

What We Have Learned

Best Practices for Turning Research and Evaluation Findings Into Effective, Appealing Programs

Children's Museum of Manhattan is well versed in working with a wide variety of partners to translate research into accessible and effective educational experiences and tools for children and adults from all backgrounds. We are committed to sharing our findings, programs and resources to ensure as many families and communities as possible can benefit from our efforts. We have learned that it is essential to proceed from the needs of the community and from their perceptions, cultural values and concerns. Such understanding does not come from short experiences in communities. Rather, it takes years to build trust to develop both thoughtful and powerful programs that have a sustainable impact on the communities that they target.

The Museum has developed best practices for working effectively with the neighborhoods we serve. These practices directly inform our work which includes conducting *qualitative field research* and *community needs assessments* as well as creating a *communications loop* between the Museum and participants to collect both data and anecdotal feedback.

The Museum has trusted relationships with an extensive network of New York City community-based organizations serving individuals across the income spectrum including libraries, schools, homeless shelters, day care centers, hospitals, universities, and government agencies. On a national level, the Museum has established museum and library networks to help us learn from our colleagues and to disseminate our findings.

Every day, our trained educators engage families at the Museum and travel to partner sites across the city to work directly with staff, and the families and children they serve. This positions us to learn firsthand of the current concerns of families. Through these ongoing relationship with individuals and organizations, we discover how our work affects them and how best to help address their needs. As a result, we are able to develop educational resources that speak to their most pressing concerns and that help support the healthy growth and development of their children at the museum and in the community.

The following overview shares some of what we have learned from the families and community organizations we work with. We are grateful for their involvement and their trust.

MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS

1. *Proceed from the needs of the community*
2. *Researchers and educators do not possess all wisdom*
3. *Trust is essential*
4. *The home and community are different from schools*
5. *Behavior change is both emotional and cognitive*
6. *One size does not fit all*
7. *Fun is good--and motivating*

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

- **Proceed from the needs of the community**, not from what we want to teach or want them to learn. This is profoundly different from the school education model, where a curriculum is proscribed and children (and parents) are obligated to follow it. Such a model does not transfer well to the home or to the community, which are governed by a different set of rules, expectations, and cycle of activity.
- **Adjust the research to the need.** Start with the research that is most needed and make sure the context for the research makes sense to the audience.
- **Behavior change is as much emotional as it is cognitive.** Knowledge alone does not change behavior. This is especially true when considering that most behavior is rooted in habits that are defined by culture, prior experience, and the society at large. Promoting wholesale and absolute change is difficult and can often have the opposite effect.
- **Some people are suspicious of, and may distrust, what can be perceived of as “elitist” organizations. These may include government organizations, hospitals, and even schools. Therefore, “scientific research” is not always the strongest sell.** Parents may tune out when they hear that “science teaches us.” Often, they respond better to concrete examples of behavioral changes from friendly, trusted resources.
- **Empower parents.** Parents do not always understand the critical role they play in their child’s development. Providing opportunities for them to see their important role in laying the foundation for learning is a critical step in helping children succeed in school and beyond. Positive reinforcement of what parents may already be doing can also build their confidence for further engagement. For example, some parents do not know that they should begin reading to their child at birth. Many feel that school will take care of reading.
- **Use an inclusive “we” approach.** Communities respond best when there is a feeling that we are all working and learning together – it is not that “they” have to learn or do something differently, but rather that the educators, parents and children are all finding ways to improve together.
- **Offer simple, concrete actions rooted in everyday activities that parents can do each day.** Parents can influence their child’s development through small changes – the small things add up. It is helpful to include simple actionable steps for families to easily incorporate into their daily lives. Perhaps the small changes also can help them save money and or time! For example, the Children’s Museum’s *Health Family Handouts* offer parents a specific weekly goal to change behaviors such as having fruit for dessert three nights a week, switching soda to water, or taking the stairs instead of the elevator.
- **Present the messaging through a variety of formats.** Adults, like children, respond to different formats for learning, and learn in a variety of ways. When providing educational information, it is important to offer several access points, including but not limited to the use of images, discussions, hands-on art projects, and literacy and movement activities.

- **Cultural sensitivity is critical. Messages must resonate and be relevant to the communities they are presented to.** Parents want to feel that their culture and background are respected and have been taken into account when a third party is conveying information. It is important to consider the context (location, environment, culture, attitude, languages, etc.) within which the audience is absorbing the messaging. Be prepared to actively adjust the message to provide strategies that are relevant for each audience's home or school setting.

For example, during our field research on early childhood obesity, we learned that low-income parents had heard that skim and low fat milk were better for their children but had interpreted this as "whole milk was for rich families and skim was for poor families." In their minds, skim is watered down and whole milk is creamy and better for their children because it had "more in it." Our educators had to uncover this cultural belief in order to better understand and respond in ways that were relevant to the audience. Simply telling the audience "drink skim" was not as effective as delivering the message in ways that matched their existing conceptual framework.

- **Include complementary information.** Providing complementary information that can be used both in classrooms and at home is critical in supporting young children and in providing connections to consistent messages that link home, school and community. Similar content communicated via website, downloadable lessons, related online educational videos, parent handouts, book lists, and more will amplify each message.
- **Align lessons with Common Core.** Aligning lessons to Common Core standards allows teachers to easily incorporate new materials into their day-to-day classroom activities.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SPECIFIC TO LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES – Literacy and Language

- **Parents feel that their children will learn to read in school.** They are unaware of the importance of reading and sharing books with young children before 5 years of age.
- **Parents feel that if their child cannot respond verbally then they do not understand and that conversations (talking) are not as necessary until they are older.** Parents feel that if their child cannot talk yet that it is because they are incapable of listening or understanding a conversation. Parents do not know that singing, telling stories and sharing who they are all help children build vocabulary, understand sentence structure, and help develop critical skills needed for reading.
- **Parents do not feel that they have the skills to teach their children to read.** Many do not like to read, or were not read to as a child and feel intimidated reading because of their lack of proficiency; they may shy away from sharing books with their children. Children's Museum research has shown that using early childhood books with low reading levels makes parents feel more comfortable, and that through the reading of early childhood books we are helping to build literacy skills for parents as well as children.
- **Parents are unfamiliar with different ways to foster literacy in young children, other than reading to them directly.** The Children's Museum helps parents understand the

importance of everyday literacy building such as talking and sharing stories, reading menus, writing grocery lists, pointing out words in the community such as stop signs, etc. Parents are interested in simple language and literacy strategies to implement at home.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SPECIFIC TO LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES – Health

- **Connections to food are emotional and personal.** Parents felt that food preparation, choices and food portions were important tools to teach children about their cultural background. So while families understood that white rice had more sugar and was not as healthy as brown rice, making the change was challenging. Utilizing a flexible approach to making small changes, such as offering brown rice as an alternative option for some meals, was successful in helping to make small changes.
- **Cultural understanding and sensitivity are critical to parents accepting new information.** For example, we found that for many low-income families, a thin child is considered an unhealthy child. As a result, these families tended to favor less healthy foods. (See preference for whole milk noted above).
- **Arts as an access point.** Health information that uses a multidisciplinary (arts, literacy, movement-based) approach is an effective way to teach scientific health information.
- **Adults were surprised that they could have conversations about health, nutrition and sleep benefits with their children.** Simple messages, coupled with goals and activity (reading, art or movement) made the conversations easy, fun and impactful.

INFORMATION DISSEMINATION PRACTICES

The Children's Museum's methodology for disseminating new information is rooted in lessons learned over many years of working with diverse families in a variety of settings. Regardless of the type of resource being disseminated, the key to success is an established network of community partners and locally-trained advocates.

Over the years, CMOM has learned what educational formats, tools, products and services lend themselves well to the dissemination of new information and are easy to implement with diverse communities in a variety of settings. These include:

- Immersive, themed, multi-sensory environments
- Graphic signage that incorporates imagery, family-friendly messaging
- Curricula
- Hands-on, tactile experiences
- Open-ended and structured activities
- Educator-led workshops for families and children
- Professional and academic-led adult lectures and workshops
- Professional development trainings
- Family festivals
- Webinar trainings for national audiences
- Dedicated website with educational videos, downloadable resources and curricula
- Weekly emails and newsletters

If you would like more information on the Children's Museum of Manhattan's research, partnerships or outreach programs, please contact Leslie Bushara, Chief Programs Officer at lbushara@cmom.org or by calling 212-721-1223 x250.