Seventeen families across three museums participated in the ethnographic-style case study of the ways in which frequent visiting families used the museum and, specifically, how they valued the presence of the interactive family gallery. The collection of the case study data occurred in 2009-2010.

Who are the families?
Although these families differ in many respects, such as number of children, occupations, and experience or expertise in the arts, all of the families valued the arts and art museums. Many parents were avid museum visitors before they had children and when the children were born they continued that practice gradually engaging their children in a variety of art-looking, art-making, and creative play. These families shared a common motivation for coming to the art museum – to expose their children to art and creative endeavors and to enjoy doing that together, as a family group.

A few of the parents in this study worked in arts-related fields but most did not. Most of the mothers did not work full-time outside of the home and, of the seventeen families across the three museums, eight home-schooled their children. The ratio of home-school to non-home-school families varied across the three museums. The High and the Speed museums both had two home-school families in their samples. Four of the six families in the Frist Center sample were home-schooled.

What do families do in the art museum?

On average, the length of time families spent on the accompanied visits to the three art museums combined was just under two hours. The shortest visit was just over one hour (73 minutes) and the longest visit was almost three hours (173 minutes). The amount of time spent at the like-site visits was, on average, just over two hours.

Most of the visits included time in the collections and/or exhibitions areas of the museums. Of the forty-nine total accompanied visits to the three art museums, six
visits did not include time looking at art in the collections or exhibitions. Families spent about 40% of their time in the interactive galleries and the rest of their time was in the collections/exhibitions, programs, café, or shop. This varied by museum. Families in the Speed and Frist tended to divide their time in the interactive space and the rest of the museum fairly evenly (roughly 50%/50%). Families at the High spent around 20% of their total visit time in the Greene Family Learning Gallery. For most of the observed visits, the social group tended to include the mother with children but occasionally included the father on the museum and like-site visits. Mothers noted that this was usually their visit pattern as they tended to visit during times that the father was working. For many families, particularly the home-school families, the art museum visit was a wider social experience. Some home-school groups met regularly at the art museum and the children enjoyed exploring with their friends while the mothers appreciated some adult visiting time. Food was also a part of the overall experience for most families, either talking about it or actually bringing food or eating together at a restaurant during or following their museum visit.

Museum Collections & Exhibitions
Parents felt that visiting the museum collections and/or exhibitions was an important component of their family outing and almost all of the visits included time in the art galleries. In six of the forty-nine observed visits, families did not go into the art galleries, confining their time to the interactive gallery only. One mother explained that she did not take her four children into the art galleries because she felt they were just too young and it would be difficult for her to manage them there. As they grew older, her goal was to gradually introduce the gallery experience to the children.

Parents recognized that many children found it difficult to stay attentive while looking at art, so most visits to the art galleries were parent-initiated and driven. Consequently, they became quite creative in the strategies they employed to focus children and help them learn to engage in looking more thoughtfully and carefully. Typically, the family groups stayed fairly close together while in the art galleries. Families with older children were more likely to engage in a social group pattern of wandering a few feet away from each other, looking on their own, then drawing back together. It was common to observe parents engaging their children by reading a label out loud and then asking a few questions to engage the child in conversation about the art. Parents tended to initiate discussions in an organic way, not forcing conversation but stimulating and facilitating thoughtful reflection as the teachable moment arose. Some parents created their own “games” on the spot, typically an I-spy search-and-find activity. A few mothers made up scavenger hunts. One mother always visited the new exhibitions on her own or with a friend before taking her child back to the museum, as she wanted to be sure her daughter would enjoy the experience. Another family with older children engaged them successfully in an exhibition by getting the audio guides that, the father reported, made his boys feel grown up.
Figure 1 illustrates a “word-cloud” of the learning behaviors exhibited by the case study families while visiting the collections and exhibitions at the three art museums. Unsurprisingly, the most frequent learning behavior was looking at art, followed by explaining, identifying, and evaluating. Smaller trends in learning behaviors were reading, self-reflection, interpreting, describing, inviting, remembering, and confirming.

**Figure 1: Word cloud of patterns of learning behaviors in galleries (exhibitions and collections)**

**Interactive Galleries**

In contrast to the family patterns while in the art galleries, parents’ styles differed from active facilitation to a more “hands-off” approach of watchful non-interference, remaining available to answer questions and offer encouragement. This was particularly the case in families with two or more children. Despite this hands-off approach, these parents remained available to answer questions, help out, and offer encouragement when their children needed it. In these families, the children most often bounced around, quickly visiting all or most of the stations, finally settling at their favorites for longer time periods.

Parents said that the interactive space provided children with an opportunity to “blow off steam” created while following stricter behavior rules in the art galleries. For families with young children, the interactive spaces provided a psychologically and physically safe place for children to explore and discover on their own and a sensory-rich environment that supported early learning development. Some parents described the spaces as a kind of anchor in their art museum visit. Without the interactive spaces, some parents said they would not come to the museum as often or even at all.

In just over one-third of the observed visits to the three art museums (17 of 49 visits), the interactive space came last in the order of the visit, supporting parent’s observation that these types of spaces served as behavioral incentives for children. Where the interactive space was located seemed to influence where the order of visiting to some degree. For example, the Frist Center for the Visual Arts is a much
smaller space than the High or the Speed, it is a changing exhibition space only, with no permanent collection, and the Martin ArtQuest gallery is located adjacent to exhibition spaces. Frist families in this study tended to visit the exhibition first, followed by a visit to Martin ArtQuest. At the Speed Art Museum, Art Sparks is located in the basement, adjacent to a changing exhibition space and a few permanent collection galleries. These families tend to visit the interactive space last or it is the only area they visit. The High Museum of Art’s Greene Family Learning Gallery is located fairly near the entrance to the museum in the Meier building and it is on the way to the area where family and children’s programs are held. Consequently, case-study families at the High did not show a strong trend in where the interactive space fell in the order of their visit. They were as likely to visit first, mid-way through, and last. No families confined their visit to the interactive gallery only.

The interactive gallery provided freedom for children - freedom to explore and engage in creative play, together or independently. Older, self-directed children tended to choose their own activity. With younger children parents sometimes These spaces also provided a kind of freedom for parents. They were released from having to monitor their child and facilitate the experience as they did in the art galleries. Many parents reported deriving enjoyment and benefit from the opportunity to just watch their child play, explore, and engage socially with other children. As one mother explained, the interactive gallery “helps me to get to know my children… I see what they enjoy.” Families with one child tended to stay together in the interactive gallery, at least for part of the visit. Sometimes these families engaged in a type of “parallel play” with each family member engaged in their own activity.

Articulating the relationship of the interactive space with the art in the collections and exhibitions was not an easy thing for parents to do. One child expressed this connection most succinctly when he used a metaphor of “cheese and crackers” to express how he experiences the relationship between the art galleries and interactive space. He explained how you have “all the boring stuff [galleries] and then all the good stuff [Art Sparks],” but both are important and go together; “they aren’t really good alone, but they go great together.”

Figure 2: Word cloud of patterns of learning behaviors in interactive galleries

FLING Family Case Study Summary
2011
Figure 2 illustrates the learning behaviors observed in visits to all three museums, combined. As might be expected in a space where families are encouraged to manipulate, express, and create, the strongest pattern in the learning behaviors was that of design - expressing and creating something. Other design-related behaviors were building, proposing, and pretending. Another strong learning behavior trend was evaluating. Children and adults frequently commented on their own as well as each other’s work. Related behaviors included self-reflection, describing, confirming, explaining, discussing, and supporting.

In contrast to the adult/child interaction in the art galleries where adults initiated most learning behaviors, children initiated more if not most of these learning behaviors when in the interactive spaces.

What Other Leisure Learning Choices do Families Make?

Leisure learning choices tended to reflect family tradition, personal interests, and the desire to expose children to a wide variety of experiences. Almost all of the families enjoyed doing things outside and took advantage of outdoor activities in good weather. Parents mentioned the value of physical exercise and how children were more relaxed and calmer after outdoor exercise. Outdoor activities included nature walks and hiking, camping, going to parks, farmers’ markets, youth sports practices and games. Other leisure learning experiences included museums, science centers, historic sites, zoos, libraries, and cultural performances.

How do Families Value the Interactive Galleries in Art Museums?

Families in all three museums were similar in the ways they valued the interactive spaces. The following is a list of themes that emerged continually in conversations with parents about the importance and value of the interactive galleries in the three art museums.

A Place to Relax & Unwind: Parents continually mentioned how the interactive family galleries provided a place where everyone in the family could relax and explore freely. It was the change of pace from the rest of the art museum that parents valued. Many parents admitted that they would not visit the art museum with their children very often, if at all, without the interactive gallery.

A Safe Place: When parents mentioned safety as a value of the interactive gallery they meant both the physical and psychological safety of the space. This was particularly important for parents of young children and in families with two or more
children. The attention to safety, for all age children, with which the interactive spaces were designed and built was noted and appreciated by parents. When parents referenced psychological safety issues they usually referred to how welcoming the interactive spaces were, a place where everyone in the family felt they belonged.

A Rich, Sensory Experience: Parents across all three museums appreciated how the interactive spaces provided children with a wide variety of opportunities to learn through the senses. Certainly this included hands-on experiences where children manipulated their environment, it also included learning through movement and sound or music.

A Place of Creativity & Inspiration: Parents continually mentioned the importance of the interactive spaces for stimulating and encouraging children’s creativity. Several parents noted that art was not taught in the schools so the interactive gallery helped them fill that gap.

An Enjoyable Experience for the Whole Family: Parents often judge the success of family outings on the degree to which the experience is appropriate and appealing to everyone in the group. The interactive galleries were valued for how well they anticipated the needs and interests of all ages.

A Place that Stimulates Interesting Family Discussions: The case study families valued experiences that provided fuel for interesting discussions. Parents reported that dinner-table conversations were frequently fueled by their experiences at the art museum interactive spaces.

A Place to Understand and Love Art: Because these parents had a long-term appreciation and love of the arts, they particularly valued the interactive spaces because they assisted them in instilling that same attitude in their children.

What Characteristics are Shared Among Art Museum Interactive Galleries and Other Family Leisure Learning Destinations?

A focus of this study was to determine what characteristics of the art museum and the interactive galleries, in particular, were shared with other family leisure learning choices. These families valued leisure-learning experiences that provided the following:

- Opportunities to engage the varied interests of family members while reinforcing family values;
- Options that are active over more passive experiences, in which the family has some freedom of choice, as well as opportunities to manipulate objects and engage the senses;
- Experiences that are both educational and fun, engaging children in multiple ways of learning in exciting and innovative ways;
- Environments that are child-friendly, without lots of rules, and opportunities to burn energy;
- Unique opportunities that stimulated creativity, sparked imaginations and encouraged independent thinking and self-expression;
- Options that allowed children to practice social skills with other children and adults outside of the family unit;
- Activities and content that stimulate family conversations;

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

Parents in the study went to great lengths to situate a family leisure learning experience within a larger context of the child’s life. They looked for opportunities to connect the art and interactive gallery activities with personal interests and the content of formal education lessons. Most families tended to strengthen these connections at home through family discussions, as well as through engaging in art making activities inspired by their art museum and interactive gallery experience.

Participation in Study

Parents were asked what effect, if any, participation in this research study might have had on the family. Many parents noted that they were more conscious about what they talked about as a family, primarily because they knew they would be asked to reflect on family discussions in interviews with the study researcher. Some parents observed that they were more intentional about how they formulated and enacted the family learning experience.

A few families mentioned that the stimulated more fathers to accompany the rest of the family on the museum and like-site visits. Some families expressed greater awareness of how they choose activities for their children, as well as their default modes of interaction. Several families grew so fond of their research assistant that their friendships continued to grow after the study.