

# ***Curious by Nature***

## **A Community Conversation with Families with Special Needs**

**February 13, 2010**

**Palo Alto Junior Museum & Zoo**



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*I think I can say for all of us, how much we appreciate you even asking. Just the fact that you asked... that you bothered to ask means that this is available to me again. We just have so many places that don't care or don't bother. Maybe it's just benign neglect, but the fact that you asked is really important to us as a community. It's huge!*

*Making an exhibit or something that is inclusive, and that you include every sub-population in the community - I think right there you already have won.*

*This [Museum] is perfect for doing this. It's just the right size, it's such a good variety of stimuli in a small area. It's just wonderful of you to undertake this. When it comes to different kinds of abilities, it's such a broad spectrum of different abilities and different needs, it's hard to meet them all, but I think that your making an effort is just terrific.*

*We bring [children] here because we notice some sort of deficit, that's part of our work... when we bring kids here we discover strengths.*

*The kids love it here. They come here once a week or so... they're voting with their feet.*

*We want him to be able to go [to museums] because we want him to keep expanding his ability to succeed.*

*... the value of the exhibit extends beyond the time that they're here.*

-Parents and educators of children with special needs  
February 13, 2010

## **Introduction**

To inform development of the *Curious by Nature* exhibit and related programs, staff at the Palo Alto Junior Museum & Zoo (JMZ) wants to hear from parents. Staff are especially interested in the experience of families with children who have special needs. In recent years the JMZ has developed an audience in this community of often close-knit friends and organizations. JMZ is also part of a successful collaboration with Abilities United and PACE (Pacific Autism Center for Education) in which disabled adults volunteer in the Zoo on a weekly basis. The institution's intimate nature, good design and warm staff have established it as a welcoming venue for all types of learners.



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JMZ's interest in learning from families with special needs is well founded. Not only does serving this population build on the organization's natural strengths, it also promotes use of best practices.

*The Palo Alto Junior Museum's project's approach of involving community groups throughout the exhibit development process to solicit input and ideas on exhibits, programs, and resources ... will result in a museum that is more welcoming and an exhibition that is more accessible and responsive. The outcome will surely benefit visitors of all abilities and be another ... example of an important process that will spark emulation by other institutions.*

–Elaine Gurian

*I am hoping that as a profession we do not fall prey to the seductive blindsighted assumption that "they" are a unique separate group with special needs that have nothing to do with "us." Instead, shouldn't we cut to the chase and acknowledge that all such universal access debates in the past have ended to the same effect – that what benefits one, benefits all, and in the most surprisingly constructive ways?*

–Paul Gabriel

*By seeking inspiration and exhibit ideas from people who learn and experience the world differently, we will undoubtedly uncover sensory exhibit ideas that we would not have otherwise, ultimately creating a better experience for everyone.*

–JMZ IMLS Grant Application

The JMZ has applied to the Institute of Museum and Library Services for funding to develop *Curious by Nature*. The City of Palo Alto and the Friends of the JMZ have already raised and committed the matching funds amount. The JMZ is also looking into other funding sources as a backup in the event that IMLS does not grant the funds.

Tina Keegan, Exhibits Director at JMZ, contracted with Wendy Meluch of Visitor Studies Services (the evaluator) to conduct a community conversation with parents on site at the Museum. Staff reached out to JMZ visitors and local organizations to invite parents of children with special needs to participate. During the session, staff provided hands-on, educational programming and lunch to the children and their caregivers.

This report includes extensive quotations from the two-hour discussion to give the reader a more nuanced sense of this population's experiences and needs than a summary can provide. To protect participant anonymity, citations for quotations are not provided. Bullet points denote separate speakers. Tina Keegan's comments are identified with "T" and the evaluator's with "E."



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A note about language: children with special needs are often referred to as “neurologically atypical.” Families with special needs often refer to families and children without special needs as “typical.” In this report, the word typical is used in this sense.

**Resources Mentioned by Parents:**

- Special Education Parent Teacher Association in Redwood City: [septar.org](http://septar.org)
- Togetherville: like Facebook for kids. This is a new, local business that may be a good partner for online services such as video streaming from JMZ.
- PECs: Picture Exchange Cards, were originally created as a tool for communicating with non-verbal people on the autism spectrum. Since its invention, though, "PECs" has become shorthand for any kind of image-based communication.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://autism.about.com/b/2006/11/07/communicating-with-pecs-picture-exchange-cards.htm>



## Executive Summary

To inform development of *Curious by Nature* exhibits and activities, the Palo Alto Junior Museum and Zoo (JMZ) hosted a community conversation to discuss how best to serve children with special needs. Eight parents and two educators reflected on experiences at other institutions, provided feedback about JMZ, and brainstormed about the new exhibit. That JMZ is making an effort to be inclusive is deeply appreciated by these participants who left the table feeling grateful and loyal to the institution. This was one of the most powerful outcomes of the session.

Almost every difficult and helpful aspect of a museum visit that these participants addressed would be identified by families with typical children as well, but for families with special needs, these things have a greater impact. Chief among concerns for these families is not the facilities they visit, but the other people that they encounter there. Issues of crowds, long lines, tight spaces and insufficient seating got more attention than did the exhibits themselves when parents talked about their museum experiences.

Museum staff members and parents of typical children are often ignorant about special populations; they can even be mean. Parents of children with special needs feel strongly about the need to educate other people about special populations. They identified several means of doing so during the two-hour session.

These participant families are enthusiastic about JMZ. It's small enough to be safe and manageable, yet with a good variety of stimuli. Several exhibits leap to mind as favorites for children in these families, including the tree stumps out in front, and the Hydropower exhibit with the "little balls spinning." Several common features can be found among favorite exhibits at JMZ and imagined exhibits for *Curious by Nature*. They include a way for the child to trigger some kind of action (cause and effect); shiny objects that move or spin are particularly fascinating for children on the autism spectrum. Movement is effective for visitors with visual impairment as well.

The huge range of experiences, brainstorming and suggestions from these participants is impossible to summarize. The full report is structured with many headings to facilitate a quick or a detailed read. It quotes extensively from the two-hour discussion to give the reader a more nuanced sense of this population's experiences than a summary can provide.



## Method & Research Questions

This session was typical of community conversations, often referred to as focus groups, in most ways. We invited 14 adults to participate, 12 parents and two experts. Eight parents and both professionals attended. Tina Keegan was also present. Staff provided refreshments in the meeting room. During the session, staff provided hands-on programming and snacks to participants' children and their caregivers elsewhere in the Museum building. Everyone was invited to stay for lunch after the session. Please see Participant Profiles and Recommendations for Researchers for more information.

Staff and the evaluator worked together to generate a list of several main questions and helpful prompts to guide our two-hour discussion.

1. What barriers do you feel you face visiting museums with your family? What have other museums done that has felt welcoming?
  - Have you ever talked about making a museum outing and then decided against it? Why?
  - Have you ever arrived at a museum visit and left because of some difficulty or discomfort? Can you describe that for me?
  - What have other museums done that have felt welcoming? Can you share specific examples?
2. Have you experienced any barriers at JMZ? What do you think works well for children with special needs at JMZ? What could we do better in terms of accessibility?
  - How does your experience at JMZ compare with other museums you've experienced?
  - Have you ever had any difficulty or discomfort at JMZ? Have you ever decided against a visit here?
  - What is JMZ doing well for you and your children?
  - Is there anything more or different that you'd like to see JMZ do to improve your experience / accessibility?
3. The exhibition will allow kids to experience our natural history collections in a multi-sensory way (touch, smell, hear, sight, and taste). What kinds of sensory, hands-on activities do you think your kids would enjoy doing to explore the collections?
4. We are also planning other accessibility enhancements, such as:
  - accessibility resources, such as, play guide, a Visual System book or poster for children with autism, pre-visit prep materials (available online), Braille or large print copies of our signage, guides or
  - exclusive Monday field trips for families or providers
  - staff training
  - classes, Kid Curator program pilot (Is this something people would be interested in as a fee-based program?)



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- What do you think of these ideas? Are there other ideas we should consider?
- Have you seen devices like these or similar things at other museums/zoos?  
Where/describe?

### Other Areas of Interest:

5. Are there any organizations, advisors, or resources we should look into?
6. What should we consider in terms of communication when designing signage?
7. Any recommendations for design considerations of the environment? (like acoustics, quiet areas, colors, etc.)

## Participant Profiles

Eight parents attended the group discussion for all or most of the time. One parent works as a speech therapist which expands her experience with children who have special needs. Most of these parents are very active in their communities. Another mentioned taking a class about ASD, and commented that both of his parents are educators. Only one family was completely new to JMZ.

Also present were a professional coach for families with children that have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and the Director of Programs at the Vista Center for the Blind. The Vista Center and Pacific Autism Center for Education (PACE) are collaborating with the JMZ on *Curious by Nature*. PACE and Abilities United have programs set up for young adults with disabilities to volunteer at JMZ.

Apart from the group discussion at the Museum, we received comments from one parent who could not join us that morning. That input has been woven into the body of this report.

The nine families represented in the focus group and via email have children with a variety of special needs. They included children with one or more of these conditions:

- Albinism (uncommon form with some pigmentation and the usual sensitivity to light)
- Aspergers
- Ataxic Cerebral Palsy
- Ataxic Cerebral Palsy with Hypotonia
- Autism (including mild to extreme cases, and non-verbal)
- Cortical Visual Impairment
- Mild Cerebral Palsy
- Pervasive Developmental Delay Not Otherwise Specified (almost like autism)
- Possible OCD
- Sometimes typical-seeming, but sometimes mildly or moderately on the autism spectrum
- Typical and mostly typical
- Undiagnosed behavioral issues, non-verbal





## Museum Experiences – Conversation Summary with Quotations

### Barriers & Supports for Museum Visits

We began the session by asking parents and educators in the group to reflect on their experiences of museums, zoos, etc. The comments in this section primarily address other institutions, not JMZ. See Junior Museum & Zoo – Reactions & Feedback for information about this institution.

### Social-scape – Staff & Other Visitors

“Other people” rises to the top as the most significant challenge facing these families with special needs when visiting a museum. Individuals, crowds, even staff can present difficulties for these families.<sup>2</sup> These participants feel that parents of typical children tend act out of ignorance about atypical children, often being impatient, giving dirty looks, or being mean. This is especially true when the child with special needs appears to be typical. Several of the group’s ideas for exhibits and visit support touched on ways to educate other parents. See Suggestions for *Curious by Nature* Exhibitry, Activities and Programming for more information.

- *[One big barrier is a] lack of knowledge [among staff about] kids with special needs or individuals with mental or physical challenges. So sometimes they’re not so accommodating when your child is acting up, and maybe not as sensitive to the fact that [the child is] not doing it on purpose. That’s their characteristic. [E: So, staff knowing how to respond...] Or not respond.*
- *If there’s a loud frenzied children’s museum environment, that’s not necessarily good for our kids. But if it’s a quiet and hushed environment, then if an outburst occurs... Then all of the sudden everyone stares at you, so it’s like you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t.*
- *Then you have to rush out the door.*
- *My son has a cane. There is a large majority of adults who don’t know what it is, so they walk over it rather than go around it. Or they say, “look out for the blind boy”, stuff like that. But the kids are really great, because if they don’t know what it is, they’ll just come and say, “why does he need that?” And you’re like, “great, I’ll tell you why.” But the parents, they just don’t understand that it’s part of what helps him to be independent. It’s an example of how adults are not as willing to learn.*
- *We tried to keep our son in a stroller for as long as possible so he’d look typical, and finally we got him the wheel chairiest wheel chair we could find, because people were mean. But*

<sup>2</sup> Note that participants spoke glowingly of the staff and overall experience at JMZ. In conversation, these parents are drawing on experiences at many different facilities.



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*then, [with] the wheel chair they say, “Oh poor family with a disabled kid. Let me open the door for you. Oh, he’s got problems,” versus just, “ he’s a bad kid with bad parents.”*

- *About the young children’s play area at X museum: Well, my son is 9 so we get a lot of dirty looks. Actually the people who work there have been totally fine, they’re like, “come on in!” They invited us in recognizing that developmentally he was fine, but the other parents, of course, were totally not cool with that.*
- *It would be nice if they could post that this is not only for small kids to have some time, but also for other children with different needs.*
- *A lot of parents are really skeptical about having their kids around kids that have disabilities.*
- *It’s not like we’re unleashing them on their babies - typically there is a parent right with them.*
- *But they don’t understand.*

### Social-scape – Crowds

Apart from frictions with individuals, crowds present another set of potential difficulties. Having to wait in long lines is extremely difficult for most children, particularly those with ASD. Crowded spaces make it hard for parents to make a quick exit if their child has an outbreak or other urgent issue. Wheelchairs, strollers and bad floor plans further complicate navigating crowded spaces. Disney Land is recognized as a site with good crowd control techniques.

One woman’s description of her family’s visit to a local institution illustrates many common challenges. There was much agreement around the table as she told her story.

- *My son as CP and he walks on his own, but we often use a wheel chair because he gets tired out. Physically, some of the museums don’t have enough space to get through so somebody else can pass. I know that’s an issue with strollers as well. A lot of us with special needs kids, they stay in they stroller a lot longer. Or you have them around as a backup.*

*For example, at the X museum, there’s that awesome X exhibit, but if you go in those, some of the pockets (dead ends), you just can’t get out, especially if it’s crowded. So it’s traffic flow or just physically too close together. People [are] not monitoring which way traffic should go. In Disney Land... when it gets really crowded you can only go this way.*

*I don’t feel safe taking my child there [x exhibit] in the wheelchair, not only because we can’t get back up in the elevator (because there’s no one making sure that there’s room in an elevator for us), but if we get stuck back there (in the dead ends) and he starts to get upset - if its crowded - he takes up a lot more space. Most of our kids take up a lot more space.*

*We actually had annual passes and we did not renew them. It’s an amazing museum and between waiting in line to see the [Z exhibit], and the bad traffic patterns and the crowded elevators. And the food court! There’s just no, nothing has [gesticulating, expressing a lack of order in the space] –our kids need rules, many children thrive in an environment that has*



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*structure. My child in particular likes things to be safe and have a routine. Even if we try to do things in the same order there, it just never was easy. And the parking! There are just so many barriers before we got there that made it difficult, that by the time we got there, aarrhhh! Get me out of here! [Laughter...]*

- *I felt the same way at the Y museum. Like the line in the beginning is so horrible and the child with ASD just does not want to wait in line. It's just impossible [Have you asked for special accommodations?] Yeah, they won't do that unless you have a membership. [much disapproval around the table]*

### Social-scape – Lines and Entry

The issue of waiting in line to enter a museum brought up a few key points with these parents. Large institutions should have some sort of passes that allow for entry without having to wait in line. Disney is mentioned as an example; they have a system for this, though it can be somewhat invasive for parents who have to make their case. The Monterey Bay Aquarium (MBA) occasionally opens an hour early or closes a bit late to help minimize lines and crowds, but only members who get the newsletter would know about it. [Note: this may be a membership benefit.] In any case, parents agree that clear signage about where to obtain services for special needs should be present at the entrance. This type of support should be a standard offering and should be presented as such.

- *I want to ask about the pass type of thing, like they have at Disney Land. Why don't they let the disabled go in first and everybody else after? Just so they can accommodate and make it so people aren't getting frustrated, and everyone can enjoy it.*
- *Again, it's this dialogue that we have to start with these people. [Inform people] that there is this kind of need, maybe they're just naive about it. Maybe it's just a small percentage of the people that visit. It is still kids that come and want that same experience as all the other kids.*
- *Maybe if, at the entrance, there was a sign that said, "if you or some one in your family needs special accommodations, go to booth 2." So that there would be a point where you could say, "hey my son's not going to be able to tolerate waiting in line." And you don't have to have a letter from a doctor like you have to have at Disneyland. Or something so that you can get out of the line. Some sort of a "hey we can help you out here." Normalizing it...*
- *E: Making it a part of the standard menu of services. [agreement]*
- *It didn't used to be as easy, and they definitely made me cry once [at Disneyland]. They said, "that's not a wheel chair it's a stroller." And I was like, are you kidding me? We went through their whole list of diagnoses, and when they got to emotional problems we said sure.*
- *Disneyland has to do this because people try to take advantage, but it's very invasive.*



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- *They finally have a stamp that says “stroller = wheel chair.”*

### Social-scape – Avoiding Crowds

Some of these parents go to great lengths to give their children the opportunity for a good museum visit despite the possibility of big crowds. One parent described how her family travels from the Palo Alto area to the MBA in two cars (a three-hour drive). That way, if the crowds are too great and their child with special needs has to leave early, the rest of the family can linger. This anecdote eventually led parents to brainstorm about using “crowd cams” in museums, similar to traffic cams that one can check on line before getting on the road. Everyone at the table agreed that this would be very useful to them.

- *The Monterey Bay Aquarium is someplace that we love to go and he loves to go but we do not go on days when we know there will be a lot of people. We’ll try, we’ll take two cars and if there’s massive fail, then we leave. We keep trying and we keep learning and figuring it out because he loves it. We want him to be able to go because we want him to keep expanding his ability to succeed.*
- *One thing that struck me about how often crowding is an issue. If the museums would somehow put up, “this is how many people we expect today,” or “we expect this to be a crowded day,” or a web cam so you can see how busy it is before you go! Not so much here, because here is smaller and it’s not 3 hours away.*
- *I love the web cam idea! That’s how we decide what freeway to drive. I don’t want to be stuck with those kids in that car on that free way... [agreement]*
- The evaluator recounts a story about visitors in line on the opening day of the new California Academy of Sciences. They were using twitter to warn people not to come because the crowds were so big.

### Physical Setting – Plenty of Space

These parents report that children with special needs take up a lot of space, even if crowds aren’t present. As previously mentioned, wheelchairs and strollers require space to pass through an area and let others pass by as well. In addition, taking care of children with special needs can require plenty of gear. Benches or surfaces where parents can set down a pack and get things out of it are very helpful, as would be plenty of hooks in bathrooms.

- *[If] he starts to get upset he takes up a lot more space. Most of our kids take up a lot more space. Whether they have walking stick a or a wheel chair or a personality or whatever it is.*



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*So having physical space between things is very helpful. We've definitely left places - like we don't eat at restaurants that don't have escape routes. That's what we call them, escape routes. [laughter and discussion, agreement] A lot of us think in terms of escape routes, especially if you want to bring another kid with you.*

- *There's all this equipment you bring with you. You need a place where you can deploy the equipment. [Laughter and agreement] In addition to everything else, the pad you have to put on the ground for all the stuff you have to get out!*
  
- Discussion moves to the parent who is present at the table with her child who has autism and is a "one-on-one child." Another parent at the table points out how many toys and snacks she has pulled out of her bag to occupy her child during our talk, *And this is for a not traumatic situation.* The mother responds, *It's hard for him to sit still for so long.* Original speaker replies: *Yes, but we're not in crisis, trying to accommodate a child with all of that stuff.* [All agree]

### Seating & Eating

Seating is the subject of much visitor comfort and satisfaction literature. These parents offer an interesting design twist. While they're keeping an eye on their children, seating that might not be obvious could be useful, like a ledge.

- *Seating when you don't really expect it, like a small ledge to sit on, a bench. It doesn't have to be a full picnic table, but just, for the parent who's keeping an eye out [agreement]. Or needs to set down their backpack to get out the sippy cup and the snacks.*

It's not unusual for parents to have snacks or drinks for young children. For parents of children with special needs, snacks can take on more importance: "just a sip of water will often calm down my son".

- *Having a place where eating is ok can be really helpful. If food and drink is not allowed in the whole place - a lot of times we can't do that. Or we cheat. And we're really good about bringing water in case it spills, because we are actually conscious about that. And we pack our trash out. We are responsible, because we don't want to make it hard on the place. But if somebody kicks us out because we have liquid, we just never go back, because liquid - just a sip of water will often calm down my son. [agreement]*

### Bathrooms

Not much attention was given to bathroom facilities, but one parent did talk about the noise level that is typical in a large restroom. She also made note of a new style of hand dryer into which



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the user inserts his/her hands – these are noisy and scary, even for this parent’s typical child.

- *...how noise is accommodated. Whether it’s an echo-y room or a bathroom... describes the bathroom at X museum: they redid them to be very narrow to get to the stalls. They have those awesome hand dryers which are just, like, terrifying gigantic noises and lights that eat your hands. That you put your hands in. My typical kid is like, “there is no way I’m putting my hands in that! They’re gonna get eaten!” [much laughter and agreement] Not only that, but they are so loud you can’t get past. You can’t take away an echo but you can [opt not to] stick 50 hand dryers in there. Those kind of things, the volume, there’s just no safe place because there’s no quiet area.*

### Spaces for Respite

The need for a quiet space where children can calm down is great for these families. These parents discussed two types of areas at MBA, the toddler play area (not quiet, but kid friendly) and the outdoor viewing decks with railings. Best is an enclosed area that is safe, with limited exits which parents can monitor easily. Quiet music on head sets, books or sensory toys could be useful in the quiet room. Seating is appreciated. Consider posting a maximum occupancy allowance to maintain a quiet mood.

- *It would be nice if there is a corner where the kids can go and regroup. So on a busy day there’s a room where they could sit down and read books or there’s some sensory toys in there. So they can go there to calm down however that might be.*
- Quiet space idea: have head phones with quiet music available (email)
- The MBA toddler play area is a good place to let her toddler *move and explore, press buttons put on flippers...* Then they can go back to looking at tanks.
- *That gets crowded, but it’s enclosed and they can go there and I don’t have to worry. I think it’s right outside the jelly fish. It’s enclosed. There’s lots of buttons to push.*
- *One of the things you say is that it’s enclosed. I know for having escape artist kids, I have to check the perimeter of places to make sure there’s no places where it looks like it’s all closed in and it’s really not. Museums are better about that in general, because they want you to pay to get in. If it’s a quiet spot and they don’t want to be touched for a little while, or whatever it is, if I know there’s only one exit, then I can stand there and give my child a little bit of space. Like on the outside decks at MBA I know where the exits are. A lot of our kids are really one-on-one kids and you have to be 3 feet away from him or something’s going to happen. So, if I can give my son 8 or 9 feet, then he can feel independent and I feel like I can breathe. Just that alone is a decompression.*
- *And there are benches there, so I can go and just sit down for 5 minutes. It’s nice.*





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- *There are places outside, the outside decks [at MBA]. The upper floor outside deck. Nobody goes there, so it's very [helpful]. [all agree]*
- *If you do have a separate area for special needs children to regroup or have some quiet time, you can put a sign on the door stating the maximum number of children. If anybody can go into the area, then the room will not be as purposeful. (email)*

### Exhibitry – Touch, Don't Touch

Hands-on learning is powerful for most children and adults, and critical for many people with special needs. Parents in this conversation suggest indicating clearly which elements are OK to touch, or possibly segregating touchable and non-touchable items in separate exhibit spaces. Iconic labels such as PECs are recommended. A note about types of objects to touch: when it comes to animals, actual biofacts, like fur, are more effective than touchable sculptures of the animal.

- *I wonder about separating exhibits that are sensory related and [having] a different area where the kids have to learn that these are “no touching, just looking.” You can perhaps put pictures or icons that they can learn: “that's an area that you can't tap. It's hands off.” Like PECs cards symbols.*
- *That's good for the visually impaired child too, because that's how they see. They have to touch. My son touches people, and we have to explain to them that he just has to see if that stripe on your shirt is a stripe. He's not blind, but he doesn't see that well.*
- *E: At zoos do you find the brass sculptures of the animals helpful?*
- *Like at the MBA, when you have the actual fur or something. That's much more real is more effective. Not just the shape because it's not meaningful to them. They can see the size, but any other details just really... too subtle... doesn't teach them much (not much information can be given this way).*
- *A brass otter and a brass penguin are pretty much the same. The feel of the fur versus the feel of the feathers is very different.*

### Exhibitry – Audio Enhancements

This group mentioned several sound-related elements. Everyone had experience with the plastic keys that turn on audio recordings, e.g., at Oakland Zoo or Oakland's Fairyland. Not only do those offer an auditory element, they are fun and give the key-holding child something to do for the whole family.



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Headsets are now available at some movie theaters. They can amplify sound for the hearing impaired or narrate the action on screen for the visually impaired. Where video is used in a museum setting, this would be a useful option, in addition to subtitles. See *Curious by Nature – Brainstorming* below for ideas about using sound in the new exhibit.

- *At the SF Zoo they have the little zoo key... I think that might be helpful too... for people that can hear a little bit or if they can't see it as well.*
- *At Oakland zoo and Fairyland in Oakland, the magic keys.. it talks to you (audio boxes). Suggests that it could raise money for the museum... I'd pay \$10 for a key if it would keep one of my children... [laughter]*
- *Maybe the keys are only \$1.*
- *E: and it's a task that the child can do for the whole family.*
- *The movie industry has become really sensitive, especially Disney, to the visually impaired. [Some theaters] have a special headset. There are two different kinds, one is for the hearing impaired, it makes things louder, and one is for the visually impaired where they describe exactly what is going on on the screen, but you can still hear the dialogue. She describes a special showing of *Up* at Pixar with this feature. Her son can't go to the theater without this. Other parent references similar events at an AMC.*

### A New Perspective

The parent who could not attend our community conversation shared her thoughts with Tina by email. She tells the story of her visit to see the “albino crocodile” at the California Academy of Sciences with her child who has a form of albinism, and visual impairment. Their experience illustrates the profound shift in perspective for parents who have children with special needs, a perspective that can be difficult for parents of typical people to anticipate.

- *A whole new world opens up when you have a child with disabilities. You suddenly realize they do have different skills (for instance she compensates and hears and feels “better”) and you respond to things differently. In my case, I thought the albino crocodile at the Academy might one day be a good way to explain to her how she is special. But the text they put up said how it wouldn't survive in the wild, and people looked at it as though it was a freak. Not what I want her to be thinking! But I can completely understand why they wrote that, and why people respond in the way they do. (email)*





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### Shade

The only parent to touch on shade, was the parent of the child with albinism. Clearly this is an important comfort feature for everyone in outdoor areas, but critical for people who are sensitive to light.

### Junior Museum & Zoo – Reactions & Feedback

These families are enthusiastic about JMZ. It's small enough to be safe and manageable, yet offers a good variety of stimuli. Parents know that if they are in the gallery, children out in the zoo area can't get into trouble or escape; more important, they are nearby.

Several exhibits leap to mind as favorites for children in these families. The tree stumps located outside, near the entrance to the Museum, got special attention. "It really seems to make kids happy." Climbing on the stumps helps children focus. The stamp activity brackets the visit and helps with transitioning in and out of the Museum.

Inside the Museum, interactive exhibits that allow the child to trigger some kind of action are most effective, according to focus group participants. Shiny objects that move or spin are particularly fascinating for children on the autism spectrum. Movement is effective for visitors with visual impairment as well. The Hydropower exhibit with the "little balls spinning," the coin spinning into the vortex, turning the crank on the Kid-Power Machine to move tennis balls, and the robot that takes donations were all named and discussed.

The only negative experiences at JMZ that participants could report relate to other visitors. On a crowded day it's hard to wait and take turns with the tennis balls, and little boys, typical or not, can get grabby. These parents are not particularly fussed by this kind of thing; they do not fault staff, but mentioning it returns conversation to opportunities for educating parents of typical children.

- *We take the kids here all the time. They love it, it's great. In part, what makes it so great is the fact that it is very difficult to do something you're not supposed to do (other than tap the glass). They're not gonna climb into the raccoon cage or in with the peacock or anything like that. So that helps.*
- *I love the size of it. [And] that my daughter can go out to see the animals and she can be out there by herself. Where I have to follow my toddler around inside.*
- *Something that is very positive that I see with the kids: they all seem to love those tree stumps outside. Kids just love that! It's a great transition point. You come in, they play on the tree stumps, then when you leave the museum they can play a little bit. It's still a little*



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*special to play before you go back to the car. I don't know who did that, maybe it's dangerous because tons of kids are walking around, but it really seems to make kids happy.*

- *They have to focus when they're on there.*
- *My son likes to count the rings.*
- *E: And it brackets the visit.*
  
- *The hydro electricity thing [exhibit] is a big hit with my son. The little balls spinning, and stuff like that. It's great.*
- *Anything with spinning, [agreement], water, action/reaction.*
- *That would be a great exhibit [if it were] more towards the back, because he spends all his time in front, at one [exhibit], because it's spinning like that.*
- *Our kids like spinning things. [agreement and cross talk]*
- *Spinning, shining, moving [things are] particularly interesting to kids on the spectrum.*
- *The movement and the fact that they can provoke it themselves and watch it.*
- *Great exhibit for autistic kids.*
- *Even the one with the coin spinning around. Those are hits!*
- *That's good for my visually impaired child too, the movement.*
  
- *The little robot taking money is a big hit, as soon as you walk in. It's very playful.*
  
- *The one thing I've notice: when it's crowded, there is high demand for certain things. Like all the kids want to turn the crank and make the tennis balls go and they... some boys especially [will grab a ball away] and that's sure to promote an incident. I'm not sure what the museum could do about it, it's just the behavior pattern of impatient little boys in general, but that is the thing that tends to cause problems.*
- *And the part that then balls get thrown around and a kid with disabilities trips and falls. Or a heavy ball like a bocci ball will get picked up and thrown at a toddler.*
- *The size is good, I don't think there is anything you can do about the crowds on certain days. But when there is a conflict that is also an opportunity for parents to be there and help their children work through situations like that. And maybe help educate the more typical child.*



## ***Curious by Nature* – Brainstorming**

### **Open-ended Brainstorming**

Tina Keegan described the Museum’s collection and the type of materials and content that will be included in *Curious by Nature*. Without describing exhibitry or support materials, we opened the floor to brainstorming. The parents and educators at the table offered many ideas for content, exhibits and activities. For ease of reading, some of their ideas are summarized rather than quoted.

### **Engaging Varied Abilities**

Parents appreciate exhibit elements that can be used in simultaneously by children of different abilities and/or ages.

- *We stopped coming here because the age difference of our kids was so great. Often times, when you have the first one as a special kid, you wait a long time to decide to have another one, because it’s a little scary. So I love it when there are activities - an activity that matches multiple age groups. Maybe activities that have different levels on the same thing, so depending on what the cognitive ability of the child is, [there is something] to interact with.*
- *E: or to facilitate interaction between the two kids themselves, one helps the other...*

### **Maps, Passports, Scavenger Hunts**

Parents had fun inventing map-related activities. Many of the children in this group really like maps and paths, and following foot prints or lines on the ground. In addition to being fun, a map of the exhibit can help children anticipate and schedule their visit. Many children with special needs benefit from pre-planning and need to do things in a certain order. As the conversation evolved, parents struck on the idea of having different versions of the map for different types of needs or abilities.

Features suggested for the maps included images of the exhibits that children can match to the real things they find in the gallery. Using the map for a passport activity was also very exciting for these parents. They suggest designing the map such that the edge of the page has places to collect stamps, stickers or an embossed symbol at each exhibit. Embossing became a favorite in conversation because it’s easy to do, doesn’t create extra garbage, and has tactile interest.

Parents referred to passport-type programs at other institutions including Disneyland, the Sonoran Desert Museum in Tucson, and in the Splash Zone exhibit at MBA. One parent



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commented that her children know the visit is over when they complete their collection of stamps.

Scavenger hunts can be designed to accommodate a range of abilities, and parents like the idea of this activity. They recommend having children seek simple things and/or sensory things such as, *how many sea stars can you count in this tank, or find something smelly*. Other types of hunts can look for fun facts or simple icons.

### Need for Audio

- *I wish my daughter could actually do that [map activities]. She won't be able to do any of the pictures or anything like that. She's more for sound and for music. She's just learning how to point, but she can't tell the difference between objects. It's hard for me.*

### Make'n'Takes

Booths or tables with crafts or other little projects that children can make and take home are popular with some of these families. Examples they refer to include events at Fairytale Town in Sacramento, and the rubbing station in the toddler area at MBA. Conversation led to tip about crayons and parenting.

- *MBA rubbings... some kids are just flicking the spinner, some color. You can use it in different ways, and get a take-home if you want. [all agree]*
- *Get the triangle crayons, they don't break as easily and they can't roll across the floor.*
- *We reuse crayons. For my son [it's] better to break them because it forces him to hold it this way. [gestures correct finger position, all agree and admire his parenting technique]*
- *Good job dad!*

### Magnifiers, Flashlights, Bubbles

Magnifying small things on a big screen or with a magnifying glass is important for visitors with visual impairment. The tanks with magnifying glasses that slide over them at MBA, and the hand-held magnifiers attached to a computer screen at the Exploratorium were given as examples.

The coach for families dealing with ASD recommends using flashlights. Her clients enjoy using flashlights to look into dark boxes, for instance. It's fun and it can help calm them down. She also mentioned the flashlights with caps that shape the beam.



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Bubbles are a favorite of many children, but the slippery floor they can create is an issue that prevents some families from using bubble exhibits. One parent described a toy that you press to make bubbles come out – a great cause and effect activity, especially for a child that can't blow bubbles him/herself.

### **Mentor Program**

The evaluator encouraged participants to contact staff if they had any further thoughts to share after leaving the session. One participant contacted Tina after the session to suggest the idea of a mentor program for teens with special needs. Students with ASD often have areas of interest in which they gain some expertise, such as planets or animals. A program where these students could guide and share their interests with younger children “will be great.” The evaluator notes that this could be the type of bridge between typical and atypical people that the parents in this conversation have been striving for.

- *A Mentor programs for special needs preteens. We often have ASD individuals with specific interests, animals and planets are some of the common topic of interest. It will be great if the museum can offer an opportunity for these kids to guide and share their interest with younger kids. Let me know if you need me to elaborate.*

### **Reactions to Exhibit Ideas**

The evaluator and Tina asked for feedback on specific ideas about exhibits and interactivity. For ease of reading, some of these conversations are summarized rather than quoted.

### **Skulls & Teeth – Interactives**

Parents jumped into brainstorming about an exhibit activity in which children match the type of bite with the skull or jaw that would make it. It's important that whatever shows the bite be something that is not threatening or disturbing, i.e., an apple, not a person's arm or a cute animal. Matching animal sounds to the animal skull was also mentioned.

- *[Skulls and teeth are] scary in a cool way.*
- *It's hard to say sometimes what kids would find scary. [all agree] Children on the autism spectrum might be focussing on a piece of it that you could not focus on. And they won't get that it's a whole skull with teeth,[it] might not actually be perceived by them like we do as an adult and typical. [all agree]*




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## Dress up items

Dress up items can be fun, but parents were not very enthusiastic about them, in part because of the threat of lice. Because of the ever-present threat of lice, dress up pieces must not be worn on the head or require pulling over the head. Some fabrics, like the plastic/rubber fins in the MBA toddler area, are not conducive to lice. Other important design considerations include being able to use the dress up item without lifting the feet or removing shoes, and being able to take it off quickly (Velcro, not buttons). An alternate suggestion was to have a make'n'take hat-making activity.

- *[Dress up is] awesome except for lice. Most parents don't think about this, but I think about this. If I had to pick lice out of my autistic son's head we would be better to cut it off – [jokes, laughter... much discussion on this, it is a big deal]*
- *E: materials that are less likely to hold lice... wolf, dinosaur, vest, like explorers vest*
- *Giant suit that goes on from the front with Velcro up the back. No lifting up of feet.*
- *Keep shoes on. I can't help my toddler with shoes if my special needs kid is gone. [When it comes to] helping special needs kids with shoes, we need a bench.*

## Puppets

Parents and educators had a fun time brainstorming about a puppet activity, clearly finding it more interesting than dress up activities. They eventually struck on the idea of a diorama setting on which long snake puppets are fixed in place such that children can reach their whole arm into the puppet, but the puppet cannot be carried away. The puppet snakes can act out suggested activities in the diorama setting while a camera captures a video of the performance. The video can be streamed on the Museum's website and/or saved on line for the visitor to view when they get home.

This activity is appealing for several reasons. It is fun and physically engaging, and it includes cause and effect. The suggested actions for the snake performances can convey information about how snakes live. These parents report that many of their children are very interested in using the computer at home, so the video feature provides a home-based computer activity which is also a post-visit link to the Museum. An example of an online link from home mentioned by one parent was the Lego robots exhibit at the San Jose Art Museum wherein children could build a robot on site and take a photo of it to view from home on the Museum's website. That program was free to operate on Flickr.

Puppets brought to mind the idea of controlling the movement of models, e.g., a flying pterodactyl. Participants were reminded of an old JMZ activity in which visitors could create stop motion animation with dinosaur models. That was a favorite exhibit and parents were sorry that it had been removed from the gallery.



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When it comes to streaming videos, one parent recommended that JMZ get in touch with a new, local company that has produced Togetherville, a type of Facebook for children. The company is trying to partner with local business for video streaming services.

### **Natural Beehive**

Parents love the idea of a natural beehive and have several suggestions:

- Microphone and speakers to listen to the bees
- Bee voice device
- Footsteps to follow on the floor to do a bee dance
- Hand held magnifier that shows image on a large screen

### **Fluorescent Items**

A display of fluorescent minerals with a dial to control the lighting would be fun for these families. Parents were excited to learn that there also exist scorpions that fluoresce.

### **Goggles for Different Sight**

Tina described goggles that show the wearer how other animals see, e.g., faceted like fly eyes, or blue like a fish would see underwater. Parents like the idea of the visual experience, but strongly recommend against goggles, “no straps.” Holding something up to the face, like a screen on a stick, would be better than something to wear or wrap around the head.

### **Sounds of Nature**

Visitors can mix different sounds together to make audio-scapes. It can feature local sounds from around the neighborhood, under water in the stream exhibit, and the like. Parents like this idea and recommend streaming it on the Museum’s website. Availability on the website would make the sound-scapes available to help children plan and anticipate their visits.

### **Animal Constructions** (making webs & nests)

Parents really like the idea of building webs or nests and recommend using Wikki Stix, which are wax-covered strings that stick together easily. They would be simple and useful for web-





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making, by laying them over an image of a web. One parent notes that the Wikki Stix manufacturer is good to non-profits and suggests that JMZ contact the company for a donation.

### **Video Clips of Things in Nature**

Parents all agree that video clips which can be controlled with a dial, to go forward and backward at any speed would be great. It's a good cause and effect activity. They ask that the screen be large and the dial be accessible for people with CP or any type of challenge gripping.

### **Back-Lit Table or Display with Colorful Plastic Shapes**

- Parents like this idea. One describes a similar exhibit at The Tech: *...little acrylic squares, diamonds and triangles that fit together. When on a light table they're beautiful. It could be a learning thing, but they look nice you can stack them, build houses, etc. You can lay it down on top of overlays to match pieces [and shapes].*
- *JMZ can use shapes and repeating shapes in nature... patterns and sequencing...*
- *they're hard to break... multiple ages... there are flat ones like stained glass, or interlocking pieces...*
- *[You can] touch and remove things to see them closely, [they're] not just on the light table.*

### **A Display of Skulls and Their X-Rays**

This could be a matching activity, matching the x-rays to the skulls.

- all agree, suggest a human skull too... people volunteer images of their kids skulls... laughter
- *My daughter is interested in peeling away the layers. Like when she gets a cut, the blood comes out... So for anything, lifting the layers...*
- *E: so you lift the fur and there's the skin, the muscle, bone, etc. [agreement]*
- *It's a fine line between grotesque or scary, and really neat and interesting. The concept of how do you equalize or normalize the playing field so that a special needs kid and a typical kid are viewing something the same way, and how we are all similar just like we're all similar to animals we all have bones inside of us. [It's] another one of those subtle things where we are the same.*

### **Nature Theme**

- *I know my son is happiest when he has 40 acres and a fence way out there. He's happiest when he's around the least man-made things. Rocks, sticks, trees, rivers, those things make*





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*him happy. Play with those items looks the same for a special needs kid and a typical kid. Because a rock is a rock and so you can't – when there's a specialized toy, you can do it wrong. He can't do it wrong when he's out in nature because that's all there is. For me, just seeing "Curious by Nature," makes me really happy, because that's the place where my son is curious and it's an environment where he can succeed. So, natural type things are always the happiest for our family.*

### Rocks & Minerals

Parents imagine an activity where children sift and dig to find mineral or fossil samples that they can match to examples, label and take home. A tabletop design is better for access than something on the ground. Rather than sand, rice, beans or pea gravel are recommended for safety. And a floor covering, such as found in a commercial kitchen, is important to keep the area safe when beans fall out of the exhibit.

The conversation briefly touched on making an enclosed version of this with gloves that the visitor uses to reach into the environment and pick up the rocks. This did not seem very popular.

- *Gives them sensory input, fits in with their natural curiosity.*
- *Experiment with the different types of gravel so it feels nice, and is easy to dig.*
- *describe a glove box to access the sand... if it's thin enough material so you can feel the sand... feel like a scientist... hard to pick things up the gloves are thick and stiff...*

**Worm bin:** Feeding the worm bin, is this too gross?

- *They would love worms!*

### Pre- and Post-visit materials, e.g. play guide, social stories

These parents like and would use pre-visit materials to help their children plan and anticipate their time in the Museum. They referred back to the map(s) discussed earlier. Photos or illustrations, of exhibits that can be used with the PEC's systems would be especially helpful.

- *I like the idea of printing out the maps we were talking about earlier, that would be cool.*
- *Or the PEC's cards, using icons. If we could print that out before [a visit] I think that would be [good]. The pictures of exhibits, either photos or not, you can print them out in a grid. You can make a board maker; so they're 4x4 and you can use them like that or cut them out. They can be laminated and used with Velcro.*



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- *For each of the animals in the exhibit, it would be interesting if the kids could print out a photo or an outline for coloring after the visit, because the value of the exhibit extends beyond the time that they're here. "Oh, look there's the bobcat that you saw today, would you like to color it?"*
- *A parent teaching resource on the website.*

Tina describes a therapeutic play guide to download before attending. She has an example from the DuPage Children's museum in Illinois. Parents really like this idea and point out that such a thing being present on the website can contribute to boosting awareness among parents with typical children.

- *Parents are very interested, Where's that museum?*
- *And if a parent with no special needs kids sees that, they will have an awareness that they didn't have before. If they just saw that, that that was a pdf that they could click on, that means they have to acknowledge that those people exist. That alone breaks it down a little bit and make it's like we're just part of the community.*
- *T: we can also make it available at the Museum.*
- *You don't have to be known as "The Place That Takes Special Kids!" But any time there's another place where our kids can fit in, it's meaningful for us.*

### **Serving visitors with visual impairments** – are Braille or large print in the galleries helpful

The idea of using Braille in the exhibit was met with mixed reaction. It could be useful for some, but children often don't bother with labels anyway. Its presence would help awareness among sighted visitors, however. Increasingly, people have Braille printers, so including Braille versions of pre-visit materials should be considered. The Vista Center for the Blind stands ready to help.

- *My son doesn't use Braille, large print definitely he can. Lighting is an issue sometimes for kids with VI. And the audio. If you're showing a video/clip, if you could have the audio that describes what's happening on the screen, they get so much more out of it than just listening to the narrator and looking.*
- *Kids don't read the text, I'm not sure what the value of Braille would be, but we'd be happy to provide it.*
- *E: you might pilot it on a few pieces.*
- *We'd be happy to create a box (audio) and maybe for exercises for kids to play scavenger hunts or whatever.*
- *Braille might not be that useful to the younger kids, but it makes adults more aware; another language that people use. Talks about her daughter who reads Braille visually. There is very little adult awareness of visually impaired population.*



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- *The items to print out at home should be available in large print, and to Braille printer. The Vista Center for the Blind can possibly donate some CC TVs, microscopes that are hand held and put a large image up on screen. ...good for CP, all kids, not just kids with VI.*
- *For kids with poor vision, always have some interactive close up things to do. -email*

## Parent engagement & Education

As mentioned above, these parents and educators are actively thinking about how to help educate parents of typical children. Information and pre-visit materials on an institution's website can do that, if only by making other parents aware that special needs populations exist.

The educator from the Vista Center for the Blind would like to find ways for parents to understand, observe and appreciate the behaviors of children the way he does when he visits JMZ. The evaluator described a children's museum that has informational panels about early childhood development posted on lollipop signs next to seating near play areas.

- *I've brought a lot of students here myself, but from a completely different perspective. It's sort of fun to listen to the parents. We're a blind center and we have psychotherapists that work with the kids and teachers. A big part of our job is to understand the child. A fascinating thing for me when I bring a child here is to watch the child to see how the child interacts with the exhibits. I was trying to think of something to make that interesting to parents too.*
- *E: children's museum e.g., where they have panels near the seating for parents to point out behaviors, child development info. Could be a way to educate parents of all types of children...*
- *One thing that I get out of bringing students here that's kind of interesting: The students I bring here, we bring here because we notice some sort of deficit, that's part of our work. What we discover when we bring kids here is we discover strengths. And there are so many different kids of intelligence that you can notice. It can be social, the way they interact with people. I don't know any way of turning that into a feasible study. For example, some kids when you bring here don't want to touch anything, but some kids are natural explorers. I'm not sure if when you come to the museum you get...*
- *E: something to look at before visiting to help spot strengths? [conversation interrupted]*
- *So many of our problems come not from our children or from the environment, but from other people. So on your website, that would be another place where you could say, "We welcome all sorts of families, you might find children with visual impairment or autism..." so that other parents would see that. She describes feeling more comfortable if she would see that they named my child's disability. That it exists. One less barrier for me. [It's] a good way to make the parent feel more involved before they even get here. Discussion: naming the*



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specific disability might not be necessary, but this parent likes that. *Any time I see my kid's disability written down, I think that those people actually understand something. Rather than just having a picture with a wheel chair on it.*

**Most Important Point Made Today**

We wrapped up the group discussion with each participant recounting what they felt was the most important thing we had addressed. That JMZ is making an effort to be inclusive, even inviting parents and educators to share their experience and advice means the world to these participants, who left the table feeling grateful and loyal to the institution. This was one of the most powerful outcomes of the session.

Concern about crowds and how to educate other parents also rises to the top for these participants. It's very important for these families to find experiences that welcome all types of learners. Providing opportunities to model acceptance and good communication for parents of typical children is an important bonus.

- *Making an exhibit or something that is inclusive, and that you include every sub-population in the community, I think [that] right there you already have won. I know that a lot of schools are trying to look at how kids are similar, rather than their differences, [that] is a great thing, but we shouldn't forget that the kids do have [differences]. Like my son is visually impaired. He says he's visually impaired, he doesn't see very well. But to him, that doesn't make him different from his other friends. It's just who he is. So as long as we're sensitive to who that child really is, what characteristics they have, they're unique from somebody else, but [that] doesn't really make them that different. They can still do things that other kids do. They follow a different path, they get there at a different time, but they still do get there. Having something that facilitates that makes us parents feel good that we can bring our kids... I think that's fantastic. It doesn't really matter what it is that you're showing.*
- *The thing I kept hearing over and over again was what do we do about crowds and where the heck do we sit? This Museum doesn't have the same level of issue here, maybe a little more seating on the inside areas would be nice.*
- *There were so many things that were important. Having different activities for people to do, like the scavenger hunts and the maps. And to do audio/visual, I thought that was very important.*
- *E: so a little bit of structure to the visit.*
- *Yes, incorporated for everybody.*



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- *One thing that occurs to me is that this [museum is] perfect for doing this. It's just the right size. It's such a good variety of stimuli in a small area. It's just wonderful of you to undertake this. When it comes to different kinds of abilities, it's such a broad spectrum of different abilities and different needs, it's hard to meet them all, but I think that your making an effort is just terrific.*
- *I heard a lot of parent concerns, and mine too has been, when you're out in public and how do people receive you. Just a lot of staff training on sitting back and taking data and modeling that inclusive community that we're all shooting for. So that the person that's working here is saying, "ok, we're all going to take a turn," or, "it looks like it's hard for him to wait, maybe we'll let him go first..." So you have the staff person modeling that for the families. Sometimes what happens is you get the special kid parent and the typical kid parent and that friction is occurring and I think that [modeling] could help.*
- *Our biggest hurdle is always other people. Not necessarily what we're looking at. That's always going to be the biggest \_\_, whether it's in a crowd or taking up someone's space. So I think the modeling is really important. Having the physical environment have enough physical room for us to get through both emotionally and physically... I just have to say, I think I can say for all of us, how much we appreciate you even asking. Just the fact that you asked, even if you don't accomplish one-eighth of what you plan on doing. The fact that you bothered to ask means that this is available to me again. We just have so many places that don't care or don't bother. Maybe it's just benign neglect, but the fact that you asked is really important to us as a community. [all agree] It's huge.*

## Recommendations for Researchers

Families with special needs face challenges, not only in visiting museums, but when participating in other activities as well, such as attending this group discussion. Because of their children's special situations, participating parents may have difficulty arriving on time, or may have to leave early. For this focus group, several parents arrived late, and some had to leave early because their children needed them. One parent had her one-on-one, autistic child with her in the session, because their caregiver called in sick that day. She was able to be present for part of the session.

Of course, appropriate programming for children and their caregiver(s) is mandatory to accommodate families with special needs while parents participate in a separate activity, like this conversation. Refreshments are necessary; ask participants in advance if they have food restrictions or allergies.

JMZ staff and the evaluator offer these suggestions when doing visitor studies with populations that have special needs.



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- Consider planning the Focus Group for a time when the Museum is closed. The second parent, or caregiver and the children would have an opportunity to enjoy the museum without the regular crowds. Parents indicated that a special visit like this has huge appeal, and you would likely attract more participants. Also, if you have other team members in the Museum, they could observe families and collect more data.
- Ask participants to arrive 15 minutes prior to the actual session start time.
- Invite a few more participants than you would when working with a typical population to help ensure that you have a good turnout.
- It might be helpful to plan on a shorter session (90 minutes rather than the more common two hours) to accommodate families whose children can't be away from their parents for a long period. The downside of this, however, could be shortened access to parents who arrive late or have to leave early.
- Have a paper survey instrument available for parents who may need to leave before being able to contribute to the conversation.
- Be flexible. A child might need to stay close to their parent.
- Have food and beverages available. Ask about food restrictions in advance.
- Ask about other accommodations in advance.
- Ask organizations to post or email the invitation to their clients. You will be more likely to get committed participants who want to stay involved in the project beyond the focus group. If you have partnered with an organization and are meeting with them regularly, they will recruit participants for you.
- Offer a facilitated program for children. Have more staff or volunteers than are typically needed. Kids will be of mixed ages and abilities, requiring more supervision. Request that an adult accompany the child if they normally require an aide.