ghetto and finally the death camp. In its original version, it included material that drew analogies between this awful period in history and the kinds

of prejudicial and intolerant behavior we all exhibit in today's world that can contribute to such a disaster in a society. It is a moving and cautionary exhibit.

A related exhibit and the latest of this type from the Children's Museum in Boston is "The Kids Bridge," an exhibit that tries to address the issue of racism in contemporary society. Through a multicultural group of children we are shown both the celebratory side of our pluralistic society and the darker side. Visitors move through a series of explorations of the languages, foods, music and neighborhoods of a variety of ethnic groups common to the Boston area. We are invited to enjoy things and ideas that are both brand new and quite familiar. There is humor and gaiety in the presentations, many of which are media based. We are also asked to confront the problems of these same children as they describe and discuss chilling examples of prejudice and racism that they themselves have been the target of. This video presentation also allows visitors to choose among various

reactions and the group's remarks provide a model for discussion and support among peers.

The thinking that formed the foundation for Kids Bridge had a long history within the institution. There were a series of programs and exhibits under the title "Meeting Ground" that were tried out over a period of about 10 years. Most of these were publicly celebratory of diversity and never attacked directly or named the issues of racism and prejudice. Though they were thoughtful attempts, none were really successful exhibits. Privately, within the institution, a sort of continual soul-searching went on. "Were we ourselves, as a group, as diverse, tolerant and unbiased as we wanted to be? How do we need to change?" This long incubation period was, in my mind, probably necessary before the institution could finally come to grapple so forthrightly and well with such a difficult issue.

(SLIDES of all four exhibits)

Although I am a great booster for this kind of exhibition, I

do not want to suggest it always works, or that it isn't troublesome, or that it's easy to do.

The nay-sayers are to a certain extent right: it is difficult to present such material for children and families in ways that are helpful and not just scary, and these exhibits often are hard to publicize. So, I'd like to go on to describe some of the methods, strategies and pitfalls we've found in our work.

The first issue is perhaps simply a question of belief: whether one believes that children are only aware of those events or situations that parents and teachers tell them about, or whether one believes that children perceive a lot more about what's going on around them than we adults have specifically informed them about. If you believe the latter, as I do, you probably also know that in the absence of a way to get at real and complete information about things that are potentially scary

or uncomfortable, kids will make things up. The things they make up are often more upsetting and confusing than the truth.

For example, children will often ascribe responsibility to themselves for occurrences that are in no way their fault. They may believe, for instance, that they are somehow implicated in the death of a pet or a family member.

Developmentally, young children may believe that a person cannot be deaf if he or she has ears and older children -- no doubt to explain some adult behavior they have observed -- may believe that disabilities are contagious. In other words, when we try to protect children from information we may be putting them in greater jeopardy.

Sometimes, we are simply protecting ourselves. The topic may be uncomfortable for us as well. We may feel our own guilt about the death of a loved one. We may feel awkward in the

presence of a disabled person. We may harbor secret discomfort around people of a different race or religion. We may feel helpless to explain the catastrophes, wars and intolerances of the world to ourselves. What on earth will we say to a child?

The children's museum can present a neutral forum and some strategies for parents and teachers. It can take the fear out of having the conversation. But in order to do so the developers of the exhibition must have worked through the discomfort for themselves. Helpful to this process is the formation of an advisory council made up of people who have professionally and/or personally dealt with these issues. Searching for the members places you and your intentions into the community and provides you with insights and contacts you will use throughout the development of the exhibit. In our experience it's important that this group is not just a "rubber stamp" for your plans, but integral members of your process.

Another helpful idea is the creation of a series of open staff meetings. I found, for instance, during the development of "Endings..." that many people, including board members and janitorial staff, had questions and worries about our tackling this subject matter. For the same is true of adults as it is for children: in the absence of complete information, people will make things up and what they make up may be more upsetting than the truth. Open meetings provided a forum to clear up misconceptions and the staff as a whole provided an early barometer for public opinion and, in this case anyway, confirmation that this was important material for us to deal with in an exhibition.

The third sounding board is of course the public. Trying out concepts and strategies is an important aspect of all exhibition development. When dealing with provocative or controversial issues, it becomes essential. For the developer it provides substantiation for instincts, tests where the

starting points are in visitors' understanding and provides insights about interest levels and questions to be answered for the visitor.

Pitfalls remain however, even after all this careful homework. Each of the potential good points of such an exhibit has an extremely unuseful flip side.

While it's important that such exhibits be value-laden, they cannot be "preachy." If they purport a single point of view (i.e. "don't worry, everybody goes to heaven") or present information in a nagging tone (i.e. "remember, it isn't 'nice' not to like somebody who is different from you") the exhibit will not be taken seriously by many of your intended users.

By the same token, although such exhibits must provide helpful information, they must not be diagnostic or clinical. In other words, the exhibit might provide the names and addresses of

groups to contact for help in providing educational options for children with learning disabilities, but must not suggest that failure at some activity within the exhibit diagnoses the user as learning disabled or that a specific course of intervention will "cure" a learning disability.

Finally, while these exhibits must be comfortable and easy for visitors to get, they must never condescend to the visitor. The story we are telling might be their own.