

Solomon Family

Martin ArtQuest helps me to get to know my children... I see what they enjoy. I love that it is something I get to do with them, not for them, but with them. – Leah Solomon

Leah remembers first taking her oldest daughter, Kaleigh (now 12), and her oldest son, Dylan (now 8), to the Frist Center for the Visual Arts to view an exhibition about Egypt. While the Solomon Family had known about the Frist Center for some time, Leah said that it was only when her grandmother informed her about Martin ArtQuest and Kids Club¹ that they began visiting the museum more frequently. Since then, Leah and her four children, Kaleigh, Dylan, Nicola (now 7), and Ryan (now 6) visit the Frist Center at least once a month. The children’s father, Rowan, accompanied his family on the first visit but was unable to attend visits two and three. Leah said that while she is usually the one taking the children to the Frist Center, she enjoys the times when Rowan can join them, as his presence demonstrates to the children “that he thinks it’s important to create and have fun.”



(From left) Dylan, Ryan, Leah, Nicola, and Kaleigh Solomon at the Nashville Public Library.

Along with engaging in art-making activities with her children, Leah is also a photographer and blogger. On her blog, Leah describes herself as an “unschooling Mama to four towheaded, blue eyed sweethearts, who encourages the natural curiosity & creativity of [her] children & finds the learning value in everything [they] do together.” A homeschooling mother, Leah encourages her children to explore and discover their own creativity and interests. During their homeschooling and leisure time, the Solomons engage in a range of activities, including listening to music, taking nature hikes, visiting museums and libraries, engaging in at-home arts projects, and cooking. Emphasizing imagination and creativity, the Solomons also enjoy writing poetry, reading fiction, pretending, putting on plays, and exploring the wilderness. While the family tends to do many things together, each of the children has individual hobbies and interests as well. Kaleigh enjoys ballet and swimming, and her sister, Nicola, enjoys nature hunts and drawing. The oldest boy, Dylan, practices taekwondo, and his younger brother, Ryan, loves exploring nature. At the time of the study, the children were participating in the Junior Naturalist Award at Edwin Warner Parks, working on their reptile badge.

For this study, the Solomon family made three accompanied visits to the Frist Center and three like-site visits to the Nashville Symphony Orchestra, a local nature area, and the Nashville Public Library. The Solomons are frequent visitors to these off-site venues.

¹ Kids Club is an hour-long, structured, free art class linked to one of the exhibitions at the Frist Center.

Visits to the Frist Center for the Visual Arts Galleries

The Solomon family did not visit the galleries during the study. Leah explained that the varying age range of her children makes it difficult to visit the exhibitions and she does not want the children to have a bad experience. Leah also indicated that the children are usually too tired to attend the galleries after Kids Club and Martin ArtQuest. While spending time in the galleries is something she wants to do herself, she sees a greater priority in fostering her children's development.

During each visit, the family spent time in Kids Club creating art. In all three cases, the family followed similar patterns: first they listened to the initial instructions then moved straight into their tasks. While Leah commonly kept a tuned ear to subsequent instruction from the teacher, the children tended to focus on the tasks at hand. During critical moments of creation, Leah offered her advice and guidance. The family always sat together, although the children mostly worked quietly, focusing on their own creations. As an amateur photographer, Leah spent some of her time photographing the children's progress.

Each of the Solomon children had unique learning and working styles. While Leah offered her support and guidance to all of her children, she tended to lend extra focus to her youngest child, Ryan. Dylan and Kaleigh mostly worked independently, and Nicola sometimes requested instruction or help and Leah would happily respond. Described by Leah as a very "conscientious" worker, Kaleigh was always the last to finish her project. Dylan followed instructions but always looked for an edge, a way to create the final object a little differently from the standard object. Nicola was very free-form in her style, sometimes becoming frustrated if she was not able to grasp a task but always completing the job at hand. Ryan worked in spurts of energy, following instructions from Leah. Upon completion of their art projects, the children took great pride in presenting their works to Leah, the teacher, and anyone else who was around.

Visits to Martin ArtQuest

The Solomon children were always observed running excitedly into Martin ArtQuest. Once there, the group split up and headed for their favorite activity stations. The children displayed a sense of organic movement as they created and made art before moving on to the next station. Under observation, this pattern resembled a natural ebb and flow as the children moved effortlessly and with great excitement through the space. On most visits, the children ensured they tried each activity at least once. While in the family gallery, Leah tended to stay in the background and offer help only when requested. She spent much of her time taking photographs and encouraging the children when they presented her with their artwork. While the Solomons always began their exploration in Martin ArtQuest on individual quests, toward the end of their visits they would come back together as a group and discuss what they had done or the fact that they were hungry. In deciding when to leave, Leah usually asked the children what they wanted to do and would negotiate a compromise among the group. For example, if only one person was tired she would encourage that person to wait patiently until the others were finished creating. Eventually, she would call the other children to finish up so they could leave.

Visits to Like Site

For each like-site visit, Leah created and implemented a pre- and post-research activity for her children. Using the first like-site visit as an example, Leah played music linked to the orchestra program to encourage the children to develop their listening skills. Leah also introduced books to help the children prepare for the concert. These activities continued following the performance in the form of additional study and questions. The symphony orchestra activity took place during the school term, as it is a monthly educational program. The orchestra activity was the only like-site event that emphasized looking and listening. The other two off-site visits were more about encouraging, exploring, observing, questioning, and experimenting.

The children's capacity to focus and level of engagement were very high during all of the like-site visits, and they often appeared to lose themselves in whatever it was they were doing. During the second and third like-site visits, conversations among the family were energetic and enthusiastic. Discussions seemed to revolve around one or more person's interests, curiosity, and observations. The children often engaged in pretending, using their imaginations to create their own adventures. As an example, during a visit to the local nature park, the children transformed a floating log into a blue whale. They spent a great deal of time helping the blue whale reach the water. At one point Dylan called himself a "bad father" because the blue whale drifted on its own. During the library visit, the children created their own version of Cinderella (which they had just watched during a puppet show) with puppets.

Like their behavior in Martin ArtQuest and Kids Club, the children displayed their own unique learning and working styles during the off-site visits. In most circumstances, Nicola tended to work on her own, spending time writing in her journal or sitting by the riverbed trying to catch insects in her fishing net. Kaleigh had a quiet confidence about her and spent time both on her own, with her brothers, and with her mother. Dylan and Ryan tended to play actively together. Leah tended to float among all the children depending on what they had found and how interested they were in showing their finds to her. Leah always maintained a sense of calm in responding to everyone as they talked to her or called on her to ask questions or look at whatever it was they had found or caught. Throughout the visits, there was never an identified leader amongst the children—they worked collaboratively, with each taking lead roles depending on what they were doing.

Motivation & Values

Leah described one motivation for visiting the Frist Center as the desire to provide her children with opportunities to participate in hands-on activities. Being able to create was seen as a benefit to her, as well. Leah also prioritized "having fun and being happy" and "not taking life too seriously" and felt experiences at the Frist Center supported that effort. For Leah, Kids Club offers a more structured environment, and it is important to her that the children are exposed to and work within a structure. Despite this claim, on the third visit, Leah was not happy that the teacher wanted the children to create exactly the same product. She explained how she prefers sessions where the teacher guides and gives examples but does not push the same outcome for all the children: "It is not a math class." Where Kids Club was valued for its structure, Martin ArtQuest was valued for its sense of freedom. Overall, both environments were valued because they encouraged self-expression. Leah also enjoys the fact that she can learn about her children as they respond to the different environments and create their

artwork. She also sees the Frist Center as a place where the children can develop skills they can apply in later life and create good memories of their childhood. Finally, Leah said that an important motivator for visiting the Frist Center is that she can put aside her teacher role and enjoy being a mother because the teaching and guiding is already in place: "I don't have to prepare, it's all there for me and I can enjoy being a mom and watch them learn as well as learn something new myself."

Overall, Leah's philosophy toward her children's learning takes a holistic approach, as she balances teaching with nurturing her children. Identifying a plethora of motivations for all the like-site visits, Leah explained how it is important to expose the children to new learning, make memories, take in fresh air through exercise and play, engage in critical-thinking, develop imagination and creativity, learn about themselves and each other, and grow together as a family unit. Leah did not rate one motivation higher than another, believing the children require a host of tools/resources to learn. Because of this philosophy, Leah also believes in exposing her children to a wide variety of environments and experiences that support that endeavor.

When asked what they enjoyed most about their visits to the Frist Center, Leah said her children appreciate the freedom and independence they can experience in Martin ArtQuest. Overall, she said the children enjoyed exploring their individual and collective interests, curiosities, and personalities. As a parent, she enjoyed discovering new ideas for teaching, such as the architecture and cityscapes theme, and watching her children express their individual learning styles and personalities. On the visit where her husband joined them, she said she enjoyed watching him work on his own work of art.

Shared Characteristics—Art Museum & Like Sites

In terms of value, Leah placed the visits to the Frist Center and the like-site visits on equal footing, saying that participating in both helps the children feel like they are part of a community.

Connections & Effect of Participation in the Study

Connections were made between the like-site visits and the Frist Center. Leah always followed up the children's learning at the Frist Center and other like sites by initiating activities based on their visits that the children could further develop at home. For example, architecture and landscapes was the focus of the first Kids Club visit at the Frist Center, and later it became a theme of one of their homeschool projects. This theme was also linked with one of the like-site visits, when Leah was able to incorporate books on architecture at the Nashville Public Library. During this trip to the library, the Solomons also spent time discussing various aspects of architecture, such as "what makes a good building, and what type of buildings do you see in the city/rural areas." Said Leah:

I am reading this book about buildings and the beauty of architecture and it almost promoted this whole unit of study—I had forgotten we were going to do cityscapes at Kids Club—that was a good connection.

This thematic learning strategy was visible in all of the visits made by the Solomons during this study. In addition, the Solomon family often discussed their experiences prior to and following each visit. Discussions mostly revolved around what they liked best and whether they had fun during their visit.

When asked how participation in the study impacted her family, Leah explained how it helped her articulate her teaching pedagogy:

I already knew that we made connections, but this has had me thinking about how to say that out loud. I just encourage it to happen naturally. But, being able to say it out loud helps me understand in more detail how the children are growing.

She also explained that because the children are homeschooled, they often feel that they are not recognized by the outside world. Participating in the study made the Solomons “feel special and provided them visibility, which was a positive experience.”

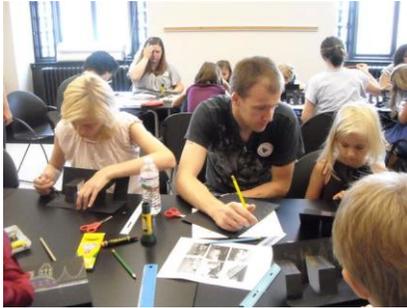
VISIT PATTERNS

	Frist Center for the Visual Arts	Like Sites
Average time spent	132 minutes (Entire visit) 68 minutes (Martin ArtQuest)	135 minutes
Timing of visits	The family always visits on Saturdays in the early afternoon. This timing corresponds with Kids Club.	All off-site visits took place on a weekday. The first and third visits took place on Fridays and the second on a Monday. All visits began around 10 am.
Order of visits	On each visit, the family participated in the Kids Club art-making activity and then finished at Martin ArtQuest. The father attended visit number one but was unable to participate in visits two and three.	First visit is to the Schermerhorn Symphony Center to watch the Nashville Orchestra, the second visit is to a local nature area close to their home, and the third visit is to Nashville Public Library to watch a puppet show, have lunch, and read books. The off-site visits form part of the children's homeschooling activities.

Snapshot

THREE VISITS TO THE FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

Visit 1



September 2009
1 hour 55 min.
Kids Club

Visit 2



October 2009
2 hour 30 min.
Kids Club

Visit 3



December 2009
1 hour 10 min.
Kids Club

THREE VISITS TO LIKE SITES

Schermerhorn Symphony Center



January 2009

Springfield Greenway



August 2009

Nashville Public Library



September 2009