

New Junior Museum & Zoo Initiative Inclusion and Accessibility Plan

Community Conversations with
Families with Special Needs

Palo Alto Junior Museum & Zoo

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- *I'm genuinely happy that the museum is undertaking this, making this place that's so beloved by the community current with the world that we live in nowadays, and updating it, and also incorporating everything that it can do better. I think it's great.*
- *So you guys are the first place that I've seen that is really putting this into practice. I think you guys are a leader in this space, and you should really own that and use that, and let other people start to follow behind you.*
- *I think the most important point that's come up is how hard you guys are working to include both types of children, and I think if you just keep that in your mission statement and your signage ... every facility should be striving for this.*
- *I'm very pleased to be here, and giving me a chance to participate in this kind of a conversation... You consider us and our inputs when you're designing the new ones. So I think that is very good - or a great start to change the world.*



Introduction

The Palo Alto Junior Museum and Zoo (JMZ) is working to create an accessible facility from the ground up as they plan for a new building, zoo habitats, and exhibits. During construction of the new JMZ the institution will occupy a temporary space in Palo Alto. The new JMZ is scheduled to open in 2019.

To inform their planning process, Tina Keegan, Exhibits Director at JMZ, contracted with Wendy Meluch of Visitor Studies Services (the evaluator) to conduct community conversation with two groups of parents on site at the Museum. Staff reached out to JMZ members and visitors, and local organizations to invite parents of children with special needs to participate. They structured two groups, one with families who have children with autism, and one with families who have children with a wide range of physical and cognitive disabilities. While parents met with the evaluator, staff provided hands-on, educational programming and snacks to the children and their caregivers.

These group interviews build on the JMZ's earlier efforts to include special-needs families in the Curious by Nature Project. In 2010, the evaluator conducted one community conversation with families of children with special needs. The current interviews confirmed findings of the 2010 interview and enabled us to dig deeper, and listen to a wider range of concerns and needs from this diverse audience.

The institution's intimate nature, good design and warm staff have established it as a welcoming venue for all types of learners. Over the past decade, the JMZ has developed an audience in this community of often close-knit friends and organizations. JMZ has a history of successful collaborations with Abilities United and PACE (Pacific Autism Center for Education) in which disabled adults volunteered in the Zoo on a weekly basis

This report includes extensive quotations from the both of the 90-minute discussions to give the reader a more nuanced sense of these participants' experiences and needs than a summary can provide. Minor corrections have been made and extraneous language has been removed for ease of reading.

Resources and Terms Mentioned by Parents

People 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*, *neurologically typical* or *neurotypical*.

Sun Camp is a summer camp for children with Down Syndrome and their siblings. It takes place in Mitchell Park. It takes into consideration the needs of typical children as well as special needs, which range from mild to severe.

Proprioceptive feedback. In everyday activities we depend on signals coming from our moving bodies to be able to respond to the space around us and react rapidly in changing circumstances. Much of this knowledge about position and movement of the limbs and trunk is provided by sensations arising in proprioceptors.¹

Silicon Valley Down Syndrome Connection.

¹ American Physiological Society, <http://physrev.physiology.org/content/92/4/1651>



Summary Findings

These group interviews confirmed key findings of the session conducted in 2010 for the Curious by Nature project, and more deeply explored several areas of interest including quiet spaces for respite, bathroom needs, wheelchair accommodations, accessible exhibitry, and ways in which museum staff can support visiting families with special needs. Participants in these sessions also reviewed and reflected on plans for the new JMZ.

In these groups, and in 2010, the most important part of the discussion for almost every single parent participant was the fact that JMZ is listening to the community, and working hard to accommodate people of all abilities. They are deeply appreciative of the Museum's efforts and see it as a leader in the field.

As we found in 2010, looming larger than any other barrier for families with children who have special needs is the socialscape. These parents are very sensitive to the need to educate families with neurotypical children about the presence and needs of families with atypical members. They spoke about this often, but gave it somewhat less emphasis than parents in the 2010 study. This could be indicative of greater awareness and recognition of special needs broadly in society. Parents in these two groups gave much attention to another part of the socialscape, museum staff, and to space for respite as a means of escaping the crowds.

Well-trained staff can offer valuable support for visitors with special needs directly and indirectly. Direct contact with the right type of personnel for programming or animal encounters is profoundly impactful on children with special needs and their families. The JMZ's Zookeeper Lee exemplifies the perfect facilitator for people with special needs; she is patient, empathetic, positive and willing to meet people on their level physically and intellectually. Staff can also assist visitors with special needs indirectly by helping them navigate the busy socialscape to access exhibits, something wheelchair users are especially vocal about.

A critical part of tolerating crowds is having a quiet place of respite. Disney and shopping malls are said to have dedicated spaces for this. JMZ and CuriOdyssey have spaces that serve well for this, including JMZ's snacking area behind the bee yard, and the frog sculpture area in the Zoo. Parents listed several types of features that could help their children calm down and regroup, including plants, water sounds, and quiet observing and listening activities. Certain types of physical stimulation are especially helpful to autistic children, such as beanbag chairs, which provide proprioceptive feedback.

Quiet and baby rooms can frustrate families with special needs. Rooms intended for very young children, such as the toddler space on the second floor of the San Jose Discovery Museum, are often developmentally appropriate for older children, but not available to them. Rooms for babies and nursing mothers cannot double as cool-off spaces for children with disabilities.

Chief among safety concerns for parents in these groups is children who are flight risks; they need contained spaces. Having "kid leashes" available could be useful for some parents. Confined spaces, such as the weaver birdcage exhibit, are a source of terror for parents who can't reach into them if a child begins to have trouble. Another critical safety issue, but for a smaller number of people, is the risk of contagion for immunosuppressed family members.

Parents whose children have special needs have extra needs when it comes to bathroom facilities. Key features are that they require are a way to contain all children while one is being tended to, such as locking family bathrooms, a changing table suitable for large children and young adults, and facilities for large-scale cleanup.



These dedicated parents had many thoughts about making exhibits accessible to children with a range of needs. Visually impaired people need help to understand what they are looking at, particularly in zoo habitats. Parents discussed using iPads to take pictures and enlarge them, featuring large lenses in exhibit designs, including carvings or sculptures of animals, and providing signage with high-contrast photographs of animals and no other visual clutter. Blind or visually impaired people who are otherwise neurotypical can make use of sound features, such as a decorative water fountain, to orient themselves in a space. Audio components are supportive of people with limited vision and people who cannot read or whose reading is delayed. Many children with special-needs are fascinated by texture, so pelts provide an engaging experience. Wheelchair users have a difficult time getting near exhibits because of the crowd of visitors flowing around the chair, and because the chair itself. Special-needs wheelchairs are often larger than regular wheelchairs, and the position of the user, such as being reclined, can complicate visibility. Railings and bars in front of or around exhibits can also present visual barriers for wheelchair users who cannot adjust their position to see around them.

Participants in these group interviews were excited about the plans for the new JMZ, though the Zoo renderings were somewhat difficult to interpret. Discussion of the new Zoo's tri-level layout and possible catwalk brought to the fore issues of traffic flow (will there be an elevator for wheelchairs, or will they have to turn around to get back to the main level?) and safety (will I be able to find my children in a dead-end path, or will I lose track of them as they reach a different level ahead of me?). Though parents need to have line of sight and know that their children are safe, they also want their children to be able to explore a bit on their own to experience independence. This is why JMZ has been popular with special-needs families, it's scaled for this level of safe freedom, and the space is contained so children can't wander out of the Zoo onto the street.

Controlled animal encounters are very powerful and beneficial for children with special needs. Several parents had compelling stories about animal encounters, including at JMZ with Zookeeper Lee. *Loose in the Zoo* animals, however, are a source of concern for some families. Uncontrolled or surprising movement, and eye contact with animals can be disconcerting for some children and adults. Exposure to feathers, skin or feces is extremely dangerous for immunosuppressed people. Mitigations suggested by these parents included offering times when no animals are loose, or providing a space within or with visual access to the zoo area, but which has no loose animals.

Other reactions and suggestions about the new JMZ touched on the following.

- Keep the rainbow bridge and the stumps at the entry.
- Parking is too limited and should include more accessible parking spaces. All accessible parking spaces should be wide enough to accommodate van ramps.
- Penguins are too smelly for some children, unless they are behind glass such as the exhibit at the California Academy of Sciences. These families avoid certain zoos, or areas within zoos, because of the smell. They appreciate JMZ for the fact that it is not stinky.
- The two-story ball machine is very exciting. Parents mused about creating an accessible space inside so wheelchair users can be surrounded by the action.
- Social groups often have more than one wheelchair user so all areas and elevators need to be spacious.
- Features for typical children, such as the crawl-in geode, should also have a version for children in wheelchairs or with other mobility issues.



Participant Profiles

In total, 20 families participated in these two group interviews; 10 in each group. One parent per family joined the group interview with the evaluator and Tina Keegan. Included among them was the Director of Programs at the Vista Center for the Blind. Most participants had been to the JMZ with their families prior to the meeting.

Several families in each group had neurologically typical children as well as a child with special needs. Children's ages ranged from infant to young adult. The ten families represented by parents in the first group all had one child on the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Several of those children had additional diagnoses of Down Syndrome or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The ten families in the second group included a variety of physical and cognitive disabilities. Most of them had multiple issues.

- Autism and Down Syndrome
- Brain injury, ambulatory, global delay
- Cerebral Palsy, confined to wheelchair, vision impairment, tube-fed, 24/7 care
- Cerebral Palsy, uses wheelchair or walker, immunosuppressed, global delays, non-verbal (uses iPad to communicate),
- Cerebral Palsy, visual impairment, hearing loss, and “multiple other things”
- Down Syndrome
- Global delays including fine motor and speech, cognitive impairment
- Septo-optic dysplasia (midline brain abnormalities) vision impairment, partially deaf
- Undiagnosed delayed development
- Vision impairment

Museum Experiences

Planning an Outing

Families who have children with autism make more outings than most of the families in the second group which are dealing with a wide range of issues including limited mobility and impaired vision. All families are concerned about crowds when anticipating an outing. Families whose children use wheelchairs or walkers are also focused on accessibility. At least one parent checks on bathroom facilities as a part of selecting a place to visit. They rely on word of mouth, websites and Yelp reviews to inform their planning process.

Socialscape – Crowds

One of the very first things that these parents consider when contemplating an outing with their child(ren) is the crowd, “how many people are going to be there?” Closely associated with crowds are the need for a place for respite from the crowds, and the need for staff support. Please see Space for Respite and Socialscape – Staff below for more information.

For families with special needs, crowds can be more than an inconvenience. They can make a visit impossible because of noise or other triggers that unnerve children with autism. The flow of visitors pressing to see exhibits can prevent wheelchairs from negotiating the space and reaching the exhibits. For many children who move slowly or walk with assistance, rushing crowds present physical danger and are frightening.



Space for Respite

Families who have children with autism tend to be the most concerned about having a quiet space to escape to if the crowds or other stimulation become overwhelming. This is a primary concern for them when choosing or planning a family outing.

- *I think it's also really important if there are areas that people can be able to go off to. [agreement around the table] Because that's one of the biggest things. Because there's a lot of people there, and that's really overwhelming, being able to have a quiet space [is important]. I know that lots of amusement parks actually do that. So they'll have a little place where parents and families can go and kind of just detox from—or at least that's how I feel that it is for my child, is to detox from all of that sensory overload.*

Participants had several examples of quiet spaces that they use with their families. Theme parks and malls commonly have family rooms available. At JMZ the snacking area behind the bee yard is useful because it has a place to sit and there isn't much activity or traffic. Similarly, the frog sculpture area in the zoo is off the beaten path and serves as a cool-down spot. The floor plan and back hallway with exhibit offerings at nearby CuriOdyssey naturally create quieter areas where children can calm down with quiet, engaging observation activities.

- *It's kind of like the mall. They have a family room, they call it now. They have a TV and they have a couch and sinks, someplace to just go [and chill out].*
- *I love the one right here next to the bees, because it's not that interesting. So there's not a lot of people going in there. It's always quiet and cool, and there's just a bench. [Agreement around the table: Quiet and nothing there, yeah.]*
- *The frog place, too. That's where my kids go when my son starts to get overwhelmed. He'll just go sit on a frog or start climbing on them, and it's just like there we go. It's perfect over there.*
- *[At CuriOdyssey] there's a section that goes around where their auditorium is, and there are rooms like this. Those little hallways have quieter toys. It's more like the fog machine and stuff. So the kids aren't loud there. They're mostly just observing. There's some bees and quiet things. So that whole L shape is quiet, because it's away from -It's like a wide hallway.*

In addition to offering quiet spaces, soothing sensorial features can be helpful in spaces for respite. Plants, water sounds, aquaria were all mentioned. Note that while some stimuli can be calming for some people, such as water sounds, they can be triggers or nuisances for other people.

- *Plants, having plants, like a dense greenery. I don't know what—maybe it just quiets the whole place down. [Agreement around the table: It kind of dampens the sound.] It doesn't have to have bright flowers, just green. It just helps calm them down.*
- *He likes to hear the sound, the sound of water. The sound can soothe him and make him engage in that area. Something he probably doesn't know, he did not remember, but the sound of water, that will attract him and then make him have a good memory.*

Specific types of physical stimulation can help people with autism calm themselves. Enclosed spaces and physical closeness, such as beanbags which can envelope a person, are effective. Similarly, the motion of a rocking chair or spinning can be soothing. Closeness, rocking and spinning provide proprioceptive feedback which enables us to navigate our physical world.

- *For my son, he likes little enclosed places like the egg chairs where they go and sit on their own. It's this little enclosed place for them. So something like that often helps them regulate themselves.*



- *Part of things that I've learned from having my daughter in occupational therapy, or OT, is the proprioceptive sensory [stimulus], which some kids really need a lot of help with. So I found that beanbags, like something that can have pressure on them or squish them, so things like squishy chairs. ... If you have to have lots of beanbags for them to kind of just lay on or roll around in. Kids like beanbags anyway, so I think that usually really helps as well.*
- *...at OT they have something that spins. So I would say if it's going to be built a lot bigger, maybe there'll be a place for proprioceptive feedback. They could spin or—he loves the spider webs, but he gets over it in like three seconds, because he's more of a spinner. ...just something else that would be a way to get back down and then he can explore the museum again.*

The Children's Discovery Museum in San Jose has an exhibit room for children up to age four and their parents. These parents like that space, and so do their children who are chronologically too old to use it yet still find it developmentally appropriate for their older child. They suggest using “developmental age” to increase access to such facilities for families with special needs.

- *[There is a room at Children's Discovery Museum] upstairs, and my eight-year-old loves it, but he's eight, and he can't go in there anymore. On the special needs nights they open it up to everyone, but when we go there on a regular time he can't go in there. [moderator: So one way to control that social scape is like the Super Sundays here.] Yeah, but I think there should a maybe mentally—the thing is, when you're going by physical age, I know an 18-year-old who is on the autism spectrum, and he's happy doing things that a nine-year-old does.*

Disney has a baby room which several of these parents have used and appreciated. Babies and nursing mothers need respite, as do children with special needs, but separate accommodations are necessary to meet their different situations and sensibilities.

Group conversation:

- *If it's a babies' room, I'm hesitant to go in with my kid. The other typical kids' parents, maybe not, but I feel like they think I'm not eligible to use their place.*
- *Tina: It might be better to have a separate quiet room or chill-out zone.*
- *If you have an infant, and suddenly there's this ten-year-old kid coming in, you're like, what about my baby?*
- *Tina: Well, mostly what I'm thinking of is if that ten-year-old needs a cool-down period—*
- *And the baby's crying.*
- *Tina: Then that is stressful for the parent of the ten-year-old. They feel like they're invading somebody's space. So it may be better to have a separate quiet zone, which is possible, or several quiet zones throughout our museum, although I like your idea of trying to get it to do double duty. That might be better.*
- *Then the quiet room you have like options where you can do different sounds or fiber optics or bubbles. You know how they've got the water bubble thing to relax kids? It's like different options depending on the child. Also kind of like a padded room so they won't hurt themselves.*
- *I know fish usually have a calming effect on anybody. That might be a nice area for a fish exhibit.*

Safe Spaces

Whether spaces are designated for “young” visitors or babies, all of them need to be safe. Parents are sensitive to spaces that can contain children who are flight risks; some children are also sensitive to open spaces with lots of activity and feel more comfortable in a finite and controlled space. Safe, controlled spaces are sometimes that way by design, but sometimes they are areas which parents identify on their own and use to hem in their children. When the openness of the Exploratorium overwhelmed one mother



trying to track her son who is a “big darter,” she called her husband to leave work and join them at the Museum to help track the kids.

- *For instance, the art room [in The Wonder Cabinet exhibit at the Children’s Discovery Museum in San Jose] is fantastic. It has a little half-door, so my children can open it, but it’s a visually-enclosed space. There’s not children that are running up behind them that they don’t see. It’s easier to be within a space—even if it’s crowded—if you can expect what’s coming. So having that little half-door that’s closed really helps my daughter feel in control of the small room and that smaller situation, because in there I see her having a better experience than [at the] sand table area right next to it that does not have a door.*
- *I walked in [to the Exploratorium] and it was very, very open, and that was the first time I realized he was a darter. Thank God my daughter is very good, and she just kind of followed us around. But I ended up calling my husband. He was working in San Francisco. “[You have to] get to the museum,” and then when he gets there everything looks calm, because I found there’s a place in there where you can build on the wall where marbles go down. It’s kind of like a nook. It’s closed off to one side, so there’s big walls where you can build on, and it’s facing towards the outside. So when you walk in it’s like a very safe place, and you can structure yourself so you’re closed in so no one can dart. My son’s a big darter, so that was like the perfect spot.*

Some children are flight risks which is especially hard on parents with multiple kids. Physically contained spaces are helpful, but in open spaces parents need help to prevent the terrifying possibility of losing track of a child with special needs. One parent noted that some museums have weighted vests available to borrow and wondered about offering “kid leashes” as well. There was agreement at the table that Disney is very good at finding and returning lost children.

- *...what makes it challenging for us to go to museums, especially bigger ones, is that my daughter is really fast on her feet. She doesn’t realize when she wanders off too far from us, or she’s not even aware, she’s not afraid. So we’re constantly worried about losing her. We have a little bracelet with her name on there, but we just wonder, since her language isn’t so good, if she did get lost, how would we find her again? How would the museum staff deal with that? Would they be prepared to help with that? So that’s always a worry for us. We’re always tag-teaming [unintelligible], because we have a son, too. He’s typical, and you just try to sometimes concentrate on something with him, but then she’s gone. It’s always good to go with two parents so one parent can always watch my daughter.*

For these parents, spaces for young people work best when parental presence is required. That way they can focus on their own child and not have to monitor others as well. The California Academy of Sciences does this well in their exhibit, Early Explorer’s Cove, for young children. A mother of twins pointed out that a policy of one parent per each child would prohibit her from using such a space.

- *I would definitely say that Cal Academy of Science in San Francisco is really good about that. They have this section where it’s just like a mini science lab. So they have tables and chairs, and then they have one more section where it’s also closed off, and you have to take off your shoes. In there, it says that at least one parent per child. So the parent always has to be there. I think that it can’t be stressed enough... So that’s what I really like about it, is that they stress that your child always has to be under supervision, just like Gymboree, same thing.*

While contained spaces can be helpful, confined spaces are problematic, even terrifying. Tunnels and similar small places for children which parents cannot enter or reach easily are very worrisome for parents of children with special needs. Visual access into such a structure is only marginally helpful because



quick physical access is the key if a child begins to have a meltdown or some other difficulty. Several parents had first-hand horror stories about children getting stuck in small places.

- *So kids are moving in and out a lot more frequently, and as those kids are moving and running, which I understand some children need to do, it's just less predictable for my daughter. So it's harder without those enclosed spaces. That said, when you start thinking about the really small enclosed spaces just for the children, that gets really hard for us. So in that same area there's like a tunnel that the children can go through, which is— [Agreement around the table: I hate that.] —horrible. You can't see the kids. There's a three-year-old with autism running through there, and a typical four-year-old steals something away and there's massive meltdowns, and you can't even see what's happening.*
- *I think it was the Reno Children's Museum. It might have been Las Vegas. I don't know. But basically it was made out of wires and it had different platforms. So it was like you were climbing in the clouds. But there was a dead-end point, and if you get stuck and you're a story and a half off the ground—. It was big enough I could go in there, but that was stressful, because he's freaking out because he's stuck.*

Safety considerations for all parents include cleanliness, but this is especially critical for people dealing with immunosuppressed family members. Participants were interested to learn about the cleaning schedule at JMZ.

Socialscape – Staff

These families feel strongly that well-trained staff can play a critical role in supporting them during a visit to a museum or other entertainment venue. They hope for thorough staff training to become the norm, but universally they do not expect to find it when making an outing with their families.

- *I don't expect to go into some sort of activities at a museum and expect the person running it to know. So usually if it's something that I feel like my son might have trouble with, I just won't take him to it, because I don't expect them to be able to accommodate that. [Moderator: So if the museum did have staff that were well-trained, they should let you know.] Yeah. I think if we get to a point where we expect all museum staff to actually know this, it would be great, but at this point I don't expect anybody.*

Children with special needs, and wheelchair users often get pushed aside, or stuck by the flow of visitors walking around them and crowding to see an exhibit. Parents would appreciate proactive help from staff to manage the flow of visitors and otherwise lend assistance when needed. Staff can play an active role in supporting parents by being a “buffer” when their children with autism are having difficulty, e.g., manage the concerned visitors while mom gathers up and removes the child. They recognize that training is essential so these facilitators can communicate with visitors effectively and without offending them. The diversity of languages among visitors is another consideration for type of facilitation.

- *. If they see that there's somebody that's struggling or something's happening, if you guys can just recognize that and say, "Hey, do you need a spot over here to the side," or, "Can I grab an animal and help focus your kids?" or something like that, that could be very helpful.*
- *...other typical kids tend to push our kids around a lot, even in the playground. Maybe there would be some way to communicate to the typical crowd that, you know, let's be respectful of other people who are also at the event and enjoying it. I don't know how to convey this to other parents, but it's really sad that a two-year-old can come and push my son away from where he is, and my son is like he*



doesn't know what to do. Then there's a crowd of children just going past, and he's like, okay, fine. He just gives up and walks away.

- *... it would be really cool at any museum if there were staff who could be hovering or moving around and trying to coordinate or help somebody who has something like a wheelchair or a child who can't get to the front. Maybe they could coordinate moving them there. Like kindly making a space for them at some point, getting them up there. Facilitating. So if it's just crowded with people, maybe they could be like, "Okay. Can you wait? I'm going to get them in, let them see it, and then get them out," just to coordinate. It might be more helpful to families, because you do have to fight for your kid, and after a while it's like I'm tired of— [Agreement around the table: Is it worth it?] Yeah.*
- *Training staff to act as a buffer for parents of autistic children rather than trying to help directly with the kid. It takes me about 30 seconds to pick up my own self-injuring or melting down autistic kid, but that's a lot harder when I have to also simultaneously be the calm voice telling other curious nearby children, "She's going to be OK. She's having a hard time and we need to go now. Excuse me, I don't want you getting kicked in the head." Or worse, when I get pushback from kids or especially parents if, for example, I need them to step back from an enticing exhibit so that they don't get kicked while I remove my child. Ideally, a nearby staff member could ask me what they could do to help me and/or just act as a crowd blocker, asking other children to step back from the exhibit and reassuring them that they will indeed get a turn in a minute, so that I can focus only on my own child in the moment.*

Good examples of staff interaction with children who have special needs included Great America and the JMZ. One mother shared a story about personnel at Great America allowing her son to take a second trip on one of the rides in the same car without leaving it to wait in line for another turn. They also assisted her with waiting in the cue for a third ride because she explained that she wants him to learn about taking turns. Super Family Sundays, and Zookeeper Lee in particular, get high marks from parents who have brought their children to JMZ. What makes Lee, and other adults effective with children of varying abilities is patience, empathy, a calm, positive approach, and a willingness to meet the children at their level physically and cognitively.

- *Actually, one of our best experiences has been at Great America. I never thought that would be one of the best experiences for us, but when we go to the younger kids' section where they have the rides and all, those people are really sensitive to our kids. Sometimes my son didn't want to get up from the ride. He would throw a tantrum to come out of the ride, and they were like, "Oh, it's okay. Let him stay there." ... After the second round, same ride, there were more kids standing—because we told him we want him to learn to come out of the ride and stand in the queue – so they were actually like, "Oh, let's go stand in the queue and you can come in again." So instead of me trying to get my son out where he's screaming and throwing a fit, he's more ready to go stand in the queue, and again, sit in the same car, exactly the same car.*
- *Zookeeper Lee is amazing. So coming out for Super Family Sunday was great, just because it was so much calmer, just the very low body, calm. She's both exciting and kind of deliberate and slow in everything. She's awesome. It's hard to describe exactly what it is, but when people just very naturally and easily connect with children, it's just something you can see, and those are the people that always work best with children. You can just see it.*
- *Part of it is [getting to their level], for example, for my daughter, speaking to her, she doesn't really hear words, because they kind of just go into the ether, like go into the air. So being able to just be there physically, that helps a lot as well. So that closeness, some kids don't like closeness, but some do. My daughter does, and enjoys when someone can be actually physically down and sitting with her or something like that.*



Educating Other Parents and People

Parents of children with special needs are eager for other parents to be aware of and understanding about their circumstances. Museums can help with messaging about respect for people of varying abilities through indirect and direct means. Information on the website and printed materials to make visitors aware of services available for families with special needs indirectly lets other families know that this audience is welcome and supported. Messaging can be more direct as well, with statements about accepting all types of learners.

- *I was actually about to say that Disneyland specifically actually, that's where I saw it. They actually said, "Do you have a special needs kid? We actually offer special needs services." I had no idea ...they had offered that, and when I saw that, it actually almost made me cry. Actually, it did make me cry. I felt like, oh my God, I felt like everywhere else they don't include everyone, and yet Disneyland, this huge establishment, does. That made me feel so happy. They didn't even need to have your child be diagnosed. It just says that if you need a place to chill out, that they had those rooms, too. So I thought that was something that really resonates as a parent to know, even if it's not specifically special needs, that you can still brand it as just like a chill-out zone.*
- *I was thinking that people don't always read it the first time, but if there's a little blurb on the map of the museum or something that just says, "Here's some things that we're doing for special-needs families, and here's how you can help out," or something.*
- *Or explicitly stating that you do want people to stay with their children and watching their children. Just like you're saying, ____, it's a lot easier when people are watching their own children. If that was just stated somewhere, like you've got actually be looking at your children, but people are more likely to follow the direction.*

The public school system was cited as an effective agent of education and inclusivity. The Magical Bridge playground is widely recognized as a wonderful facility for disabled children, but somehow the messaging falls short. Though people know that it was designed for families with special needs (through signage and reputation), neurotypical families use it so much that the intended audience cannot access it. At playgrounds and in museums, these parents are frustrated when other parents are not attending their own children to help negotiate their interactions.

- *So far I feel like the public school system ... is really the community place or the neighborhood place where we can expect the whole staff and the teachers are willing to educate other parents who are in the [community itself]. Again, the inclusion is the Palo Alto School District's main focus, so that they can expose these special-needs families are natural as possible. Other than that I cannot really pinpoint which place really does. But I, as an individual myself, I try to be the advocate of this situation.*
- *But it doesn't actually work out, because we come there more often than here, because my son wants to run around. It's nice, and it's sad in some ways, because typical parents of typical children who are two to four years old will also leave them, and moms will be talking in one place. You cannot a two-year-old for pushing away somebody else, but all that pushing and all that happens, and nobody's there. There's nobody there to—if you want to tell, "Oh, could you please ask your son or daughter not to push other kids?" there's nobody there to talk to. You don't know who is their parents.*

Several parents described ways in which they educate other parents. Conversations at the playground while watching children play is an easy way to talk about special needs. A healthcare professional in the second group interview talks with parents who are anxious about treatment to let them know that she understands anxiety because of her special child's condition, etc.



- *It's usually just a conversation. That's how it starts. They'll notice the different behavior, and then you'll talk about it, if the parents are paying attention. Like you said, people tend to tea-party when they go to events. The adults will go here and the kids will go here, and everybody's having fun, (everyone else), but when you have a special needs kid you're hyper-focused on them, because God knows what's going to happen. If you have parents that you notice are paying attention to their kids too, and you see the different behaviors, you can start to talk about it. ... Sometimes the other parents, they're noticing what's going on. Maybe they have suspicions about their own kids. Sometimes it starts that way too, and then you just go down that road.*
- *I'm a dentist, so sometimes it's surprising to make a conversation with my own patient that I've known for a while and built already a relationship with. When I openly talk about it, "I have a special child, so I know how it feels when somebody's really anxious," then they really open up the conversation, and I [unintelligible] to know that they have own special needs child, and we talk. Some people, they don't have any special needs family or children, but they're very happy to be educated and know of the situations.*

Bathrooms

Bathroom facilities are a focus for any parent of young children, but they take on more importance for parents with children who have special needs. A family bathroom which can be locked is best for parents who have more than one child; they can assist one child knowing that the other cannot escape. Large individual stalls are also useful when a parent has to assist a child using the toilet or changing a diaper.

Location is important too. Having restrooms near the entrance exaggerates the importance of being able to lock children in with the parent. Alternate restrooms inside the facility are convenient and can be visited without nearing the exit and potentially shortening the visit. A family restroom on the second floor of the new JMZ would be greatly appreciated.

Older children who use diapers or pullups need help changing and getting clean. Standard pull-down changing tables are not large or strong enough for them. Parents described restrooms at other facilities which have large benches that can serve as changing tables for larger people. Some sort of shower facility would be welcome when children need a bigger cleanup.

- *The second thing with that, too, is a lot of special-needs children are still in pull-ups when they're however old they are. One thing that's fantastic at the Children's Discovery Museum is there is just a big tile bench. It just looks like a bench, but if I need to change a four-year-old's poopy diaper, that works. Because I can't use a changing table, necessarily.*
- *That's a really good point. My son is four, and he just got potty-trained, and trying to change him in public, up until this point, was almost impossible. It would be the most frustrating thing. That's a really good point.*

JMZ's current bathroom facilities are greatly lacking. These parents were very happy to learn that they are allowed to use the men's room which is more accessible. They plan to take advantage of that as necessary. Signage would make it easier for moms to use the men's room because people in line at the ladies room won't assume they are just being impatient.

Visual Impairment

Several parents had a lot of information about the challenges facing visitors with visual impairment, and how to help them use the space as well as access exhibits. To support people with impaired vision



navigate through space, steps and grade changes on the floor need to be marked with yellow or white lines.

- *So I think especially for children with—and a lot of kids have visual—my son can see. It's not like he cannot see, but he has lots of issues. He cannot focus, he has strabismus, he has nystagmus. So he sees double, he cannot tell where is up and down if there's a gradation. If there's a rocky area, he comes to a halt. He doesn't know whether it's going to be stable enough for him to walk on it or not.*

Many people who are blind or visually impaired are otherwise neurotypical. For them, overstimulation is not a problem, in fact they need more stimulation. A constant source of sound, such as a water feature, can help people who are blind or visually impaired orient themselves to a space and navigate it more easily.

- *I was just going to mention sometimes using your other senses is good. If there's a sound source in the museum, it's always in the same spot, like a decorative fountain or something. So students who are vision-impaired can be oriented more easily to where they are. ... That's comforting for a lot of our students.*

Parents described several tools and techniques which help their visually impaired children understand and see what is on exhibit. The woman whose son uses an iPad to take and enlarge pictures of the animals in the habitats, recommended incorporating large lenses into exhibit designs. One parent described the aquaria at the Monterey Bay Aquarium where animals swim right up to the glass where children can see them. Fast or slow movement can be easily visible or invisible to people depending on the nature of their visual impairment, but high contrast seems to be universally helpful.

- *Well, actually some of the windowed stuff where they have water and the animals swim right up to the front of the window, I don't know how you could get much better than that.*

Three-dimensional models or deep carvings of animals in the enclosures, and touchable pelts are helpful and exciting. Several children in these families are very engaged by texture; this was not limited to children with visual limitations.

- *I have little flashcards, and every card has an animal with a texture. Oh my gosh, both my kids really—but especially [my son with autism]. He loves to touch. He might be making those associations. I don't know, but that might make him more engaged and more wanting to participate.*

Regarding signage and labels, high contrast and a lack of visual clutter are critical to support visually impaired visitors. All agreed that signage can help their children understand what animals are in the habitats, and that high contrast photographs (not illustrations) of only the animal (no other context such as plants) are most effective.

- *... what we do know is that high contrast is good, less clutter. Too much clutter is a nightmare for her to try to see something. Like you walk into the typical elementary school classroom, and I around and I'm like, I don't know how she sees anything in here, because there's stuff hanging from every surface. So just making something very simple and having little clutter is huge for someone like her.*
- *That's another difference, is that kids like my daughter, you see an illustration of a dog and a picture of a dog, and you know they're both a dog, but for some kids, they see the photograph, and it looks exactly like the dog. But then it doesn't translate to an illustration. ... Like their brain is not interpreting the illustration. So the picture you show makes a difference, too.*



Audio Components

Audio components are helpful for people with impaired vision as well as cognitive issues which prevent or limit reading ability. Hand-held devices at a museum, or loading apps onto personal devices for use at the museum were options that these parents discussed and would use. Note that for many people with autism or other conditions or sensitivities, headsets and earbuds would not be appropriate options. Parents also voiced concern about too much sound in the same area becoming cacophonous and overwhelming their children, something that made personal audio devices or effective sound showers (as described by the moderator) very appealing.

- *I like the idea [of audio components and animal sounds, etc.]. It definitely would give her an experience that she might not be able to access visually. So yeah, I think it's a great idea. The problem is she's deaf in one ear. Unilateral hearing loss is odd in that it's harder to hear—it's a different type of hearing loss than overall. So it's hard to localize sound. Where is it coming from? It's just different, and it's different in different environments. So I don't know the right way, but I think it would really make a difference.[Moderator: Maybe if it were a handheld device, like a little phone thing you pick up, then that's clear, as opposed to ambient sound, which would be more difficult.] I'm not sure which would be better.*
- *I like the phone idea, because then just whoever needs to hear it is hearing it, not this person with the lion and then that person over there with the bats or whatever, and all these things are going on. It's overwhelming.*

Hands-on & Bodies-on Exhibits

As is true of all parents and museum visitors, hands-on and bodies-on opportunities are popular with this group. Participants offered examples of good physical experiences at CuriOdyssey, the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose and the High Desert Museum. Please also see Visual Impairment for more information about tactile features.

- *We like CuriOdyssey in San Mateo, and the San Jose Discovery Museum, and those are both very hands-on.*
- *I remember a place that we liked. It's in Oregon, called the High Desert Museum. It's near Bend. It's an amazing museum. I think what my daughter particularly liked there was that they had a place where she could engage physically. So they had like a farm, and they were able to dig and water the plants, and pump some water from the well. Just physically engaging made her really interested in everything there. Rather than just looking at something, she was able to get in there and work.*

Junior Museum & Zoo Renovation – Reactions & Feedback

Icons to Keep

The Rainbow Bridge in the Zoo and the stumps at the front entrance are very special to participants who have a history with the JMZ. The stumps are especially important as bookends to the visit, parents use them to transition children into and out of the Museum.

- *The bridge! Don't lose the bridge! There's so much that's nostalgic about this museum [unintelligible]. I grew up here, but I know so many friends whose parents and grandparents grew up here, and it's just like, "You lose that bridge, everybody's going to cry."*



- *[Moderator: does your family use the stumps...] Every time. I love it, that and the fact that there's shade and a spot to sit right there and finish your snack, do the stumps. Yeah, love it.*

Zoo Layout & Catwalk

There was much discussion of the new Zoo's tri-level floorplan and possible catwalk to the second floor of the Museum. The question of traffic flow – will there be pass-throughs or dead ends – presents many issues. Line of sight is always important; parents of children who tend to run away prefer dead ends so they know where their child will end up. However, this can be less of a difficulty if the other end of the pass through is visible and not distant, and the area is contained. Sometimes line of sight is less critical. The idea of a safe place for the child to explore and experience some independence is appealing to some parents.

Wheelchair users strongly prefer a pass-through because wheelchairs can be bulky and difficult to turn around and/or navigate through small spaces. For them, an elevator is a good addition to this path, but there has to be enough room for people and chairs to get in and out easily. The rainforest exhibit at the California Academy of Sciences was cited for this type of tidy pathway. One parent also likes the uni-directional flow of that exhibit, because they know they will see everything. The possible catwalk is problematic in that it can introduce a means of escape which could be hard for parents to reach in a timely manner. A gate at the start of the catwalk and a means of quickly accessing it would be helpful mitigations.

- *... when there's not a line of sight ... I use a stroller in those situations a lot more frequently. I've never brought a stroller here, but if I couldn't see my kids and there was a chance that they'd be running away in different places, even at three years old I might use a stroller.*
- *This is a safe place for my son where we can let him be independent. So as long as I know he's not going to get out of your facility without supervision, I would like him to get a little bit of independence. He can be inside, he can be outside. He doesn't have to be always in my sight, but I know that he's not gone.*

Group discussion:

- *I would say if you're going to have the catwalk, you need to have a way for someone who's on the surface whose kid is up there, to get up there quickly.*
- *To see what is going on up there, maybe a see-through something.*
- *Well, yeah. I'm assuming the catwalk would have lines of vision. [Moderator: Like grating for the floor instead of solid floor.] Yeah, but I'm thinking if I see my kid up there and I'm down here, how do I get up there quickly? If I have to run through crowds of people to get to my kid, that's not good.*
- *Because you're going to lose line of sight while you're running through the crowd. They can move, too.*
- *Exactly. If I can just run up a set of stairs to that catwalk right away, I'm okay with that.*

Loose in the Zoo - Interaction with Animals

Controlled interaction with animals, such as Zookeeper Lee facilitates on Super Family Sundays, is highly valued by these families. Some participants shared stories about profoundly impactful animal encounters at JMZ and elsewhere. However, for some the idea of Loose in the Zoo is problematic and would prevent them from visiting that part of JMZ. This is due to fear of animals in general, fear of eye contact with animals, and/or a suppressed immune system which makes contact with certain animals extremely dangerous. Sudden and unexpected animal movements, such as birds swooping nearby, could be frightening. Possible mitigations include having periods of time when no animals are loose and/or



providing an area which is protected from the loose animals, but with visual access to the Zoo area such that parents and children can check out the situation and decide whether to enter or not. CuriOdyssey has an arrangement like this, which parents appreciate because understanding what is happening, and setting expectations is especially important for children with autism.

- *We were somewhere I think near Lake Shasta, and they have this zoo, and parrots were in an enclosed area. The parrots are just flying around, drinking and sitting on his shoulder, pooping. My son initially didn't like it, but then he went in the corner and just stood quietly, and then some parrot came and sat on his shoulder, on his arm. And then he slowly started looking at him, and he didn't want to move. That was the first time he actually looked at a bird that close.*
- *... that is one of the most valuable things that kids can get out of these experiences. My son went through Edward the tortoise with Lee, and just watching the way he lit up and had that interaction with the animal, that's what keeps us coming back.*
- *My daughter doesn't like animals to look into her eyes. She has difficulty with making eye contact with people in general, but also animals. She feels like they're being aggressive, even if they're not.*
- *I was almost going to say the CuriOdyssey, also they have two different sections, one section where it's behind glass, and you can look out and see, ... after you look at the animal exhibit, then you can actually go through [if you want to]. ... If there's that staging area, I think that would be helpful.*
- *I love the idea of having whatever staging zone or a place where you can see that you're about to enter into this, and you know what's coming, what to expect. But I'd say that for my daughter the interactive experiences with the animals are what sound the most exciting for me. That's the best part of the Super Sunday, or whatever it is, thing for her. Interacting and seeing the tortoise was the best thing ever.*

Parking

Currently at JMZ, limited parking and insufficient accessible parking spaces frustrate these parents, some of whom had to park blocks away on the day of the interview. They asked for more parking overall and more accessible parking spaces with room for van ramps to unload wheelchairs. Looking at the renderings of the new facility, participants wondered about expanding the parking lot by opening it up to the Girl Scout House parking lot, expanding into the park, or adding an underground garage.

Other JMZ Features

We talked about the possibility of including penguins in the new Zoo. Two parents reported that they would not be able to attend if penguins were present because the smell is so strong it makes their children sick. Penguins at the California Academy of Sciences and the Monterey Bay Aquarium are behind glass so the smell is not a problem, but the area near the penguins at the San Francisco Zoo is off limits because the smell is overpowering.

Parents were excited about the two-story ball machine. They liked the idea of being on top of it looking down. Providing a way for a wheelchair to be inside it and surrounded by the activity of the balls would be very engaging. The current ball machine accepts balls into one side, but children then retrieve them from another location, this is difficult for children with limited or slow movement, or other disabilities.

Exhibits with multiple user stations can help limit interruptions by children who can't wait for a turn. Playing with mirrors to distort images, or multiple mirrors is lots of fun.



A hands-on garden area, such as exists at the Peninsula Jewish Community Center in Foster City would be lovely. The roof area of the new JMZ would be great for this, especially if there will be a cafe.

Short pillars which define the entryway and separate it from the driveway and parking lot should be spaced far enough apart for wheelchairs to pass between. Also in that entry area, the renderings show yellow “bubble guides” on the sidewalks. Participants reported that these can be difficult for people with low vision and/or limited movement to negotiate. They can be slippery, and for at least one child represented at the table, the change in surface underfoot can startle and confuse her.

- *Yeah, and also ...like those bubble guide things down on the ground. Those are kind of slippery for the ones that are walking, and it makes them unbalanced, too.*
- *Yeah. You can have yellow, but just maybe a line kind of thing that's not that big of a difference when you walk on them. Because I know for my little one, she's walking, and when she feels that difference in leveling, she gets nervous and panics, and just freezes and she doesn't know what to do. ... And she has visual impairment, too.*

Colored foot prints on the floor can help with wayfinding.

A suggestion box or space on the website for feedback will help make parents aware that JMZ wants their feedback, and remind them to provide it.

Additional Concerns for Wheelchair Users

In addition to parking spots with space for van ramps, and the difficulty with traffic flow around exhibits, several other wheelchair-specific issues arose during the second group interview. Generally speaking, parents told us that all areas need to be extra wide and spacious, because special needs wheelchairs are often larger than standard chairs such as one uses in the hospital. Positioning of the rider, being reclined for instance, adds to the challenge of being able to get close to exhibits or see downward. Where picnic tables with fixed benches or seating are used, there should also be wheelchair spaces.

Wheelchair users often come in pairs or groups, so designers need to be sensitive to issues of space and access. Double-wide elevators to accommodate one or two wheelchairs at a time are best. Elevator cars with doors on two sides make for easier loading and unloading of wheelchairs.

The presentation about the new JMZ included mention of a geode for children to crawl into. These parents would like to see a version available for wheelchair users also. Perhaps the area can have two geodes side-by-side, one for wheelchair users and one for ambulatory people. Such an arrangement would enable siblings or friends of varied abilities to enjoy the exhibit together. Ideally, the wheelchair accessible version would be large enough for more than one chair, and for a chair to turn around in it.

Immersive experiences are desirable for wheelchair users, especially for the child of this mother who has virtually no ability to use her arms or legs and has to be strapped into her wheelchair. She referenced the wave tunnel exhibit at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. She was also fond of the idea of being able to enter the ball machine with her daughter in her chair to be surrounded by the activity of contraption.

- *With [our daughter], who doesn't have any ability to touch things, really, or not to do any of this, it would be really cool to have things that she could maybe ride through and experience. Like the Monterey Bay Aquarium where that water goes over? ... A lot of these displays you push a button. Unfortunately she just isn't able to interact with things. So that's something she misses out on. ... if you put yourself in a wheelchair and have somebody tie down your hands and your feet, then if you*



can figure out a way to enjoy it, that's basically her experience, because she can't interact with it. A lot of it is interacting and moving your head [unintelligible] can see something.

Most Important Point Made Today

The most important part of the discussion for almost every participant was simply the fact that the JMZ is genuinely interested in their input and working hard to be inclusive and accommodating. A few parents also touched on the value of the accessible and supportive facility in which they can receive assistance and where their children can be safe to explore.

- *I'm just really—I'm pleased that people think about it, because there's so many times when we do go to something... We have a youth activity center, and we went to it for Halloween. They had [grade school students] up there[on the little stage] doing their costume, but [our daughter] couldn't go on the stage. She had to be wheeled in front of the stage. They probably just didn't even think about it. It's an afterthought in a lot of cases.*
- *I think it's very responsible for the museum to consider this. Most museums don't, and it's very hard to accommodate so many different disorders and issues.*
- *For me it was accessibility, because a lot of places don't think it all the way through, and that you guys are giving us a chance to put in our input, which is really important, especially for our kids and different disabilities, because it's a wide spectrum. So that's a good thing. So I appreciate it.*
- *I thought there were a bunch of really good ideas. I guess the biggest thing to me was letting kids have space that they can explore, but also giving parents a safe way to make sure that they aren't exiting.*
- *I'm grateful that you're taking it into consideration. I love the idea of... being able to access things with your different senses, whether it's sound or touch or whatnot. ... I would appreciate having somebody help me, like I mentioned before, to actually access the front of the line where people are viewing. That would be hugely helpful to me with my daughter.*

Method & Interview Questions

This session was typical of community conversations, often referred to as focus groups, in most ways. We invited 10-12 families for each group and prepared for discussions of 90-120 minutes. Tina Keegan was present for the sessions, during the second half of each one she gave a presentation about plans for the new JMZ with a slide show of renderings of the new facility. Both sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. Staff provided refreshments for parents in the meeting, and hands-on programming and snacks for participants' children and their caregivers elsewhere in the Museum building. Participating parents received a \$50 check or gift card, and each child also received a gift bag.

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

Area of inquiry: Barriers and supports at other institutions

- What barriers do you feel you face when visiting museums with your family?
- 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?

Area of inquiry: Barriers and supports at JMZ

- 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 do you think works well for children with special needs at JMZ? What could we do better in terms of accessibility?
- Is there anything more or different that you'd like to see JMZ do to improve your experience / accessibility?

Area of inquiry: Reactions to new JMZ Plan

- The JMZ is raising money to build a new museum & zoo – opening in 2019. We would like to share our vision with you and hear your feedback on it from your perspective as a parent of a child with autism/disabilities.
- Presentation of new JMZ plan (Tina) – 10-15 min.
- Overall, what is your take on this plan? – Follow up and explore responses...

Area of inquiry: Suggestions for the new plan

- Do you have ideas for how the zoo or science exhibits could be enhanced to better serve your family?
- Have you seen something at another zoo or museum that you really liked?
- What kinds of sensory, hands-on activities do your kids enjoy doing?
- Any recommendations for design considerations of the environment? (like acoustics, quiet rooms or spaces, colors, classroom design, etc.)

Area of inquiry: Additional programming and support

- Do you have any feedback on our *Super Family Sunday* events?
- Do you have suggestions of other supports that we could offer?*
- Would you be interested in fee-based programs such as classes or camps? Should it be a class exclusively for children with autism or other special needs or would you prefer it to be integrated with children of all abilities? Would scholarships or reduced fees be an incentive to participate?*
- What should we consider in terms of communication when designing signage?*

*If time allows.

Wrap Up:

- Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you think should be mentioned?
- Go around the table: What, for you, is the most important point that was made here today?

Recommendations for Researchers – excerpted from the 2010 Curious by Nature project report

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.

- 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.