

Mensch Family

By going together as a family, we have that shared experience of being able to see the wonder in her eyes when she looks at something and to see her reaction to things. I really hope Alex will experience the wonder and joy of other people's creativity. – Ruby Mensch

The Mensch family moved to Atlanta in 2000 and visited the High Museum of Art for the first time that same year. While Ruby and CJ admitted being somewhat underwhelmed by the collection, they said that they started visiting the museum semi-frequently after Alex was born and even more frequently when she became a toddler. An important date for the family was when the new wing opened in 2005 along with the Green Family Learning Gallery. “Alex was very excited,” CJ said. “The High became a special place for her.”



Mensch Family (from left): Ruby, Alex, and CJ Mensch.

Ruby and CJ hold professional jobs as an editor and a librarian respectively. Both describe themselves as art appreciators and have spent a lot of time visiting art museums and creating art on their own. Ruby holds a degree in costume design and continues to work with textiles, making quilts and clothing; CJ writes and makes music. Due to her hours at work, Ruby explained that it is often CJ who takes the lead in organizing and facilitating outings with Alex. As a former school teacher, CJ previously had summers off and would spend much of that time with Alex. Ruby also described the different roles and strengths she and CJ play as parents, saying “I have more interest and motivation to do hands-on crafts and structured activities like building or reading, but CJ is so great at free play... he is great about getting right in there and imagining new play and engaging with her in a more abstract way.” Other activities the Mensch family enjoy doing together include fishing, visiting playgrounds and indoor gyms, walking around downtown Atlanta and Centennial Park, visiting other science and children's museums, and listening to and making music.

For this study, the Mensch family made three accompanied visits to the High Museum of Art, and three like-site visits: a fishing trip and visits to the Fernbank Museum of Natural History and Zoo Atlanta. The Mensch family fishes occasionally and visits the Fernbank and Zoo Atlanta often. CJ said having a membership to the zoo is great as it allows the family the opportunity to be flexible depending on what is happening in their day and at the zoo. In talking about their motivation for visiting the off-site spaces CJ outlined the importance of being outside as a means of encouraging and inspiring creativity and engagement with each other. CJ also finds fishing to be comforting; it was something he shared with his father that he wants to share with his daughter. CJ said that the fishing trip was a great way to see his daughter enjoying nature. The fishing visit was also seen as a way to teach the importance of “process” over “product,” since Alex would learn that fishing is not about how many fish you catch, but about the process of sitting there and enjoying each other and nature. Visiting Fernbank was a way for Alex to have fun while exploring. CJ also indicated that he wanted Alex to know that

somewhere in her childhood there was just fun. There were a number of times when the family visited the off-site venues during the evening when the spaces were being used as music venues or for other programming activities. CJ wanted to expose Alex to the changes in spaces as he felt it was important for her to see something, "outside the regular context... and adds that extra excitement."

Visits to the High Museum of Art Galleries

Often observed pulling on her parents' arms to move them along more quickly and expressing her desire to see and/or do something else, both CJ and Ruby admit that they are often on one of Alex's "speed tours" while in the galleries. CJ and Ruby attempt to slow down visits through the galleries and focus Alex's attention on the art using a variety of strategies, including utilizing the family guides, designing their own scavenger hunts, asking targeted questions, reading labels aloud and then explaining, and engaging in pretend and imagination. Ruby and CJ also tend to break up a visit to the High Museum of Art into manageable parts by incorporating short breaks to the café, infusing blocks of free play or artmaking, and/or attending special events, such as Friday night jazz or theatrical performances. During an interview, Ruby and CJ explained:

I think we would spend less time in the museum if the Family Gallery did not exist and [Alex] would probably have a harder time focusing on looking in the gallery space because she would get bored, there would not be that outlet for her, and I think she really is looking forward to going to the interactive space and being enticed to participate in activities in other parts of the museum. Your café and the museum shop work too, so that would be our compromise if the Greene Family Learning Gallery did not exist.

Visits to the Greene Family Learning Gallery

While in the Greene Family Learning Gallery, the Mensch family tends to play and create together. When both parents are present, they sometimes take turns engaging with Alex. For example, Ruby will spend time helping Alex build and then CJ will jump in and engage more in role playing and pretense. When just CJ and Alex visit, there is more prolonged one-on-one interaction. For example, during the second visit, the two played together the entire time, building a fort and a "scarf museum" and creating a puppet show. As a strategy, the Mensch family says they prefer to visit the Greene Family Learning Gallery at the beginning and end of their visit, as visits were a "disaster" when they attempted to use the space as a reward for good behavior in the galleries. Both parents agree that infusing free play throughout a visit works best for their child.

Visits to Like Sites

Similar to their visits to the High Museum, during their visits to like sites CJ and Ruby generated learning environments for Alex by creating their own quizzes and scavenger hunts. The family often engaged in lively discussions in which all family members contributed. Alex participated in the discussions by asking fact-oriented questions and presenting creative ideas (such as catching fish using licorice). This approach was encouraged by CJ, who explains, "I ask a question, then she asks more questions and it leads into a conversation." In terms of leading the experiences, the Mensch family followed a pattern similar to that observed during their visits to the High, with Alex tending to take the lead. In some spaces Alex took her time,

reading labels and asking questions whereas in other spaces she moved more quickly (although always interacting and participating in some manner). Ruby and CJ often made subtle efforts to keep Alex interested when her creative spirit wanted to move on.

Motivation & Values

In talking about their motivation for visiting the High Museum of Art and the Greene Family Learning Gallery, Ruby and CJ say that it is important that they get to enjoy the experience together and learn about other people's perspectives. Ruby said that she views the art museum as a source of inspiration and hopes that visits to the High Museum will help spark Alex's creativity. CJ emphasized the importance of introducing Alex to the museum at an early age, saying: "if you start young and introduce art in a quiet space and then try to bring her back when she gets older I think we will create a lifetime museum-goer instead of having to drag her to the museum." They both added that they want Alex to feel like she "belongs" at the museum and hinted that the Greene Family Learning Gallery helps in that respect.

When asked to discuss what they value most about the Greene Family Learning Gallery, Ruby and CJ said that it is a place where Alex can relax and be hands-on and where they can sit side-by-side as a family and be creative together. As Alex is an only child, Ruby and CJ also enjoy watching her play and interact with other children and "finally come out of her shell." The availability of a variety of activities for Alex to engage in is also perceived as being a benefit by CJ and Ruby as it allows them greater flexibility when one wants to view something else in the museum—this way the parent who stays with Alex has activities to keep her engaged.

When asked what they enjoy most about their visits to the High Museum, the Mensches explained that as a child Alex enjoys engaging in hands-on activities, like making the paper lantern during her first visit to the High. During their second visit to the museum, CJ explained how Alex felt "proud" to complete the scavenger hunt and was equally proud of her ability to navigate so easily and naturally through the museum. The sense of pride, he explained, stemmed from her feeling like a "leader." On the third visit, CJ perceived that Alex enjoyed spending time with the research assistant and watching him and Ruby dance:

I think seeing me and Ruby dancing is always great for her—it's a lot of fun. We are kind of goofy in some ways—me taking her up and swinging her around—and showing her we are really having a good time is really important.

CJ mentioned that watching his daughter learn is the most enjoyable aspect of any visit to the High Museum of Art. He added, "I could watch her learning all day long."

Shared Characteristics—Art Museum & Like Sites

In terms of shared characteristics with the High Museum, all three like sites were identified as spaces that encourage and spark their daughter's imagination.

Connections & Effect of Participation in the Study

Making connections between current and past visits to the same site as well as connections between different sites seemed to be important to the Mensch family. CJ mentioned Alex found great enjoyment when she remembered how to find her way around a place or

remembered activities she did there when she was younger. On several occasions, Alex was able to link the visit with a previous one, remembering specific activities like previous scavenger hunts and jazz nights; places where she previously could not go, like the Lichtenstein house; and tasks she previously could not accomplish, like being able to climb on her own. In thinking about all the memories Alex has made over the years, CJ said:

She has definitely made a lot of memory connections and it just warms my heart to know she knows who Howard Finster is and it just blows my mind and I think that's great! It's so wonderful.

The Mensches make attempts to situate any visit to the High or a like site within a larger context, often discussing their visit to the museum before and after each visit. On the way to the High or another venue, the family tends to talk about what they plan to do that day and other related topics. After leaving the sites, the family tends to discuss what they saw and did, memories of previous visits, and ideas for future outings. CJ also explained that following “inspirational” visits to the High or other similar sites (like other museums or theaters or music venues), Alex always wants to “come home and do and make something.” He added “the fun never stops and we do talk about it.”

VISIT PATTERNS

	High Museum of Art	Like-Sites
Average time spent	123 minutes (Entire visit) 16 minutes (Greene Family Learning Gallery)	160 minutes
Timing of visits	On two occasions the family visited on a Friday, and on another they visited on a Sunday. For two visits, all of the family members were present, and on the other, just CJ and Alex. There does not seem to be a certain time pattern to the visits, as they came both in the mornings and in the afternoons/evenings.	The first and third visits took place on a Sundays and the second took place on a Friday. The Sunday visits were late mornings into early afternoons and the Friday visit was in the afternoon.
Order of visits	The order of the visits seems to be driven mostly by interest and timing. During all of the visits, the family visited the collections and stops at the café. On the first and second visits, the family visited the Green Family Learning Gallery—once toward the middle of the visit and once at the very beginning. On the first visit, the family also attended a workshop and two performances.	All the family attended the first and third visit and Ruby was unable to attend the second visit. All visits involved high levels of engagement within the family.

Snapshot

THREE VISITS TO THE HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

Visit 1



February 2009
2 hours 51 min.
The Last Emperor

Visit 2



July 2009
1 hour 49 min.

Visit 3



September 2009
1 hour 29 min.

THREE VISITS TO LIKE SITES

Sope Creek, Fishing Trip



April 2009

Fernbank Museum of Natural History



October 2009

Zoo Atlanta



November 2009