

## Speed Art Museum— Art Sparks Family Learning in Interactive Galleries Research Project Case Study Summary



### Who are the families?

The five families in The Speed Art Museum’s case study sample were selected because they were frequent visitors to the Museum and Art Sparks. While each had a unique family history that led to their becoming regular visitors, several patterns related to motivation united these families. All of the parents in this study expressed an interest in the arts and/or a love of museums. Many of them currently or have worked in fields related to the arts and architecture either as professionals or students. In most cases, mothers initiated the family’s museum-going. Grandmothers also played an important role—one became a docent at the Speed Museum which inspired the extended family’s participation; another grandmother purchased her family an annual family membership. One family lived very close to the

Speed Museum and their love of museums and the close proximity led them to discover the Speed Museum as a “natural fit” for their family.

Art Sparks served as a primary attraction for the five families in this study. Some said they discovered Art Sparks early on when they first began to visit the Speed, and Art Sparks’ offerings cemented their relationship with the Museum. Some families were drawn by a special family program, then got hooked on the Art Sparks experience. One family visited the Museum weekly for an entire year. The families in this study shared a common primary motivation—to expose their children to art and creative endeavors.

Of the five families, two families home-schooled their children during the time of the study. Of the families who sent their children to public or private school, one mother had a full-time job outside the home as a commodities analyst, one mother had an architecture background and was currently in school completing her degree in fine arts, and the other mother was a working artist. The father’s occupations included an architect, communications consultant, engineer, marketing executive, and retail store manager.

## What do families do in The Speed Art Museum?

On average, The Speed Art Museum families in this study spent an average of one and a half hours at the Museum. The shortest visit length was 79 minutes and the longest was 137 minutes. Families spent almost the same amount of time on their accompanied like-site visits, with the average just over one and a half hours. Most, but not all, of the visits included some time in the collections and/or exhibition galleries. The distribution of time was, on average, 55% of the total visit time was in the exhibitions and collections while 45% of the time was spent in Art Sparks. The social group tended to be the mother with children but occasionally included the father on the museum and like-site visits. Food was also a part of the overall experience either talking about it or actually having lunch together at a restaurant following their museum visit.

### Museum Collections & Exhibitions

Family visits to The Speed Art Museum's galleries varied according to the child's degree of interest, the changing configuration of the social group, and the ways in which they related to others. With regards to interest, a few children expressed disinterest by moving quickly through the galleries and only briefly glancing at the artwork. Others expressed the same disinterest by saying things such as "If I look at this for an hour, I'll just go to sleep" and "Come on. Keep going. Keep going!" In these cases, the parents patiently maintained their agenda to view the artwork and attempted to engage and redirect the children, using strategies such as asking questions or initiating a scavenger hunt. For the less interested children, the in-gallery interactive stations attracted and held their attention.

Time is apparently a factor in how children connect with the exhibitions and collections. For example, one mother observed that, over time, her daughter became more engaged with the artwork and now frequently asks questions and shares her own observations without constant prompting from the parent. One child recalled being scared of the artwork in the galleries when he was younger, calling it "weird and scary," but now that he was older, he understood them better and enjoyed them more.

The configuration of the social group sometimes varied throughout the visit, with family members exploring independently then joining together in parent-child dyads or as an entire family to check-in and converse. One home-school family consistently stayed together in the galleries, visited on weekdays, and engaged in a variety of mother-initiated strategies to maintain the children's attention such as spontaneous scavenger hunts and focusing questions.

There were variations in the ways these families interacted socially in the galleries. Home-school mothers tended to actively facilitate engagement with the art, talking about different ways of seeing. For example, one family highlighted the effects of viewing distance, and suggested guessing the title of the artwork before looking at it. These home-school parents tended to seize opportunities to define words and

concepts. The other families took a more casual approach to art in the galleries, perhaps with an implicit emphasis on enjoyment. They encouraged and followed the children’s interests, read labels silently and out loud (often an independent adult activity), asked questions, and shared their thoughts. For all the families, parents most often initiated interaction and supported their children’s efforts to initiate.

For some families, viewing art in the galleries was an essential part of the museum experience; for others it was not essential. Some parents saw this as a developmental issue; they added gallery visits or increased the amount of time spent in the galleries as children got older. Some were concerned about younger children behaving inappropriately in the galleries. They also felt that older children benefited more from the gallery experience.

Figure 1 illustrates a “word-cloud” of the learning behaviors exhibited by the case study families while visiting the collections and exhibitions at the Speed Museum of Art. Unsurprisingly, the most frequent learning behavior was looking at art, followed by explaining, reading, self-reflecting, discussing, identifying, and confirming. Families also evaluated works of art, described, proposed, and remembered.



### Art Sparks

For families with young children, Art Sparks satisfied several essential needs such as providing a psychologically and physically safe place for children to explore and discover on their own and a sensory-rich environment that supported early learning development. Without Art Sparks, some said they would not choose to be involved with the Museum.

For all the families in this study, Art Sparks took a position of central importance in their visits to The Speed Art Museum. When, in the course of their visit they chose to visit Art Sparks, varied among families and particular visits. Of the thirteen total visits to The Speed Art Museum by the five case study families, four of those visits were to Art Sparks only while four visits included Art Sparks as first on the visit agenda followed by visits to the exhibition and collections galleries. On two of the visits, Art

Sparks was last on the agenda and on the remaining two visits the families did not visit Art Sparks at all.

Families agreed that Art Sparks holds great interest for their children and meets their needs. In some cases, Art Sparks served as an incentive or reward, so the parents could spend some time in the galleries. They viewed Art Sparks as part of developing their children's interest in the arts, with Art Sparks as a springboard to engagement with artwork in the galleries. One mother said "I think it's been interesting to watch that sort of graduation from Art Sparks into the other realms." She described Art Sparks as an "anchor" from which her children have grown.

Art Sparks offers a wide variety of activities. Among this variety, families found great flexibility of choice, and many options for interaction with materials, subject matter, and other people. This freedom contrasted sharply with expected behavior in the galleries, which was perceived as somewhat restricted and prescribed. Children were expected and encouraged to be active and energetic in Art Sparks, providing a welcome complement to the more disciplined behavior in the galleries. Families valued the opportunities for joint activity—imaginative play, reading books, making art—as well as opportunities for independence and self-sufficiency. Families that viewed artwork in the galleries more independently, tended to play and work together more in Art Sparks. This provided a setting for collaboration and mutual appreciation in which one child told her mother "you're the best idea maker."

Families described Art Sparks as a space that always offers new high-quality offerings that maintain their children's interests, accommodates different ages, and allows children to expend energy—all within a safe contained space so parents need not worry where their children are or if they are safe and behaving properly. Many parents expressed a desire to expose their children to new experiences and new ideas; they said this was how they discovered their children's interests. In Art Sparks, children could organize and think through spatial problems. For some parents (particularly those with backgrounds in art and architecture), these activities fell within their zone of comfort and knowledge. A home-school mother said that while her children can make art at home, they particularly loved making it at Art Sparks.

Many families not only recognized, but emphasized, the relationships between art in the galleries and Art Sparks. They actively sought out and talked about these connections, linking them with their personal lives and interests, including archeology, history, and mythology. One parent described how the tangible and interactive nature of Art Sparks made the conceptual connections "more real." One child used a metaphor of "cheese and crackers" to express how he experiences the relationship between the galleries and Art Sparks. He explained how you have "all the boring stuff [galleries] and then all the good stuff [Art Sparks]," but both are important and go together: "they aren't really good alone, but they go great together."

The learning behaviors exhibited in Art Sparks, as in the galleries, included much looking at art, explaining, self-reflecting, discussing, confirming, identifying, and reading, etc. (See Figure 2). However, there was a greater diversity and greater frequency of learning behaviors in Art Sparks compared to the galleries. Based on observations, children initiated more of these behaviors in Art Sparks than they did in the galleries where parents did most of the initiation of learning behaviors. Children tended to initiate conversations in Art Sparks more than they did in the galleries.



Figure 2: Learning Behaviors in Art Sparks at the Speed Art Museum.

### What Other Leisure Learning Choices do Families Make?

Learning—defined broadly—motivated these families’ leisure decisions. Two parents described their family’s attitudes in this way: “learning is the way life is” and, through family activities, children can discover “ways of being in the world and finding your place in it.” Their leisure learning choices reflected family tradition, personal interests, and the desire to expose their children to the variety that life has to offer. Museums, science centers, historic sites, zoos, libraries, farmers’ markets, local parks, sports, and cultural performances provided physical object lessons and opportunities for interaction with diverse subject matter that parents wanted their children to experience.

Many families expressed a value of nature. They chose outdoor sites, particularly when the weather was pleasant, such as the Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, Falls of Ohio State Park, and Gallrein Farms Pumpkin Patch. One mom stressed her desire to expose kids to seasonal changes throughout the year, and to encourage them to appreciate nature. She explained, “I want them to really get the appreciation that most of history and most of time has not involved humans or even life.”

### How do Families Value Art Sparks?

Families’ visitation patterns and verbal reports conveyed their tremendous appreciation for Art Sparks as part of family fun and social enculturation. They valued the form and content of Art Sparks found in opportunities for creative collaboration and joint imaginative play. These opportunities for physical and social engagement

change regularly in Art Sparks, so new, interesting, and varied activities sustained the children's interest across multiple visits. Families recognized the value of multisensory, whole-body, imaginative activities that enabled children to explore new things, make connections to their lives, and channel their energy in productive ways.

Families believed that Art Sparks provides a safe and engaging environment for children of all ages. For families with children of multiple ages, this satisfied a critical need for family activities in which everyone could find something of interest. The contained space with optimal visibility allowed parents to keep their eyes on children when they played separately from the parents. In addition, the children could "blow off steam" and engage in messy activities without the hassle of cleaning up, as they would have to at home.

According to parents, Art Sparks afforded many different forms of social interaction markedly different than in the galleries. The atmosphere was described as energetic and convivial, not hushed. Children could move about freely and comfortably interact with other children outside of their family group. Parents valued these opportunities for their children to practice social skills. The safety of the activities allowed children to engage independent of adults, so social groups took on flexible configurations. Parents felt that the rich content of Art Sparks inspired conversations that might not have happened anywhere else. Parents noted that the interactive gallery also served as an incentive for children to spend time in the collections and exhibitions with a reward of Art Sparks.

### **What Characteristics are Shared Among Art Sparks and Other Family Leisure Learning Destinations?**

A focus of this study was to determine what characteristics of the Speed Museum of Art and Art Sparks, in particular, were shared with other family leisure learning choices. These families valued leisure learning experiences that provided:

- Opportunities to engage the varied interests of family members while reinforcing family values;
- Experiences that are both educational and fun;
- Options that are active over more passive experiences, in which the family has some freedom of choice, as well as opportunities to manipulate objects and engage the senses;
- Activities and content that stimulate family conversations;
- Environments that are child-friendly, without lots of rules, and opportunities to burn energy;
- Unique opportunities that stimulate creativity and spark imaginations; and
- Options that allow children to practice social skills with other children and adults.

### **How do Families Make Connections Between the Museum Experience and their Home Life?**

Most of the parents in the study went to great lengths to situate a family leisure learning experience within a larger context of the child's life. They looked for

opportunities to connect the art and Art Sparks activities with personal interests and the content of formal education lessons. One home-school mother specifically linked the artwork with history and language lessons. Another parent talked how the photographs they viewed during one visit prompted her and the children to talk about changes to familiar environments:

“...we talked about how things have changed in some of the places that were familiar or have main streets that look a little bit different now. We were making those kinds of recognitions from the photographs.”

One child talked about her preference for large portraits, “the ones where the people are dressed in some sort of period costume.” Through conversation, the family linked this preference to the daughter’s love of history, reading, and designing her own historic paper dolls.

### **Participation in study**

Families’ participation in the study yielded many benefits recognized by the families themselves. Several said their visits to The Speed Art Museum and other leisure learning sites gave them more to talk about. As mentioned above, many of those conversations linked the experiences at the Museum, and at like-sites, with the family’s history, interests, and every-day lives. Some families expressed greater awareness of how they choose activities for their children, as well as their default modes of interaction. For example, one parent said she became more cognizant of her and her daughter’s “anti-social tendencies.” She also valued the opportunities to foster her daughter’s interpersonal relationships and “get her more comfortable with unusual situations.” Parents appreciated the complimentary membership and being included in the activities at the Speed:

“We felt valued by the Speed and knowing what was going on and being part of it made us appreciate our relationship with the Speed a lot more.”