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Bringing families In: An Examination of Family Programs at the Museum of Chinese in America and Other Cultural and Historical Museums in New York City

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Bringing Families In:
An Examination of Family Programs at the Museum of Chinese in America and Other Cultural
and Historical Museums in New York City

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Museum Education: Childhood

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Abstract

This independent study includes family program survey research and planning processes completed during my Master of Science in Museum Education fieldwork at the Museum of Chinese in America in New York City in the spring of 2017. This information is compared to data gathered from surveys with ten other cultural and historical museums and with the Cool Culture community program. This study also includes a literature review of studies and theories concerning child development and family learning in museums. With information from all these resources assembled, analyses of strengths, challenges, and potential areas for growth are outlined for family programs at cultural and historical museums.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables.................................................................................4
List of Appendices.................................................................................................5
Acknowledgments.................................................................................................6
Introduction............................................................................................................7
Family Learning in Museums................................................................................8
Family Programming at Cultural and Historical Museums...............................12
MOCACREATE Survey Findings.........................................................................17
Institutional Comparisons.....................................................................................26
Cool Culture Family Programs..........................................................................43
Cool Culture Demographics Information..........................................................46
Conclusion and Recommendations.......................................................................48
References............................................................................................................51
Appendices............................................................................................................53
List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: The Museum of Chinese in America .................................................................13
Figure 2: Visitor Group Demographics .................................................................18
Figure 3: How Did Visitors Learn About MOCA/MOCACREATE? .............................19
Figure 4: Ages of MOCACREATE Child Attendees ...................................................20
Figure 5: Child Interests .........................................................................................21
Figure 6: Adult Interests .........................................................................................22
Figure 7: The New York Historical Society .............................................................27
Figure 8: The National Museum of the American Indian .........................................28
Figure 9: The Asia Society ......................................................................................29
Figure 10: The Jewish Museum .................................................................................30
Figure 11: The Rubin Museum .................................................................................31
Figure 12: The Museum at Eldridge Street ..............................................................32
Figure 13: El Museo del Barrio ...............................................................................33
Figure 14: The Museum of Jewish Heritage .............................................................34
Figure 15: The Studio Museum in Harlem ...............................................................35
Figure 16: The American Museum of Natural History .............................................36
List of Appendices

Appendix A, MOCACREATE Survey Questions.......................................................53
Appendix B, Cultural and Historical Museum Family Program Survey Questions..........54
Appendix C, Cool Culture Interview Questions....................................................55
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Introduction

Programs for families in museums in which children and adults create art are an important part of learning together and strengthening connections with museums and the community. Drop-in family programs often involve an artmaking component that ties into the learning and exploration featured in the museum galleries. This type of hands-on project can be simplified or elaborated upon depending on children’s developmental levels, and the act of creation provides an accessible entry point for the subject matter displayed in the museum.

The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), located in Manhattan’s Chinatown, has a mission of making Chinese American history comprehensible for visitors of every age. Twice a month it hosts MOCACREATE, a 4-hour drop-in family program in which adults and children are invited to create crafts and participate in activities that tie into the museum’s exhibits and various events and festivals throughout the year.

For this project, MOCACREATE evaluations and visitor survey data are compared to interviews with educators at other historical and cultural museums in New York City. Photos of museums and data visualizations in this analysis are all by the author. In addition, outreach and demographics information from the Cool Culture program is included to create an enriched picture of the impact of family programs in New York.
Family Learning in Museums

Families make up more than half of non-school visitors to museums (Black, 2012, p. 166), so attracting them with programs targeted at child and adult co-learning and engagement is a productive way to further grow and strengthen a significant audience. When we view museums as institutions for learning, we recognize that learning does not just happen in school and that parental involvement is crucial. Outside of the hierarchy of school and its associations, museums can offer a welcoming and engaging opportunity for families to learn together by making their own decisions together (Black, p. 167). In creating programs that take advantage of the educational and free-choice nature of museums, it is important to keep in mind the developmental differences between children of varied ages and the way they interact with their families.

It is only in relatively recent years that neuroscience has come to understand the importance of exposure to a wide variety of experiences in early childhood. According to Shaffer (2015), “...the early years are significant in a child’s growth and...interaction with the environment through multiple senses heightens learning...[R]esearch findings [suggest] a link between the physiology of the brain and early sensory activity, including those in museums” (p. 21). This finding reflects the ideas of constructivist educational theorists: psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed his concept of social interaction as being key to constructing meaning in the early 1900s (Shaffer, p. 55), and later in the twentieth century, Jean Piaget formed his theory of developmental stages that emphasizes the importance of sensory experience (Shaffer, p. 57). More recently, the Early Learning Model based on the work of Vygotsky and Piaget has emerged, stating that “young children explore their world, driven by an innate curiosity to learn and know...[gather] information through their senses...and through social interactions...create
mental constructs from interactions with the environment” (Shaffer, p. 51-2). As children grow older and develop understandings of how things work, it is also important to keep in mind that “children bring their own experiences and conceptions of the world with them. These conceptions determine how they receive what is presented to them and what they will learn from it” (Jensen, 1994, p. 111). Putting all these learning theories together in the context of a museum, it is essential to provide varied opportunities for multisensory, experiential learning for visitors beginning from the youngest ages.

The flexibility and open-endedness of a museum space allows for educators to create tools and programming that achieve the goal of connecting with visitors of all developmental levels, but one must also keep in mind that these same spaces are not perceived as accessible by all. Therefore, it is valuable to thoughtfully consider the emotional experiences that families face in a museum. “...[F]amilies and teachers acknowledge [a welcoming environment that creates a sense of comfort] as critical to a successful visit to a museum. Comfort can be physical...as well as a sense of familiarity in experiences within the museum” (Shaffer, p. 94). While museum employees often focus on exhibits, programming, and safety of visitors, families in particular also need to feel a sense of comfort and welcoming in order to have a positive visit. It is important to keep in mind that this is true not just for young visitors, but for the adults in family groups as well. Part of administering to the comfort of young visitors is viewing the museum from their points of view. Jensen (1994) wrote:

Children experience a sense of powerlessness in museums, as they do in many aspects of their lives. Unlike other age-groups, they are rarely in museums by free choice...By offering children choices during museum visits...educators can give them some feeling of power and command over their museum experience. (112)
Once the educator understands the ways children learn and perceive within the museum, it is time to shape the visit itself. As the focus of this study is specifically on artmaking workshop programs, this will be the angle from which planning will be viewed. As described by Kropf and Wolins (1989), “The ultimate goal of an educational program or activity for families should be to teach a limited number of specific skills in ways that allow visitors to independently use the museum as an educational resource” (p. 82).

It is important to avoid assuming what knowledge or educational skills the adults in a multi-age group might have,

Helping family groups acquire and construct knowledge about museum objects and exhibitions requires guidance. Even if some members of a family are familiar with the exhibit content, they may not know how to discuss their knowledge with others. This guidance, in the form of educational activities for family visitors, can provide shared experiences for the family members and opportunities to learn together.” (Kropf & Wolins, p. 77-8)

Providing support for family learning will help visitors become what Black (2012) calls “museum literate” (p. 184) and explore museum exhibitions and programs on a more frequent basis.

In the United Kingdom, the desire to make museums accessible and comfortable for children led to the creation of Kids in Museums, an organization with the mission of making museums welcoming to all families. Every year they give out the Family Friendly Museum Award, recognizing institutions that follow the guidelines of the Kids in Museums manifesto: reach out, get to know your families, seek to reflect your community, be positive, make it easy and comfortable, be accessible, tell your story, and communicate well
While these recommendations clearly apply to all museums, they can also be used explicitly to build successful family programs. With these guiding concepts in mind, creating programming that builds a bridge between families and museum content will be satisfying for museum and visitors alike and will develop a relationship that brings families back again and again.
Family Programming at Cultural and Historical Museums

When many people think of museums, they often picture art museums with collections of paintings and sculptures, or they imagine science museums with dinosaur fossils and displays of technology. While there are many ways that different museums include the art and science objects one could find in other museums, institutions that focus on culture and history use their collections to look at the past through a particular lens. That lens may be geographical, as in a city museum, it may be the perspective of a group of people, as in a museum that explores immigrant experiences, or it may be another lens on history entirely such as a museum focused on jazz or baseball. In all of these institutions, museums use photographs, documents, objects, and other artifacts to make culture and history captivating and understandable for visitors.

One such museum that has a particular lens is the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), an institution that was started in 1980 as the New York Chinatown History project by historian John Kuo Wei Tchen and activist Charles Lai. As described by the museum, it is “dedicated to preserving and presenting the history, heritage, culture and diverse experiences of people of Chinese descent in the United States” (mocanyc.org, 2017). Through objects largely donated by the local Chinatown community and other artifacts and documents that evoke and represent nearly two centuries of the changing Chinese American experience, MOCA educates its visitors on the history and culture of Chinese people in the United States (2017).
During the spring of 2017 when this study took place, MOCA had two exhibitions on display: With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America, the museum’s permanent exhibit that chronologically traces the experiences of Chinese Americans from the mid-nineteenth century through today; and Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy (SSBS): Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America, a temporary installation that profiles 33 Chinese and Asian American chefs and examines their backgrounds, influences, and experiences with food. These shows, particularly the latter, inspired the projects done at MOCA’s family program MOCACREATE, a drop-in artmaking workshop that takes place on the first and third Saturdays of each month. One project is developed for each month in addition to a few yearly large-scale family festivals:
Lunar New Year in February, Family Treasures (a workshop for learning about preserving and recording family objects and stories) in April, Dragon Boat Festival in June, and Mid-Autumn Moon Festival in September. For these special family festivals, MOCA brings in performers, artists, food tasting, games, and other activities in addition to an expanded array of artmaking projects. All MOCACREATE and family festival events take place in the afternoon from noon (for festivals) or 1:00 (for regular biweekly sessions) to 4:00pm.

As an intern in MOCA’s education department, I helped to plan and prepare activities for family programs. Although we only needed to create one project a month, I saw the challenges in developing art activities for families in this particular context. We had to ensure that projects were not too similar from month to month (and from year to year, when it came to family festivals) and were appropriate for all ages. While Sweet, Sour, Bitter, Spicy held many rich opportunities for thinking about food, culture, and community, we wanted to avoid offering too many food-related projects so that projects did not feel repetitive. In addition, though there are pieces of art on display in the galleries (SSBS has a ceramic sculpture element that connects different chefs’ cuisines with one another and with different regions of China and Chinese cooking), there is not a variety on view that might lead to clear tie-ins with family projects (for example, there were no paintings and very few drawings on display), and some media in the galleries are not easily translatable to MOCACREATE, such as photography and videos. There is also an awareness of MOCA as a Chinese American space; while Chinese imagery, calligraphy, and other arts are certainly important to the community the museum wants to represent, part of MOCA’s mission is to make sure that clear distinctions are made between China and Chinese America with a focus on the latter. Traditional Chinese arts and customs such as lion dancers and making lucky egg necklaces are reserved for family festivals with themes
that are celebrated in the Chinese diaspora all over the world, while non-festival art projects emphasize materials and processes that are more familiar to American audiences who may or may not be of Chinese descent. This delineation between Chinese and Chinese American projects is made with careful thought and flexibility. Lastly, the education department also prefers rotating various materials and techniques for each project so that families are exposed to as many different experiences as possible when they return to MOCACREATE. On top of all these considerations, it is a goal to encourage repeat attendance and to reach new members of the Chinatown community who had not visited MOCA, as well as inviting visitors from outside the neighborhood to come to MOCA for the first time.

In order to determine how successful we were in developing projects that engaged families and supported them in making connections to the gallery exhibitions, I conducted a survey of families who attended MOCACREATE in March and April 2017. I was also interested in how other cultural and historical institutions with missions similar to MOCA’s navigated structuring, planning, and marketing their family programs. I made a list of institutions in New York City that view history through a particular lens as described above, and I contacted their education departments to find out about their family programs. Museums I contacted include the New York Historical Society, the National Museum of the American Indian, the Asia Society, the Jewish Museum, the Rubin Museum, the Museum at Eldridge Street, El Museo del Barrio, the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Though these museums are not exact comparisons to MOCA (the Studio Museum, for example, exhibits only art and not artifacts), I was interested to see the ways in which the museums engaged with both the communities whose stories they reflect and a larger general audience. Interestingly, many visitors surveyed at MOCA also regularly visit the American Museum of Natural History.
Although this institution is different in scope and in the way it programs for families, information gathered from an educator there is also included in this study.

In order to get a broader understanding of who visits MOCA and why, I also reached out to Cool Culture, an organization that partners with 90 cultural institutions in New York City and 400 early childhood programs and public schools to ensure that families from many different demographic groups all over New York City have access to the arts. Cool Culture provides over 50,000 low-income families with free admission to city museums and partners with school and museum educators to give support and guidance to children and their families in museums (coolculture.org, 2017). By getting perspective from a Cool Culture representative and reviewing their demographics information for museum visitor numbers among their members in Chinatown, I was able to better understand how family programs like MOCACREATE can help to develop and strengthen local community ties.
MOCACREATE Survey Findings

For this study, I wanted to find out about the families who attend MOCACREATE programs. For two months in 2017, I attended all four of the family program sessions and interviewed as many families as possible using survey questions that I wrote (see Appendix A). On March 4, March 18, April 1, and April 15, I was present for the entirety of each of the 3-hour programs and interviewed a total of 34 families with 46 children. On March 4 and March 18, the project was decorating plastic flower pots and planting mint and parsley seeds in them. On April 1 we celebrated Qing Ming, an annual Chinese holiday in which people celebrate their ancestors and bring decorations and offerings to their graves. (This was a regular MOCACREATE activity, not a family festival.) On April 15 we made food sculptures out of recycled materials in the style of the sculptures in SSBS.

I recorded the following information:

- What family members/others were in the group;
- The ages of children;
- Whether visitors had been to the museum before;
- How they heard about the museum/MOCACREATE;
- Whether they had visited or planned to visit the galleries;
- Children’s activity interests;
- Adult family activity interests;
- Experience with other museums;
- Additional thoughts.
I asked visitors my questions while they were working on their projects, writing down their answers as they spoke. Although I started each line of questioning with my prepared set of questions, the interviews were casual and I often followed up with additional questions in the moment to get further information or clarification. For example, when someone said that they had been to MOCA before, I asked what their previous visit(s) involved and recorded whether it was another family program, an event for adults, a gallery tour, or another type of visit. When possible, I asked the children directly about their interests, but some children did not want to answer me directly, and some parents jumped in with their answers to the questions. In one case, the parent did not speak English, and her daughter answered as many of my questions as she was able. What follows is an analysis of trends in the answers to each question.

![Visitor Group Demographics](image)

*Figure 2. Visitor Group Demographics*

The majority of groups who attended MOCACREATE were mothers with their child(ren) (Figure 2); 22 families all together. Especially contributing to this trend were several families who came together as a group: there were two different instances when five mothers who were friends came together with their children, one instance when two mothers whose children
attended the same preschool came with their children, and one instance when two mothers and a father from another family whose children attend the Avenues School in Manhattan came together. There were also two fathers who came together with their daughters who were friends—they were two of the three father and daughter groups. While the seven groups that included a mother, a father, and child(ren) is significant, the mother and child(ren) attendance representation is a stronger trend and should be considered in outreach and project development. It should also be noted that the two Other Groups represented a mother and son visiting the son’s local aunt from out of town and a girl with her nanny.

![Pie chart showing how visitors learned about MOCA/MOCACREATE](chart.png)

*Figure 3. How Did Visitors Learn About MOCA/MOCACREATE?*

Visitors were fairly evenly split in how they learned about the museum and the family program (Figure 3). Aside from the aforementioned adults who heard about MOCACREATE from friends and the parents of their children’s friends, memberships with New York City cultural organizations were the biggest draws to MOCA. Cool Culture connects families, particularly those who are low-income, with 90 cultural institutions. The Identification New
York City (IDNYC) program provides participants with a free photo identification card that gives them access to free one-year memberships to many cultural institutions in New York City, including MOCA. KidPass is a service with a monthly membership fee that gives members ten activity credits to use each month on different activities around New York City, including those at MOCA. Several adults also mentioned seeing MOCACREATE listed on parenting blogs: Mommy Poppins and Red Tricycle were both mentioned specifically. The influence of listing MOCA in these family and culture-specific resources, particularly online, is significant. MOCA’s own online presence through its website and e-newsletter also contributed to how visitors learned about the family program, further underscoring how key strong an internet presence is. It is significant to note that out of 34 family groups, 24 said that they were at MOCA for the first time at the time of the survey.

Figure 4. Ages of MOCACREATE Child Attendees
The ages of children who attended MOCACREATE skewed toward preschool through kindergarten ages, and infants/toddlers and first through third graders were about evenly represented (Figure 4). From anecdotal conversations with museum educators not part of this study, it seems that family program popularity among those with children ages 4-6 is common; one reason for the presence of older children at MOCA may be tied to parent motivations, which include a desire for children to learn Chinese culture and language. The additional presence of pre-teenage children underscores the need for projects that can be simplified for the very young but also prove engaging and creative enough for older children as well.

Figure 5. Child Interests

Sports were a very popular interest among the children surveyed (Figure 5). These included team sports like basketball and individual sports like swimming. Enough visitors specifically mentioned dancing (8) that it warranted its own category and could be a potential future family activity. Though it was mentioned less frequently, music (singing and instruments) also could be incorporated into MOCACREATE activities. Various types of artmaking and crafting were mentioned by many visitors, which is understandable because visitors were
ostensibly at the sessions to participate in such activities, and because it was easy to think of activities in that category because they were engaged in artmaking while being surveyed. Technology, including video games and computers/touch screens, and playing, a category for all mentions of pretend play, were other most frequent mentions. Reading and building were each mentioned by a few visitors, and the Other category included interests that would be less related to MOCACREATE programming such as chess and trains.

Figure 6. Adult Interests

Like their children, the adult visitors were interested in arts and crafts and hands-on activities, many of them pointing out that they liked whatever project they were working on at the time of the survey (Figure 6). Many adult respondents were interested in Chinese-specific programming for their children; one Chinese American woman explained:
There's not much Chinese culture to give to kids here [at MOCA]. The exhibits are more for us [adults]; I would like to see more for kids. He says “I'm American,” but I want him to know he's Chinese too. I want him to learn about Chinese culture.

It is important to make this distinction between the family programming at MOCA and the accessibility of the galleries for young visitors. The parent who mentioned wanting “more for younger kids” may also have wanted this attention in the galleries in addition to the perception of age appropriateness of MOCACREATE activities. Some of the other suggestions offered by adults, such as performances, food tasting, and storytelling, are activities offered at family festivals, and I explained this distinction to the parents who mentioned them. Because of the drop-in nature of MOCACREATE and the need to have a set schedule for activities like performances, it would be challenging to incorporate these programming elements more regularly, but it is still an option to consider. Music and building (meaning blocks, Lego, and other similar toys) could more easily be brought into MOCA’s family programming.

Other results to note from the family surveys include the fact that only 10 out of 34 families had visited the museum galleries prior to being surveyed. 16 families did mention that they planned on viewing them later, but I was not able to ascertain how many actually did. While the other facilitators and I did our best to explain the ties between the MOCACREATE projects and the museum exhibitions, families may not have felt compelled to visit them because of time constraints, lack of interest on adults’ or children’s part, or possibly the perception of the galleries as a non-kid-friendly space, as described by one parent. Two of the three projects done during my survey tied to the SSBS special exhibit, potentially leaving families without a strong entry point into the core exhibition. These are all places for further consideration by museum leaders.
In answering the question about other institutions they visit, families listed a wide range of museums. (There was also one mention each of the YMCA, library, park, and the zoo.) There was generally an even divide among mentions of art museums, history/culture museums, and science museums, but children’s museums were by far the most commonly mentioned location (the Children’s Museum of Manhattan, Children’s Museum of the Arts, Brooklyn Children’s Museum, and the Long Island Children’s Museum were grouped together, as attendance at each was largely based on where the families live) with 11 out of 41 responses. The American Museum of Natural History was the second most common response with 8 mentions.

When asked if they had any additional suggestions for improving MOCA’s family programs, many respondents reiterated concepts that came up earlier in the survey; for example, three parents said that they would like their children to learn (or at least be exposed to) Mandarin in the museum. One parent mentioned that because her children visit museums on school field trips, she does not feel the need to take them again as a family, which gives a different perspective on educator assumptions of how field trips might grow visitor numbers. It is commonly believed that children who have positive experiences on museum field trips are more likely to return with their families, but this parent’s comment suggests otherwise. Another parent talked about a family project they participated in at the Museum of the City of New York in January 2017 where families made their own protest signs, and his children brought theirs to the Women’s March in New York. He found it helpful that the project they worked on both had a function outside the museum and helped his children connect to the larger world in a personal way. A parent who lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan said that the recent expansion of the Q subway line has given her family much easier access to MOCA (which is right off the Canal Street stop on the Q line) and suggested promoting that new access to potential visitors in
her neighborhood. This small sampling of rich comments and suggestions illustrate how important and helpful it is to make program evaluation and communication with visitors a regular priority for museums, particularly in education.
Institutional Comparisons

Taking note of how visitors learn about and react to MOCA’s family programming is helpful in understanding perceptions of the current program and some potential developments for the future. I was also interested in getting a picture of family programming at comparable institutions through an email survey (Appendix B). As there are hundreds of cultural institutions in New York City, I narrowed down a list to focus on museums that, similar to MOCA, look at historical and present-day society and culture from a specific perspective. What follows is a brief description of each of the nine institutions I chose along with the American Museum of Natural History, a common response to the survey questions about other museums that families visit. All of these institutions offer some form of drop-in family programs with creative, artmaking elements. These are the programs I focused on for my comparison with MOCACREATE. All nine of the historical and cultural institutions also look at the perspectives of a group of people united by their shared geography, religion, and/or ethnic background.
The New York Historical Society explores the political, social, and cultural history of New York City through its collection of art and objects.
Figure 8. The National Museum of the American Indian

The National Museum of the American Indian is part of the Smithsonian Institution and is one of three facilities that house and exhibit art and artifacts that advance knowledge and understanding of the cultures, traditional values, and transitions of Native communities in the western hemisphere through partnership with Native people.
The Asia Society’s mission is “promoting mutual understanding and strengthening partnerships among peoples, leaders and institutions of Asia and the United States in a global context” (asiasociety.org, 2017), and its museum in New York is one of twelve Asia Society locations in the world.
Figure 10. The Jewish Museum

The Jewish Museum is “dedicated to the enjoyment, understanding, and preservation of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Jewish people” (jewishmuseum.org, 2017) through its collections, exhibitions, and educational programs.
The Rubin Museum helps visitors “make connections between contemporary life and the art and ideas of the Himalayas and neighboring regions including India” (rubinmuseum.org, 2017) through cross-cultural exhibitions and programs.

Figure 11. The Rubin Museum
The Museum at Eldridge Street is housed in a historic synagogue with a mission to “tell the story of Jewish immigrant life, explore architecture and historic preservation, inspire reflection on cultural continuity, and foster collaboration and exchange” (eldridgestreet.org, 2017) through tours, cultural events, and educational programs.
El Museo del Barrio has a mission “to present and preserve the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States” (elmuseo.org, 2017) through its collections, exhibitions, publications, public programs, educational activities, festivals, and special events.
The Museum of Jewish Heritage has a commitment to “educating diverse visitors about Jewish life before, during, and after the Holocaust” (mjhnyc.org) through recorded testimonies, collections, exhibitions, programs, and educational resources.
The Studio Museum in Harlem displays artwork and supports artists and arts education for “artists of African descent...and for work that has been inspired and influenced by black culture” (studiomuseum.org, 2017).
The American Museum of Natural History has a mission “to discover, interpret, and disseminate—through scientific research and education—knowledge about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe” (amnh.org, 2017).

Figure 16. The American Museum of Natural History
Museums vary greatly in how they structure the family programs they offer. Exhibit content, scheduling around other public programs, and funding are just some examples of factors that affect how and when family programs are run. The Museum at Eldridge Street and the Museum of Jewish Heritage, for example, are closed on Saturdays, so there obviously cannot be any programming then. Generally, most of the institutions surveyed offer programming for families that includes artmaking and other activities on a weekly or monthly basis on weekends in the afternoon. The Jewish Museum, for example, has art projects, story time, and performances for families on Sundays, and the Rubin Museum and the Studio Museum both offer similar drop-in artmaking programs with changing projects on Sunday afternoons. It’s important to note that Target sponsors free admission every Sunday to the Studio Museum, so family programs are deliberately timed for this day. Other museums focus on larger, less frequent programming that connect to special events and exhibitions. In addition to regular “Living History” programs on Sundays at the New York Historical Society that feature activities and stories with historians, the museum has added “Centennial Saturdays” programs that tie in with their temporary exhibit on World War I. The Asia Society has three major family events every year—Diwali, Lunar New Year, and Norouz—in addition to smaller programs related to special exhibitions. The American Museum of Natural History has a space for children ages 5-12 in their Discovery Room, which is open during the week and on weekend mornings and afternoons, but the museum also hosts “Celebrate Culture” family days that take place once a month and involve performances and projects.

The cost and breadth of promotion for family programs are often affected by the frequency and scale of a given program. Many educators surveyed mentioned free promotions through their institutions’ existing networks, including museum websites and social media, email
newsletters to families and school contacts, and press releases to local parenting blogs and media. Some institutions also mail postcards or calendars to members and those who are on family program lists, and some pay for ads or promoted social media postings, particularly for more large-scale events. A few educators described direct coordination with local organizations. The Asia Society, for example, partners with the Pardis for Children School for its yearly celebration of Norouz, the Persian New Year. El Museo del Barrio sends flyers to local organizations and parent coordinators, and the National Museum of the American Indian uses local grassroots outreach, particularly for their teen programs. The American Museum of Natural History is one of several institutions to participate in the Urban Advantage program, which supports middle school learning through science investigations. As part of the program, the museum distributes family vouchers to participating schools.

MOCA participates many of these marketing and promotion efforts for MOCACREATE, but its connections with more local organizations are a potential area for growth. The idea of parent coordinators especially makes sense for MOCA, as I saw in my sampling of visitors how several parents took it upon themselves to organize group visits for families. Finding more of these motivated parents and giving them additional information and support as ambassadors for the museum could result in great benefits for the families and the museum alike.

I wanted to know what different family programs looked like in terms of participant numbers, frequency of repeat visitors, and whether families were local (when that information was available). With repeat visitors, one could draw the conclusion that families are enjoying the programming being offered and are developing Black’s idea of museum literacy. While I could not ask educators about whether their family program participants visit the galleries because they are not doing the same evaluations I did at MOCA, hearing about their repeat family visitors
gives some information regarding families feeling welcome and comfortable in museum spaces.

MOCACREATE participation averaged about 8 families per session (around 21 people). Usually one or two of the families had been to MOCA before. Generally, institutions with weekly programs for families saw about 15-40 participants at each session with anecdotally around 40-50% repeat, local visitors. Large-scale family events at MOCA yield about 150-200 participants, and similar events at the National Museum of the American Indian, the Jewish Museum, and the Museum of Jewish Heritage drew comparable numbers. The New York Historical Society and the Asia Society saw even larger numbers, around 400-550, and the biggest events at El Museo del Barrio (Dia de los Muertos and Three Kings Day) see numbers well into the thousands, thanks in part to school group participation in the Three Kings Day parade. Across the board for events both large and small, educators pointed out that factors like time of year, weather, and other events happening in the city all contribute to participant turnout. While boosted marketing and publicity certainly affect awareness of big yearly events, establishing anticipation for big events that happen at the same time every year like Dia de los Muertos and Diwali adds to a sense of must-go attention.

Finally, I asked educators if they had any other observations or comments to share. At the New York Historical Society, their Family Programs Department targets children ages 3-13, but they do see outliers in toddler and teenage participation. At the Asia Society, consistent and high quality programming is key. Because of fierce competition for events in New York, it is important to maintain a high standard with real artists who are paid competitively and have strong connections in their communities—lion dancers for Lunar New Year, for example. At the Jewish Museum, attention is given to offering projects that involve varied materials for a range of ages, and larger family days also include a big collaborative project like a mural, sculpture, or
collage. They have found that the morning and late afternoons are best for programs because of a common naptime between 1:00 PM and 3:00 PM, but Family Days are noon to 4:00 PM because they see a lot of children who are 4 to 8 years old. The Museum of Jewish Heritage has had the same findings on timing with a 10:00 AM start on Sundays being ideal to avoid running into naps and meals. Like the Asia Society, they have found that consistency is key, so most programs have continuity: the same storytellers, puppeteers, and teaching artists run the regular programs whenever possible. The Museum at Eldridge Street is interested in building their family audience. They are going to reevaluate their ticket pricing and are aware of ways they can expand their outreach. Partnerships with other Jewish and family organizations is one area they could consider, as well as outreach beyond the Jewish community and into local communities in their Chinatown neighborhood. They have started giving flyers and discounts to local schools, especially at times of big holidays like Hanukkah and Passover.

Educators had thoughts on their programming content as well. At the Rubin, projects that are open-ended and have a culturally relevant theme are successful compared to other projects that might have more controlled end products or that emphasize the artmaking aspect over the cultural ties. At the Rubin Museum, the average age of child visitors is 5 years old, yet older and younger siblings also need to be accommodated, especially since they want to make artmaking activities an entry point for families to grow their connections to the museum. The Studio Museum has a similar understanding of preference for open-ended projects. They explore artists’ process through materials and reference an inspiration artwork rather than make a predetermined object or copy of a sample. Projects also need to be open to interpretation in order to be accessible for all ages and for families who may stay anywhere from ten minutes to two hours. Since their average child participant ranges from 3 years-old to 7 years old, they are aware of
best practices for bridging the developmental gap between childhood and adulthood while keeping in mind that everyone has different levels of understanding and willingness to engage with art materials and with each other. Some families will stay for just a few minutes, some parents will become engrossed in their own projects and leave their children to work on their own, and some adults and children want to make multiple permutations of their projects. These types of varied preferences all need to be accommodated when planning activities.

At El Museo del Barrio, the challenge of connecting art to culture is highly prioritized. It can be difficult at times to connect a family project to traditional cultures and crafts, but some families find contemporary art hard to connect with, so a balance has to be found between the two—this is similar to the ways in which MOCA examines the differences between traditional Chinese cultural activities and culturally American activities. Additionally, a particular challenge for the museum’s Coquí Club, a monthly bilingual program for children ages 1 to 4 and their caregivers, is mixed preferences from adult participants. As the program has grown in popularity, more and more visitors come in from outside the museum’s largely Spanish-speaking East Harlem neighborhood. These parents want more focus on their children learning Spanish, while families who speak Spanish at home like the bilingual nature of the program and prefer more of an emphasis on art education and active learning.

What we learn from this institutional comparison and the MOCACREATE visitor surveys is that consistency and flexibility are crucial for successful family programming. Families have shown that they are very willing to return to museums again and again when the timing and frequency work with their schedules. However, they also want exposure to new activities and materials that interest and engage everyone from the youngest infant to adults. Open-ended artmaking, as exemplified by the Studio Museum, is a way for all visitors to access
works of art at their own pace and in their own ways. The challenges of creating relevant cultural connections are common across many institutions, with MOCA and El Museo del Barrio sharing the additional element of a desire for language learning among visitors. Planning around holidays is one simple way to accomplish this, but ensuring that projects are varied and use multiple materials and techniques is essential. In museums that do not display a lot of art, tying artmaking projects to exhibitions can be a challenge, but bringing visitors closer to objects on display through hands-on projects is very valuable for families, particularly when exhibits are less accessible for children. Most importantly, families primarily want to learn together and spend time engaged with meaningful activities with one another.
Cool Culture Family Programs

The question still unanswered is how family programming can help participants make the leap to becoming regular museum visitors, particularly for those in communities underrepresented in general museum visitor groups. While it is very difficult to quantify and analyze this potential effect directly, information from the Cool Culture program is extremely helpful in making some conjectures (see Appendix C for interview questions). Through its two major programs, Cool Culture works toward its mission to ensure that diverse New Yorkers have access to arts and culture starting in early childhood. Their Citywide Access Program partners with 400 Early Childhood Centers and Title I-funded Department of Education Kindergartens to provide free Cool Culture passes to 50,000 families. This pass covers admission to 90 different museums, zoos, and gardens in all five boroughs of the city. The Family Explorers Club is made of two community programs, one with mostly Spanish-speaking families in Harlem and one with Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking families in Chinatown. Melissa Zhang, Program Manager who works with the latter group at Cool Culture describes the latter program,

These programs go beyond the pass, which only takes away the financial barrier, and work to address cultural and language barriers. We work more deeply within the community, including training for parents, partnering with cultural institutions to create family day programs, and providing language translation. Families from our partner early childhood centers form a club that commits to going to different cultural institutions together, and learn more about teaching their children through the arts. In the program this year, we had space for 26 families from four Early Childhood Centers around Chinatown.
Programs like these are crucial for bringing in families who may not feel comfortable visiting museums on their own, even without the admission cost. Providing support through bilingual communication, training and preparation for families, bringing multiple groups in together, and developing a commitment to trying new experiences goes so far in expanding a museum’s reach. The program Zhang mentioned from this year brought families to MOCA for the Family Treasures event where adults could learn how to collect and preserve family stories and artifacts, and children could participate in artmaking activities like decorating a keepsake box and sculpting food out of everyday materials. Many of the 26 families who attended the event not only had never been to MOCA before, but it was actually their first time ever to visit a museum. Seeing the effects of this Cool Culture program was inspiring and illustrated how, with thoughtful education and committed support, museums can reach audiences far beyond those who are already coming in.

Zhang was able to provide additional information about how Cool Culture does outreach to families. As with many of the museums surveyed, they are active on social media, have a family events newsletter, and mail out flyers about events. All materials are available in English, Spanish, and Chinese whenever possible. For the Chinatown community specifically, families prefer the WeChat application to email, Facebook, Twitter, or other common forms of communication, so Zhang and her team mainly use that platform to reach families. Other considerations they make for this population include translating materials and event information, providing background information about events (What is the significance of Memorial Day? Why do people hunt for eggs on Easter?), encouraging families to use visual inquiry through the scavenger hunt cards created by Cool Culture and posted on their website, going over museum rules, and helping families with transportation when needed. Since the program targets first-time
visitors who might not be comfortable visiting museums on their own, these supports are necessary and significant. Cool Culture looks for the same level of visitor support on the museum’s end. Welcoming and recognizing families and being patient and friendly with visitors learning how museum visits work are essential to help families feel comfortable and have a good time. Zhang also pointed out that having quiet areas for young children to take a break and rest or have a snack is very helpful. Children’s museums commonly design their spaces with such areas in mind, but other museums do not always have such accommodations. Especially when family programs are happening, identifying rest areas with comfortable seating and open space greatly helps families have a successful experience.
Cool Culture Demographics Information

Cool Culture collects information about the families they work with in order to measure the effectiveness of their programs in getting diverse families through museum doors. For the purposes of this study, this information is helpful in understanding how MOCA’s visitors differ from those of other museums and how MOCA staff can make adjustments accordingly. Cool Culture shared with me their 2015-2016 demographics information comparing families visiting MOCA with all families participating in Cool Culture programs. This data is based on responses to the Cool Culture Family Pass registration and MOCA’s visitation tracking data, and it sheds some light on MOCA’s visitors compared to New York City museum visitors in general. I had assumed that because of MOCA’s mission and its location in Chinatown, it would have significantly more visitors of Chinese heritage and more first and second generation visitors, and the data largely supports both expectations. 54% of the families who visited MOCA through Cool Culture and reported their ethnicity were Asian, compared with 10% of all Cool Culture families. 24% of MOCA’s Cool Culture visitors primarily speak Cantonese at home and 20% speak Mandarin, compared with 2% and 5%, respectively, of Cool Culture families. These statistics on ethnicity and primary languages reinforce how important it is to have Chinese translations in exhibit texts, on MOCA’s website, and in other promotional and educational material for the museum, which MOCA does whenever possible.

Cool Culture’s demographics also illuminate family structures. The vast majority of Cool Culture families, those who visited MOCA and museum visitors in general, have 1 to 3 children, with most having 2. This reinforces the need to have projects that are appropriate for multiple ages so that all siblings and other family members can participate together.
In keeping with Cool Culture’s mission, they have a very strong showing among first and second-time museum visits. Cool Culture family visits to MOCA were 36% first-time and 24% second-time (general Cool Culture numbers show 47% first-time visits and 18% second-time). This suggests that Cool Culture is successful in bringing new visitors to the museum, but because of Cool Culture’s emphasis on welcoming families who are new to museums, it is up to the institution to give families high quality experiences that keep them coming back. Here is where museums can take inspiration from Cool Culture’s procedures and also maintain that focus on inviting and supporting families throughout their experiences in family programming and throughout the museum.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Family programs at institutions like the ones examined here have many wonderful aspects that educate young children and their families while nurturing them to grow socially with one another and with others. The sheer variety of museum exhibits and collections, notably in cities like New York and even within the relatively small sampling of this study, provides families with multiple means to learn about their own backgrounds and experiences and those of others. The potential options for places to go and things to do are numerous, and educators can capitalize on that diversity of experiences by tailoring rich and engaging programs for families that connect the objects and stories on display with hands-on projects that help with active learning. Museums are unique in this way; as learning spaces, they have the flexibility for children and their families to choose how and when they want to engage with projects and displays unlike the relatively more rigid confines of a classroom. Family programs add the hands-on element that non-children’s museums often lack, creating an entry point to the objects and ideas explored in museum exhibitions.

Some complications with providing family programming at cultural and historical institutions involve the nature of culture and history itself. Families want substantive experiences in the activities they choose to spend their time doing; this means that projects need to be varied, have different levels of difficulty for different developmental levels, and have a real reason for existing beyond simply making an object to take home. Capturing the depth and nuance of cultural events and ideas in a relatively simple family project is a complex endeavor, but it is possible when viewed as just a first step toward deeper understanding. Families are eager to have support in connecting to cultures in as many ways as possible, so whatever museums can do to aid in this effort is helpful and appreciated. Whether museums want to take further steps in this
direction—through bilingual programming, for example—is for educators to decide based on their vision for their work, the need, staffing ability, time, and funding. Thoughtful considerations specifically for families in museums bolster the importance of museums in our society.

People who lead museums are skilled in knowing about the visitors they see regularly, but more can be done to connect with those who are not attending museum programs and exhibitions. Partnering with organizations like Cool Culture and IDNYC is a strong first step in prioritizing invitations to would-be-first-time visitors, but museums can also engage in their own outreach by contacting local schools and other community organizations and finding potential partnerships and group activities there. Supporting those new visitors not just during their first visits but on subsequent trips to the museum will go far in growing overall visitor numbers and securing a strong place in the neighborhood community. It is not only through displaying and programming around rich exhibitions that museums show their worth, but also by connecting with local residents and demonstrating the relevance of the museum and its content to their lives that museums become a vital, living part of a community.

Other possible areas for growth involve thinking beyond the usual channels. The use of social media is widespread and relatively inexpensive and easy, but being aware of how different communities communicate and learn about events can be powerful, as with Cool Culture’s use of WeChat. Going beyond existing organizations and finding parent coordinators who are willing to organize small groups of families to visit the museum together can also be an effective way to reach out to potential visitors in a more casual and comfortable way. Being mindful of early childhood development and existing interests can also help to make family programming more appealing. For example, could dance classes and other active movement activities be
incorporated into family programming? Can collaborative building projects where multiple families contribute to the creation of a single large sculpture or structure be added to events beyond special family days? Considering family program possibilities besides the usual make-and-take models can provide variety, which has the potential to attract new visitors. As seen in the family surveys done for this study, regular program evaluations that check in with families to see what they like, dislike, and wish to see in programs will also help to keep programming evolving and relevant.

Although museum education usually first brings to mind school field trips and adult programming, the families with mostly young children who participate in family programs are a fundamental part of establishing a museum as a space for everyone to learn throughout their lives. There are a multitude of ways that children can become familiar with and eventually masters of a museum, and supporting these young children and their families in having a level of comfort and ownership is a crucial function of family programming.
References


Appendix A: MOCACREATE Survey Questions

1. Have you been to MOCA or MOCACREATE before? What brought you to the museum/the program today? (Elicit details if they've been before: how many times/how often, what did they do/see, etc.)

2. Did you go or are you planning to go to the gallery today? If so, what are you expecting to see?

3. How old is/are the child(ren) in your group? [to the child] What kinds of projects and topics are you interested in?

4. What would you, as the adult caregiver, like to see in terms of programming for your child(ren)?

5. What is your preferred method for finding out about programs at MOCA (email, mailing, social media)?

6. Do you attend family programs like this at other institutions? How often do you attend family programs, and how often do you visit museums in general?

7. Is there anything else you'd like to add that might help improve family programs at MOCA?
Appendix B: Cultural and Historical Museum Family Program Survey Questions

1. How often does your institution offer family programming?

2. What is the number of visitors who participate in your family programs, on average or per program?

3. If you track this information, do you have an approximate percentage of family programs participants who are repeat visitors?

4. If you track this information, do you know what percentage of participants are local, American tourists, or foreign tourists?

5. What kind of marketing and outreach do you do to promote your family programs? Is this process the same for every program, or do you reach out to different lists (or programs or organizations) depending on the program?

6. Are there any general thoughts or observations you've made regarding family programs in the following areas?
   a. Projects
   b. Program timing
   c. Participant age groups/demographics
   d. Other
Appendix C: Cool Culture Interview Questions

1. Are you able to share the school districts and/or any demographics information of CC families who visit MOCA?

2. How many CC households are there in the neighborhoods surrounding MOCA? Please let me know if providing zip codes, school district numbers, or other information would be helpful in answering this.

3. What kind of outreach does CC do with its members regarding participating institutions and their programming (for example, I know MOCA is part of a scavenger hunt created by Cool Culture)? Is any particular means of communication especially effective?

4. What support does CC offer to families aside from sending out/posting information about museums and programs? Are there any tools you've found particularly effective (the activity guides on the website, for example)?

5. What does CC do to encourage first-time visitors specifically? What do you think (and/or what feedback have families given you) would be helpful for museums to do to support first-time visitors?

6. What does CC do to encourage repeat visitors specifically? What do you think (and/or what feedback have families given you) would be helpful for museums to do to support repeat visitors?

7. Do you have any observations or feedback regarding what family programs specifically could offer to draw in families?