

Research Toy Activities – Educator Training Tips

Introduction

This document offers suggestions for training museum educators (staff/interns/volunteers) to present research toy interpretations. We provide an overview of the information educators typically require to interpret child development research in museum environments, and guidance in the overall structure and timing of training activities.

Background Reading:

Review of both the original research article and the research toy interpretation guide is an important first step. These resources can also be helpful:

- **“Reading Research Papers – An Educator’s Guide”** provides guidance on breaking down the original research article.
- Additional reference material, such as popular press articles or on-line videos (e.g., YouTube), can help educators understand the research and its applications for families.

Demonstrations & Discussions:

When possible, it is helpful for an experienced museum educator to model interactions between an educator and a family, by demonstrating the research toy activity for a new interpreter.

- First, an experienced museum educator can demonstrate the research toy activity as if a new interpreter was the child participant. S/he can then “debrief” the new interpreter as if the new interpreter is the caregiver of a child who participated in the activity.
- Next, a new interpreter can practice demonstrating these two aspects of the research toy to another educator. The details do not need to be “perfect”, but this exercise helps new interpreters start to think about how to organize their presentation.

Discussing the original research study, and key points to share with caregivers, with an experienced museum educator is helpful to new interpreters. Across sites, we have found that these points are important to explore during training:

- What is a research toy?
 - Why are research toys used in the museum? How are research toys developed?
 - What is the difference between an active research study and a research toy interpretation? What is the difference between “participants” and “educational opportunities” in the Living Laboratory model?
- What are the different parts of a research paper? How does each section connect to the research toy activity?
 - Review figures (i.e., charts and graphs) provided in the interpretation guide, which aid in understanding the study’s results and may be used to help visitors understand the results of the original study.

- What key points should be included in the caregiver debriefing?
 - Review the research question, methods, and results.
 - Discuss why the study is important and interesting to our understanding of children’s development.
 - Review strategies to connect the study’s methods and/or results to behaviors that the caregiver may have just observed as the child interacted with the research toy.
 - Encourage the new interpreter to spend some time writing, in his/her own words, a caregiver debrief for the activity. Challenge the new interpreter to develop both a 30-second and 1-minute version of their debriefing.
- What are visitors’ Frequently Asked Questions about this research toy/the original study?
 - Include common caregivers questions that span activities – e.g. “Is my child smart?”
- What strategies can help an interpreter modify the activity for different visitors?
 - Discuss challenges, such as shortening the activity when a child is losing interest or how extending the interaction when a child is very interested in the materials.
 - Discuss different types of educational opportunities the interpreter may encounter and strategies to use when educating visitors of all ages.

Observation & Practice:

Schedule time for the new interpreter to both observe an experienced museum educator presenting the research toy with visitors, and to practice their own presentation with visitors.

- Suggest locations that work well for presenting research toys in the exhibition, and how to record educational opportunities so that your organization can track its public impact.
- Observe the new interpreter present the research toy with families, and provide feedback as needed.