



The
DOWNSIDE
of
**FAMILY-
FRIENDLY**

Why that crying child may be the beginning of new trends historic sites and museums need to start dealing with.

by Gordon Bond

“I decided I would posit an intentionally heretical question: Do children belong in museums?”

We’ve all been there if we love museums. You’re trying to read a plaque or study an artifact, absorbing the experience. But you can’t. Someone’s kid is crying. Or running around. Or cutting in front between you and the case, leaving sticky fingerprints on the glass. Depending on your temperament, you may regard such behavior as cute or as irritating.

I’m of the latter persuasion.

This is the downside of “family-friendly.” And I’ve experienced it enough over the last couple of years that it got me thinking about the whole tri-part dynamic of child-adult-museum. So much so that I decided I would posit an intentionally heretical question: Do children belong in museums?

I knew that this was a gross overgeneralization that would illicit shrieks of indignation. But when the child is obviously either miserable or ambivalent, the adults annoyed and the staff stressed, perhaps reexamining that sacred tenet isn’t such a bad idea. So I posted the question to the H-net NJ History Listserve while a friend cross-posted it to a museum-specific listserv.

And, someone called me a “Grinch” for even asking.

But beyond such kneejerk responses were many more thoughtful ones which illuminated just what a tough job museums have in juggling demographics. Much of it is, admittedly, anecdotal—I seem to have provided an opportunity for harried museum folks to vent some of their frustrations. I only use names and institutions where the individuals elected to share them in public forums, but all are real quotes from real people. Still, anonymous or not, there is something instructive in hearing the candid views of a wide range of people on the issues inherent in family-friendly museums.

(I use the term “museum,” by the way, throughout this article, intended to be inclusive of historic sites, re-enactments, house museums, etc. as well as the non-history-related varieties.)

I will admit, however, to being somewhat disappointed that only one person noted the *other* way one could have taken my email’s subject line. “I may have this wrong,” said author Dennis Rizzo, “but are children disappearing at such an alarming rate that we need to place examples of them in museums?”

Kids in Museums

Okay, so I’m not *really* advocating that children be banned from museums. I understand and appreciate all the myriad reasons why you want to get kids into such places. Many of the responding emails detailed the success stories—programs that

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Associate Curator of
Education, Winterthur
Museum, Garden &
Library (Delaware)

have been able to really engage children or personal stories of how museum staff became museum staff thanks to exposure as kids. And, if I want proof that bringing kids to museums can be a positive influence, I need only look as far as my own reflection in the laptop monitor. My parents had become enamored with the Smithsonian Institution and many a summer vacation was spent blissfully haunting the obscure corners of exhibit halls.

There isn't much point in my publishing the arguments here in favor of bringing kid's to museums since I don't think they're in much dispute when they actually work. "Research demonstrates that those who visit museums during childhood are far for likely to become museum visitors in their adult years," Dorothy Witter responded to my question.

An anonymous school program guide at the Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library in Delaware even went so far as to assert, "I think it is more important that a child visit a museum than an adult whose preferences and interests are set...Even a toddler visiting an art museum has a sensory experience with space and color and line."

Someone higher up in New Jersey's history community emailed me privately, expressing some concern. Much of the argument in favor of funding historic sites is based on the notion that it helps educate children. Embracing the family-friendly ideal is a matter of survival for institutions. "[I]f children are not exposed to cultural institutions or historic sites as children, can we even begin to assume that they will value these experiences when they are older?" asks Winterthur's Associate Curator of Education, Lois D. Stoehr. "Most museum educators truly believe that the future health and longevity of our institutions depends on our ability to inculcate children with an appreciation for them."

In the case of the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art in Laurel, Mississippi, it may have very well saved them. "In our community, the museum was a forbidding and elitist place until the 1970s or 1980s," curator Jill R. Chancey, PhD wrote. Then they started an "adopt-a-bus" program to help offset the cost of busses to bring more schoolchildren into the museum on field trips. "Older adults in town will tell me that they haven't been in the museum in decades, or have never been, but when I meet natives under 30, they have fond memories of the museum and have been here multiple times. They do not find us intimidating because they grew up knowing they were welcome here. If you get kids to buy into the museum as part of the community, they'll grow up to be adults who recognize the value of the museum."

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Lauren Rogers Museum
of Art (Mississippi)

Of course, not every child is going to be interested in the museum experience or get anything out of it. And that’s not a value judgment or a reason not to fund history, but simply a statement of fact. Looking at it from a different perspective, I have never been interested in sports. The extent of acceptable athletic activity for me is a walk and the occasional bicycle ride with my wife—largely on flat, paved paths in local parks. Even if my parents had taken me to, say, baseball games rather than museums, I don’t think I would be publishing an online sports magazine now instead. The nature versus nurture argument has been applied to all manner of human development—from criminality to homosexuality. But whatever combinations of chemicals in the brain that conspire to make us enjoy this but not that, have left me distinctly ambivalent when it comes to sports. Certainly the same must be true for interests in museums?

Of course, the problem is that you don’t always know if the museum experience will stick with a child or not. Some in the field see children picking up a lot more than might at first be apparent. And school groups can’t exactly excuse anyone who just isn’t into it. And some well-meaning parents will bring the kids to exhibits not really intended for children in the hope it will indeed be educational for them on some level. In short, misbehaving children in museums—as elsewhere—are nothing new. And museums have been developing creative strategies to engage children for a long time. There are even museums exclusively geared to them.

But developments that may be new also emerged from the comments I received—an increase in misbehavior brought on by changes in parenting styles and illuminated by a major shift in demographics.

All of which museums must now work out how to address.

Rise of the Permissive Parent

Last summer, my wife and I attended the reenactment of the Battle of Monmouth. We arrived early enough to stake out a prime spot along the rope-line and, despite the sweltering heat, crowds filled in around us...including two little boys, perhaps ten years old or so, who landed beside us and proceeded to jostle and fight and generally knock into people. When the British took the field, they screamed at the tops of their lungs such endearing sentiments as “DIE!” As if to drive home the point, they shot at the bad guys with a toy musket. When a cavalry officer galloped along the rope-line to the thrill of the front rows, the boys took the opportunity to shove their guns

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White Hill Mansion
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over the rope at the horse. In a deft display of horsemanship, the man cantered his steed over to the edge of the crowd, reached out and grabbed the toy gun from the boy's hand—to the rousing and appreciative cheers of many. He handed it off to a Park Service staff member, instructing that the toy only be returned to their parents. Before galloping off to rejoin the reenactment, he called out to the boys, “Where are you parents?”

Where indeed?

While I would assume the horses used in such events are seasoned to the din of battle—even a mock battle—who's to say the thrusting barrel of a toy gun might not have spooked the animal to tragic results?

Of course, you can't really blame the child for acting childish. Social graces just don't come as instinctually as crying. At the end of the day, it's the parents who are responsible.

Parents inattentive to their child's misbehavior put at risk not only artifacts but the safety of those around them and of the child.

“I've had the unfortunate experience of working at an event where a child was rolling around the art gallery with a pair of those sneakers with wheels on them,” wrote Consultant Susan Ruderman. “Not only was I worried about the artworks, I also knew there was a possibility that she could trip and fall on the uneven floor. No one was saying anything! I finally couldn't take it any longer and went up to the kid and told them to stop. I also told the mom that she needed to control her child.”

A common thread that came out of the commentaries was a perceived increase in both bad behavior and inattentive parents. Now, this is going to come across as a classic “why back in MY day...” kind of statement. Uphill. Both ways and in the snow, of course. But I think a lot of us over a certain age will agree that when we were kids, we would *never* have been permitted to get away with some of the behavior that is accepted by parents today.

“I'm inclined to agree with you,” Loretta Kelly of White Hill Mansion in Fieldsboro, NJ responded. “The problem as I see it is the lack of supervision from parents, chaperones and teachers. We live in a time where too many adults think their kids are entitled to whatever they want whenever they want with no repercussions.”

“Perhaps children (as well as adults) have seen a decrease in attention span due to modern technology and the general distractions of life,” suggested Douglas McVarnish.

“The fact of the matter is this,” Joe Krulder concluded, “in today's society there exists more tolerance for childish antics

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- Susan Ruderman

than in the past. Lax parenting, or whatever you want to call it, is more the norm than it used to be.”

“We all have friends or relatives,” writes Joyce Elyea, “who always felt their children were welcomes everywhere. If you don’t want Johnny doing handstands during your dinner party, you only invite them to barbecues. But you are completely helpless to the idiots that feel their children are ‘expressing themselves’ when reality is the parents are just inconsiderate of anyone else’s needs.”

“There seems to be such a sense of entitlement among some parents now,” Susan Ruderman comments. “Maybe it has always been this way, but in the past ten years I have seen more babies and toddlers brought into situations that are inappropriate for them, but the parents seem oblivious to that fact. My other pet peeve are the modern strollers which seem as large as SUVs to me (and some of them cost almost as much as a used car). I don’t mind umbrella strollers in crowded places, but I am tired of worrying about my foot being run over by a clueless parent ‘driving’ one of these massive strollers—some of them wide enough for twins or triplets. And lest anyone think I am a grumpy childless child hater, I do indeed have a child—and I still think this way!”

Someone who only described themselves as working in museum education described how “some children really fail at basic behavior (throwing rocks at historic light fixtures), while most behave quite well. The one similarity we have seen in the monsters is that the parents refuse to tell them no, or let them wander off so far that they do not see the behavior. Some even blame us when their kids misbehave (he wouldn’t throw sand at the animals if you did not have things that look like sandboxes).”

Okay—let’s take a step back here.

There have always been those sanctimonious parents who believe their spoiled little darling can do no wrong, no matter how priceless the object they just broke was. And that one kid whose behavior earns him or her the title of “monster” will always stand out in one’s memory longer than the dozens who passed quietly through, well-behaved and kept in check by attentive parents.

So are we *really* seeing a shift in parenting style from past generations? It is, of course, easy to dismiss this as just history repeating itself. Every generation—and this is demonstrable fact—complains that the misdeeds of the younger generation are due to moral decay, lack of religion, permissive societies, abandonment of traditional values or some such other generalizations. They forget their parents likely said the same

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“Microtrends: The Small
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things about them. But there is at least some evidence that this is more than just curmudgeonly old people reminiscing about some largely mythical days of their youth.

“For most of western history, the predominant parenting style was the strict, demanding authoritarian,” wrote Meghan Vivo in “The Rise of the Permissive Parent” for the website, www.4troubledteens.com, a resource for parents of emotionally troubled teenagers that advocates various boarding schools geared towards their issues. “But since World War II, experts have observed a gradual shift toward a more permissive style of parenting. While neither the authoritarian nor the permissive parenting style is ideal, studies show that children of permissive parents are more likely to struggle in school and engage in risky behavior...According to Brooke Judkins, PhD, LPC, and Jesse Quam, LCSW...Boomers were typically raised with authoritarian parents, who were high on rules and discipline but low on warmth and understanding. In addition, post-Boomers face mounting social pressures to indulge their children...‘Parents are working longer and longer hours to provide their teens with the material things they think they want,’ said Quam.”¹

According to Mark J. Penn and E. Kinney Zalesne in their much-acclaimed book, “Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow’s Big Changes,” “In the old days, kids just got the rod, or at least the riot act. Now they get picked up, timed-out, and negotiated with at great length. The jury is out on whether we’ll get a more nonviolent society, or more people unwilling to listen to authority...Pampering Parents may be more than a microtrend—this trend affects millions of parents, and has enormous societal implications.”²

So if this is, in fact, a real phenomenon, museum staff may find themselves having to come up with strategies to handle the attitudes of more permissive parents and the resulting behaviors of their offspring.

Well-meaning parents may be taking their kids to exhibits not really intended for children simply because they think it’s the “right” thing to do—hey, it’s educational, right? And educational is good! But as Cindi Ortiz pointed out, the trick is to know how to read the cues from the child him or herself—when to push them into going and when to back off. Forcing a child to endure a museum can be just as detrimental to their view of such places when they grow up as not taking them there at all. “Some children love museums and soak up the experience like sponges,” she pointed out. “If it is something they are interested in it is so much the better—but exposure to new and different things is important too. If a child is not receptive, try again

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another day, but don’t subject the child to repeated reprimands nor the other museum goers to the inappropriate behavior or the reprimands! I love to see interested kids in a museum and hear their comments and questions and see that they are really ‘into’ the exhibit. [But] nothing is more annoying, however, than an unruly child, of any age, who is obviously not appreciating the museum experience and inflicting their lack of appreciation on those around them who ARE trying to enjoy and learn.”

Tyreen Reuter has a perspective from both sides of the issue. She’s an architectural historian and active with the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. But she’s also the kind of mother who puts her kid’s picture as her Facebook identity and volunteers with the school newsletter. “Being busy and volunteering a lot, we end up having to bring my kids to things that I would rather not,” she admits. “In those cases we try extremely hard to keep them quiet or occupied. It can be a challenge...But when I bring them willingly—as we have done to many places—there is a LOT of conversation on the way there—telling [her son] Sam about the time period, why we are going, what he [can or can’t] touch-ask-wander off into, etc. It generally helps. It’s all about context and his interest level. He’s LOVES reenactments—the camp part anyway, not the fighting—and seeing grand houses—like the Ballantine house [at the Newark Museum]—but gets antsy at less obviously visually interesting sites (empty barns, for example).”

“I think one other contributing issue is that some parents are always looking for cheap and/or free things to occupy their kids,” she added. “[A]nd museums and historic sites are generally lower on the budget scale. So you maybe don’t always get the audience for the best reasons.”

Karen Larsen told of how a colleague watching disruptive children “leaned in and whispered to me, ‘were we like this?’ ‘Yes, only our parents would not have allowed it.’ How they managed to put the fear of God into us is a mystery to me, but if someone discovers and patents the secret they will make a mint.”

If you think this is just a problem at restaurants and museums, think again. Ron Clark is author of “The End of Molasses Classes: Getting Our Kids Unstuck -- 101 Extraordinary Solutions for Parents and Teachers,” and has been named “American Teacher of the Year” by Disney. Oprah Winfrey even picked him as her “Phenomenal Man.” He was a public school teacher before founding The Ron Clark Academy. “Today, new teachers remain in our profession an average of just 4.5 years,” he wrote in an essay for CNN on September 6, 2011, “and many

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of them list ‘issues with parents’ as one of their reasons for throwing in the towel. Word is spreading, and the more negativity teachers receive from parents, the harder it becomes to recruit the best and the brightest out of colleges.”³

The Rise of the Childless

When McDain’s Restaurant and Golf Center in Pittsburgh instituted a policy prohibiting anyone under the age of six from dining there last July, it made headlines. Some parenting blogs were on fire in outrage, considering it a form of discrimination. But many felt differently—apparently enough to make this a sound business decision for McDain’s. Even some parents were fine with the idea since it offered a chance for a dinner together that didn’t involve children—theirs’ or anyone else’s.

At the other end of the spectrum, some businesses go out of their way to cater to customers with kids. Supermarkets are a good example. Some Wegman’s include not only the ADA-required parking spots for the handicapped, but spots near the entrances for pregnant women and large families. Checkout lanes are specifically designated “no candy” for parents looking to avoid tempting their kids. Shop-Rite supermarkets include “Scrunchy’s Playhouse,” a room set aside to provide childcare services while patrons go shop. Keeping the kids out of the way, occupied in a safe and fun environment, makes the chore of food shopping a little more pleasant for everyone involved.

But not *every* business needs to be family-friendly. “When I go to Burger King for lunch, I expect to see children,” wrote Joyce Elyea. “When I’m at a fine restaurant dropping \$150 on dinner, I DO NOT want somebody’s child next to me...I don’t want to experience other people’s kids all of the time and especially when I don’t bring mine.”

Certainly, there has always been friction between those with and those without kids over how the world ought to be structured. There was even a 2004 episode of *The Simpsons* based on it, where an anti-kid-friendly advocate character, Lindsey Naegle, dreams of an America “where the whole world *doesn’t* stop because a school bus did.”

Restaurants seem to be a good bellwether of trends in this arena. If you do a Google search on “childfree restaurants,” you’ll get nearly 2 million hits. And now there are websites like www.thechildfreelife.com, dedicated to providing “a safe place for those who are childfree by choice, childfree by circumstance, or undecided about having kids.”

There seems to be an increased backlash against everything

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- Deb Fuller

having to be so family-friendly. Thanks to the emergence of blogs and various social media, the childless are gathering ranks and doing more than just giving irresponsible parents a dirty look. And there are statistical reasons to think this is indeed more than just some bitter child-haters with a blog.

As a society, there is a generation in the U.S. that are waiting longer to get married, waiting longer to have kids and—if they even have them at all—are having fewer of them. When compared to their parents and grandparents, today’s couples spend a larger portion of their adult life childless.

There are, simply, more childless people.

Some statistics to back that up: According to a 2009 Pew Research Center report, nationally, men get married on average at age 28 and women at 26.⁴ A 2006 study by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that the average age an American woman had her first child in 1970 was 21.4 while by 2006, it was 25. As many as 20% of women are starting families as late as age 30 to 35, despite the increased risks to their health and of birth defects.⁵ In the late 1950s, the average woman in the U.S. could expect to have three to four children in her lifetime while by 1999 it was one to two.⁶ According to U.S. Census Bureau data, as reported by *USA Today* in 2009, “[t]he percentage of American households with children under 18 living at home last year hit the lowest point—46%—in half a century, government data reported Wednesday.” By contrast, in 1950, it was 52% and in 1963 hit a high of 57%.⁷

Perhaps what we’re seeing is that generation increasingly asserting its right to enjoy these life choices they made.

Waiting longer to start a family may also be having another perhaps unexpected effect. Deb Fuller is a dance instructor who shared her experiences with older first time parents in their 30s and 40s. “Because they waited so long to have kids, they had fertility problems and their little darlings are truly medical miracles. These parents are now hitting middle age, have half the energy they did when they were younger, are stressed out in their jobs and now have to deal with young children. They...want to give their children ‘cultural experiences’ [and see] museums as a cheap way to spend an afternoon away from the TV. Given that mix, you have parents who are too tired to deal with their kids and don’t because they think they are little miracles that can do no wrong. They think that if they don’t take them to museums or art galleries or get them into the \$40K/year pre-schools, they will never get into Harvard and thus become nothing in life. If we all had those problems, eh?”

Embrace the family-friendly model too tightly these days,

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- Cindy Boyer
Director of Museums &
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and museums may find themselves at odds with this increasing demographic.

School Daze

Of course, kids don’t just get dragged to museums by their parents. Schools view museums as natural extensions of the educational mission and museums actively seek programming partnerships with them. Unfortunately, the students often view it as little more than a chance to get away with goofing off.

Last June, my wife and I went for a short vacation to Boston. Next to our hotel was the gorgeous Boston Public Library, which was having an exhibition of maps from the Civil War. Shortly after we began, a group of high schoolers arrived on a class trip. They were typical teenagers—wise-guys joked and jostled trying to impress the girls—but not overly annoying. The docent did a good job keeping them wrangled and reasonably focused. Then they were turned loose with a list of questions they had to answer from clues to be found throughout the exhibit. A few boys evidently considered themselves too cool for such egghead stuff and just walked around the room, making fun of each other. But then one young man noticed that when he clapped his hands (which for some reason he felt compelled to do), it echoed around the ceiling. So, he made circuit after circuit through the exhibit, periodically clapping his hands. It became so irritating that I made up my mind: *just one more clap and I’m going to go complain to the chaperones*. A potential scene was averted, however, when before he could get in another clap the docent called them to gather near the end to go over their worksheets. Mr. Clap just gave some goofy, snarky answer that got some giggles from peers.

While this sad exchange was playing out, it occurred to me that the boys who were fighting and dying 150 years ago were not much older than Mr. Clap. “A teaching moment” has become a popular phrase these days and if this wasn’t one, I don’t know what would be. And it was lost on Mr. Clap and likely several of his friends, not necessarily because of anything the teachers or docent had done wrong. Maybe he was just one of those kids who didn’t care about history anymore than I care about sports. Still, he was old enough to know better than make spurious noises and someone in charge could have called him out on it.

“Of course, with others...who have been dragged there against their will and who really just want to be hanging out with their friends, there’s not much you can do,” laments Marguerite Radhakrishnan. Cindy Boyer, Director of Museums and Education for The Landmark Society of Western New York,

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Exhibits, Geneva, New
York Historical Society

added, “I especially can’t stand the increasingly common use of obscenity in young adult conversation, especially (euphemistically speaking) the ‘F-bombs.’”

Sarah Faford, Curator of Collections at the Kankakee County Museum in Illinois, points to an interesting observation about the teachers who bring such groups to museums: “we have found that the biggest problems have come from classrooms with younger teachers. They are less disciplined and the teacher is more concerned about taking pictures with their iPhone than making sure the students are well behaved.”

Steve Price is a volunteer on the Education Staff of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, but with New Jersey roots, having served as co-chair of the Crane-Phillips House Museum in Cranford. “My experience is that too many teachers think that time in the museum is break time, so at the start of every tour I always tell the teachers that I need them to keep the kids together and keep them focused.” From experience, he can usually tell who the troublemakers are going to be when they walk through the doors. He laments having to raise his voice in the exhibit halls, particularly with the unguided school groups, and the dirty looks he ends up getting from the teachers themselves. “But the fact is, they were not doing their jobs, and I think the same is sometimes true with parents in museums: they just aren’t doing their jobs.”

If you read my review of the New Jersey State Museum exhibit, “Glass Boys and Cranberry Girls: NJ Through the Lens of Lewis W. Hine,”—photographs of child laborers in early 20th century New Jersey—you’ll recall the following relevant passage:

There were three different groups of kids—seemingly school groups—that passed through the Hine exhibit in the roughly 45 minutes I was there...Most breezed in and out, maybe looking at a picture or two, oblivious to how lucky they were to have that luxury. Admittedly, some of the adults did try to engage kids into looking more critically at the images. But, for the most part, the relevance was ignored. If, however, a child is accompanied by an adult who will take the time, this showing might have more impact. Unfortunately, this really wasn’t the case with many of the adults I saw. In a corner was a life-sized enlargement of one of the berry-picking little girls in a photograph. Several kids crouched down by it so an adult man could take their picture with her. It was a joke to them—like how you might have your picture taken as a goof with a guy in an animal costume at a theme park. That those kids and their chaperones could be so cavalier—disrespectful?—could perhaps be viewed as positive. At least they live in a time

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and place where they could be.

Sometimes, the adults can be worse than the kids.

“We’ve been blessed to have well-behaved children/families at our 1840 historic house...adults are another story,” writes John Marks, Curator of Collections & Exhibits for the Geneva, New York Historical Society. “Can’t I just walk through the house on my own? I don’t want a tour. It’s okay, I live with antiques.’ And the cell phones. ‘Hi! Oh, I’m on a tour—what are you doing?’ We can’t assume folks know what a museum is, why we do what we do or how to take a group tour.”

“I’ve been the director of a couple of museums,” writes Kathy Fischer, “and can’t recall ever getting a complaint about this [children misbehaving]. Strange adult behavior, yes. Children, no.”

An anonymous reply came from someone working at a historical site they wished to remain unnamed. They say that when kids try to touch the tools, a polite “no” and explanation that the items were dangerous sufficed. “[B]ut I wish I had a dollar for every time some pushy father decided he was going to sit down and show his kids how things worked. Somehow parents found it more difficult to understand the word ‘no.’ The worst part was when they would challenge me and you should have seen the dirty looks I used to get...If you’ve had a bad experience with a child in a museum, you need look no further than the parent that’s with them!”

And the problem extends to the opposite end of the age spectrum as well. Ray Lennard, Curator for the William G. Thompson Museum & Gardens in Hudson, Michigan, admitted, “one of the docents refers to one of the local senior citizen group tours as ‘herding cats,’ as some wander ahead or lag behind the guided tour. Furthermore, we see more adults attempting to handle artifacts than the children do.”

A lot of museum people mentioned that patrons probably ought to check in advance, if possible, when school groups are scheduled and plan visits around them.

Rules Shmules

So what’s a museum to do? Programming is, of course, a big part of it—making sure you have something for nearly everyone. Many institutions have done very well at this. But often it all rests upon a foundation of rule, which can be the proverbial double-edged sword. There was an interesting disagreement over how—and how far—to enforce them.

“By fighting unruly kids and apathetic parents, you make the museum a kid unfriendly place.”

- Joe Krudler

“If you visit a museum with your child for the first time, you may not be aware of the ‘rules’ or ‘appropriate museum behavior,’” wrote Dorothy Witter. “Believe it or not, not everyone knows that we don’t like when people touch works of art.”

“The museums need clear ‘codes of conduct’ and not be afraid of asking a parent to quell an unruly child’s behavior or invite them to leave and come back another time when the child is more receptive to the experience,” wrote Cindi Ortiz, clearly coming down on the side of insisting on strict adherence. “Parents need to be responsible for their child’s behavior and to stop inappropriate behavior immediately or be willing to leave the museum if the child will not comply.”

“I think basic rules do have to be stated in writing,” said another anonymous museum worker, “because many people are clueless and you need to be able to point to something that was there for them to read when you kick them out.”

Rules are, of course, necessary and provide justification to fall back on when things go bad and museum staff have to take the uncomfortable step of ejecting someone. However, it may be possible to become *too* strict. Joe Krudler counsels a more laidback perspective. “There are really only two ways to approach this—ride the cultural norm or fight against it. I don’t think the latter will get you anywhere. By fighting unruly kids and apathetic parents, you make the museum a kid unfriendly place. When you start posting rules and enforcing them, you run the risk of garnering a reputation for unfriendliness, stuffiness, elitism, etc., etc., which then leads to a fall in attendance and membership long term.”

“I think there’s an appropriate way of handling this situation without posting rules,” Dorothy Witter continued. “I can’t think of anything more unwelcoming and cold than a list of things you CAN’T do during your visit.”

But what about the apparently rising tide of the childless? Not enforcing rules can have the same bad effect on also attracting and keeping them as visitors.

“To many adults, kids can be annoying and take away from their experience at your site,” Jim Schulte of Preservation Salem County pointed out. “A visitor who leaves with a bad experience is unlikely to return and by human nature passes this experience on. So now we have lost a visitor and potential supporter.”

It a classic damned if you do, damned if you don’t scenario.

William B. Obrochta, Manager of Educational Services for the Virginia Historical Society, sees a more fundamental disconnect between museums and parents. “It seems to me that one of the

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things that museums don't do well—even children's museums—is educate parents about how they can engage their children in the museum. Parents know that taking children to museums is good because they will learn, but they don't know why or how.”

Rules and better engagement with parents is one response. But there is another that seems to be gaining traction in the same way childfree dining is in the restaurant world.

Adults Only

While I never had the math skills for it, I've always enjoyed science—astronomy in particular. My wife and I have gone to several science museums in the U.S. and Canada. But, inevitably, the cool hands-on displays get dominated by children. And, it wouldn't look good for a 40-something year old man to muscle a toddler out of the way to play with the exhibit. Recognizing that adults would like to play too, several science museums have begun to institute “Adults Only” nights where grown-ups get to use the interactive displays—all without the guilt of body-checking an eight year old.

Most museums basically just open their doors and come one, come all. Special events or programs notwithstanding, they try to appeal to everyone all at once, which can sometimes create friction between families and childless adults. While the “adults only” approach is, in effect, a form of segregation, it does permit the museum to cater more effectively to the given groups.

“I think we need to broaden our understanding of museum education beyond thinking that ‘education = children.’” wrote Keith D. MacKay. “There are numerous museums, both art and historic sites, fulfilling their educational and inspirational missions through programs and events for adults: teens, senior citizens, young professionals, etc.”

But such segregation isn't only to placate the childless—it can also help bring in more families. Carol Ely suggests museums “have specific family days with extra staff on hand where you take time to greet people and explain the rules in a friendly way. We have one summer event with a very low admission price which seems to be the gateway experience for a lot of young families who hesitate to take children to museums because they don't know if the children will be welcome and if they'll enjoy it. Because the price is low, it's low risk for the parents, and because we know in advance that we're going to be dealing with young kids and with inexperienced museum-goers, we have enough personnel to guide the experience. We hope they'll enjoy it and come back and tell their friends.”

**“Did anyone
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- Randall Gabrielan

“As for crying babies and toddlers, parents with small children deserve to enjoy museums also, so maybe what should happen is that museums offer special hours or discounts for parents with young children to visit during off-peak hours,” wrote someone identifying herself as just Evelyn.

Solitude—whether it’s escaping from a crying infant or a fully grown adult chattering away on their cell phone—is often part of the appeal of the museum experience. I have often relished those quiet moments when I could just stare at an artifact of interest and contemplate the history behind it. Quiet is certainly a part of the experience for art museums. “I would love to see an art museum offer a ‘quiet night,’” wrote Cindy Boyer. “[A] special night where visitors are invited to meditate and relax with the artwork. No cell phones. No guided tours. No talking. An evening of refuge.”

While such approaches may provide solutions that work for some, it’s not a matter of one size fitting all. Larger institutions with paid, fulltime staff and relatively secure funding sources can afford to specialize their programming. Smaller institutions, however, with volunteer staff and insecure funding may find it less practical. “Unfortunately,” wrote Joe Krulder, “to create such a layered or tiered presentation, museums need additional staff, creative folks who can engage children, adults and intellectuals...there are only so many Getty museums out there; deep pockets and all the resources in the world.”

But one thing even little institutions often prove themselves adept at is finding creative solutions to complex problems.

Conclusions

While perhaps a touch melodramatic, this is almost a “perfect storm.” On the one hand, both anecdotal experiences and academic research indicates a trend towards “permissive parenting” styles becoming increasingly the norm, resulting in inappropriate behavior by their children. On the other, anecdotal experience and statistical data indicate an increase in childless adults who will be most offended by the results of the permissive parenting. And stuck smack in the middle are the museums, large and small, who must work to find the means to entertain and educate them all. Will there be more clashes over misbehaving children?

Time will tell.

I want to take a moment to thank everyone who replied to my email—yes, even the one who called me a Grinch. Obviously, I could not include everyone’s responses here, but I

do appreciate the insights everyone brought to the issues.

But I am going to give the last word to Randall Gabrielan, who sums it up nicely, I think. “I have been both charmed by youthful interest and irked by disruptiveness of youngsters (and parents) but we should realize that not only are impressions for future interest in museums and history made while young, but we want to capture the parents while they have the relative youth, energy and money to support us,” he wrote, but added, “Did anyone ever hear of someone hiring a baby sitter in order to visit a local museum?”

Indeed.



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