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# Family Learning in Free-Choice Educational Settings: A Review of the Literature for the National Park Service

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**Family Learning in Free-Choice Educational Settings:  
A Review of the Literature for the National Park Service**

By

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Masters Committee:

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**Family Learning in Free-Choice Educational Settings:  
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## Abstract

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This literature review is part of a National Park Service (NPS) initiative to improve lifelong learning in national parks. National parks are free-choice learning environments (also referred to as informal or non-formal settings), where individuals have significant control over their learning. Families make up a substantial portion of the NPS audience. This literature review aims to inform NPS practices by answering the following questions: What does research literature reveal about the nature of family learning, factors that influence family learning, and recommendations for improving family learning in free-choice learning environments?

Families learn from their conversations and interactions with each other and their visits to free-choice settings are influenced by what Falk and Dierking (2000) categorized as Personal, Sociocultural, and Physical factors. Free-choice settings must address the Personal factors families bring to their visit including motivations, prior knowledge, identities, and diverse learning needs. Researchers who have studied the Sociocultural context of family learning urge free-choice learning institutions to encourage social interaction, help parents to facilitate their children's learning, and form reciprocal relationships and partnerships that encourage participation from underrepresented families.

Finally, the Physical context of family visits can be improved by designing family-friendly exhibits, by implementing technology in family-friendly ways, and by creating exhibits that accommodate the various developmental levels of multiple users. Overall, free-choice learning settings must focus on providing enjoyable, collaborative opportunities for families to learn together.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Ana Houseal, for her guidance, patience, and constant support as I wrote this paper. Many thanks go out to my committee members, Dr. Kate Welsh and Dr. Matthew Wenger, for their willingness to assist in this undertaking. Additionally, without The Science and Mathematics Teaching Center's logistical and financial assistance it would not have been possible for me to attend the University of Wyoming.

I am grateful to have participated in a project for the National Park Service's non-governmental advisory board learning subcommittee. Dr. Lynn Dierking and Dr. John Falk generously provided helpful feedback and many NPS employees also contributed article summaries and responses about their NPS experiences that helped inform this paper. Because of my participation in this project I was fortunate to be able to spend time exploring a topic I love and continuing to discover ways to inspire learners of all ages.

I wish to acknowledge the influence of the Lasallian Volunteers, my former students, the Teton Science Schools community, my friends, and family. Thanks to the Lasallian Volunteers I had the opportunity to teach near a national park where my former students inspired my passion for outdoor education. The Teton Science Schools helped me take that passion and turn it into better teaching skills and a deeper appreciation for the beauty and complexity of our natural world. My friends near and far have never ceased to inspire me and have helped me keep my sanity. Last, but not least, my family has provided unwavering support, encouragement, and love. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Primary Research Question.....	1
Scope of the Project.....	2
Background.....	4
Limitations and Gaps in the Literature.....	5
Significance of the Project.....	7
Definition of Terms.....	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	9
Family Learning Research Background.....	9
A Shift in Theoretical Perspectives.....	12
Families as Learning Institutions.....	12
Methodologies for Measuring Free-Choice Learning.....	13
The Contextual Model of Learning.....	15
The Museum Visitor Experience Model.....	16
The Personal Context of Learning in Free-Choice Settings.....	18
The Sociocultural Context of Families' Museum Visits.....	28
The Physical Context of Learning for Families: Exhibits.....	37

Chapter 5: Discussion.....	42
Conclusions from the Literature.....	42
Implications for the National Park Service.....	43
Considerations.....	44
Recommendations from the Literature.....	46
Conclusions.....	49
References .....	52
Appendices .....	60
Appendix A: <i>A Call to Action</i> .....	60
Appendix B: Museum-Goer Identities .....	62
Appendix C: Special Topic: Family Science Learning in Free-Choice Settings.....	63
Appendix D: Special Topic: Intergenerational Programs.....	65
Appendix E: 10 Steps to Encourage Family Learning at Your Institution.....	67
Appendix F: Family-Friendliness Checklist.....	68
Appendix G: Family Amenities Checklist.....	71
Author’s Biography and Contact Information.....	72

## List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1: The LIFE Center Lifelong and Lifewide Learning Diagram .....	7
Figure 2: The Museum Visitor Experience Model.....	17



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In 2016 the United States National Park Service (NPS) will celebrate its centennial. The NPS has grown in scope and size over the past one hundred years and its 397 units welcome visitors from all over the country and the world. In 2010 there were 281 million recreational visits to parks (NPS, 2011, p. 1) and previous surveys indicated that approximately half of those visitors likely traveled in family groups (Forist, 2003, p. 17). In fact in 2009, the majority of visitor groups in Yosemite National Park (69%) were family groups (Blotkamp, Meldrum, Morse, & Hollenhorst, 2010, p. v). That is to say, families make up a substantial portion of the NPS's audience and therefore in order to improve parks as free-choice learning institutions it is important to consider family visitors' needs and expectations while seeking to better understand their park experiences.

This paper aims to examine the factors that influence family learning in free-choice learning environments in order to inform how the NPS can increase family engagement, participation, and learning. Falk (2005) defined free-choice learning environments as places where individuals have significant control over their learning. The terms *informal* and *non-formal* are often used synonymously with the term *free-choice* to describe these learning settings, but for the purposes of this paper, the term *free-choice* will be used. Parks are examples of free-choice learning environments and research on family learning has been conducted in settings that have characteristics similar to parks.

### **Primary Research Question**

This extensive literature review focuses on answering the following question: What does research literature reveal about the nature of family learning, factors that influence family

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

learning, and recommendations for improving family learning in free-choice learning environments?

### **Scope of the Project**

The NPS recently enlisted the expertise of its non-governmental advisory boards to provide recommendations about topics most pertinent to advancing the NPS's mission. The learning subcommittee was asked to provide guidance about enhancing life-long learning opportunities in parks. Within the topic of life-long learning, the subcommittee chose to use research literature to inform family free-choice learning in the parks.

This literature review utilized articles on topics related to family experiences and learning in free-choice settings<sup>1</sup>. No peer-reviewed articles were identified that directly addressed family learning in national parks, so a related body of literature focused on free-choice settings was used. The literature for this paper was carefully chosen after an extensive search. First, keywords such as *intergenerational*, *informal*, *family*, *learning*, *free-choice*, *museum*, and *national park service* were used to search for relevant literature. A bibliography of over 60 sources was compiled from this search. It was given to two experts in the field of free-choice learning, they reviewed the list, added additional articles to it, and suggested that 26 of the most recently published articles relevant to family learning be used as core articles for the review.

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<sup>1</sup> Articles that used the terms *informal*, *non-formal*, and *out-of-school* to describe learning settings where visitors have significant choice and control of their learning were also used in this review.

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

Free-choice family learning research often occurs in the context of hands-on science museums and while science is an important component of experiences in many national parks, those settings do not closely match many of the varied NPS educational environments. Pertinent findings were, however, included from articles about science museums. Articles about research conducted in natural history, children's, and history museums were added to broaden the scope of the review to match the diversity of park venues.

In addition to the 26 recently published core articles, four previous literature reviews on the topic provided background, context, and common themes (Adams, Luke, & Ancelet, 2010; Borun, Cleghorn, & Garfield, 1995; Dierking & Falk, 1994; and Ellenbogen, Luke, & Dierking, 2004). This paper builds on those previous reviews by synthesizing articles mostly published after these reviews were written. Of the sources used in this paper, 82% came from peer-reviewed journals or were essays within edited books. The remaining 18% of sources included relevant non-peer reviewed articles and reports. The non-peer-reviewed articles provided relevant foundations, findings, and recommendations. Government reports (e.g. NPS, 2012; Forist, 2003) and reports from education organizations provided demographic information and insight into the NPS's education approach.

In order to involve NPS employees and partners in the literature review and its results, individuals were recruited to read, summarize, and respond to the 26 core articles. These responses contributed to a separate paper that identified connections between the research literature and NPS practices. The NPS responses helped shape this literature review, since volunteers summarized key concepts from recent articles and highlighted relevant connections to the NPS. This literature review and the NPS responses to the literature could inform future

subcommittee work, such as the development of additional strategies, activities, and professional development ideas concerning this topic.

## **Background**

The NPS's original mission: "maintaining and protecting our national parks for the continued benefit and enjoyment of all Americans" (NPS, 2011, p. 2) is arguably as relevant today as it was 100 years ago. However, in its next century of service, the NPS aims to take its mission further to "use the collective power of the parks, our historic preservation programs, and community assistance programs to expand our contributions to society" (NPS, 2012, p. 5). The question is: How can the NPS achieve this goal?

NPS initiatives over the last decade have enlisted the help of experts to plan for improvements in NPS programs. First, evaluations revealed weaknesses in some areas of NPS education and interpretation. The National Education Council [NEC]'s (2006a) *Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan* found that

Many parks offer interpretive media (exhibits, wayside exhibits, films, brochures) that are inaccurate, inaccessible, and significantly outdated. In some cases the content and condition of films and exhibits are more than 30 years old and no longer relevant or accessible.... The NPS must improve its media to meet twenty first century standards so that visitors connect with park stories, meanings, and heritage. (p. 9)

While the parks are meant to be parks for all Americans, the *Action Plan* went on to say that, "NPS audiences do not reflect the demographics of America" (p. 11). These concerns are among areas explored in the relevant literature reviewed in this paper.

A decade of NPS evaluation and improvement initiatives culminated in the NPS's (2012) document entitled *A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement*. *A Call to Action* charted a path into the future and created actions targeting 39 areas for NPS improvement. A few actions involve every park, but managers and

superintendents were to select the most appropriate actions for their program or park to achieve (NPS, 2012). *Connecting People to Parks* and *Advancing the NPS Education Mission* are two key themes the document addressed, and consequently these themes were considered in this paper in light of the research on family learning (see Appendix A for the *A Call to Action* elements most pertinent to this paper).

### **Limitations and Gaps in the Literature**

While it is evident that the NPS already contributes to visitor-learning and that educational programs in the parks are enjoyed by people of all ages, the parks' educational impacts from a research standpoint are largely unknown. There is little published data or literature on outcomes and impacts of education in the national parks (Brody & Tomkiewicz, 2002; NEC, 2006a).

Evaluations of interpretive media other than exhibits are rare. Accessible summaries of any NPS evaluations do not exist, and the use of these studies beyond each particular park is not known. . . . There has been very little evaluation of informal interpretation, information services, or orientation. (NEC, 2006b, p. 45)

A few examples of peer-reviewed articles on national park learning were found, but none directly addressed family learning (e.g. Benton, 2008; Brody & Tomkiewicz, 2002; Knapp & Benton, 2004; Novey & Hall, 2007). However, free-choice learning literature was used as, “much of the existing informal education literature is considered to be applicable to park environments” (Brody & Tomkiewicz, 2002, p. 1122). Parks are settings that often include visitor centers, guides in the form of rangers, interpretive signs, programs, and opportunities similar to those in museums, aquariums, zoos, nature centers, and other free-choice learning environments.

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

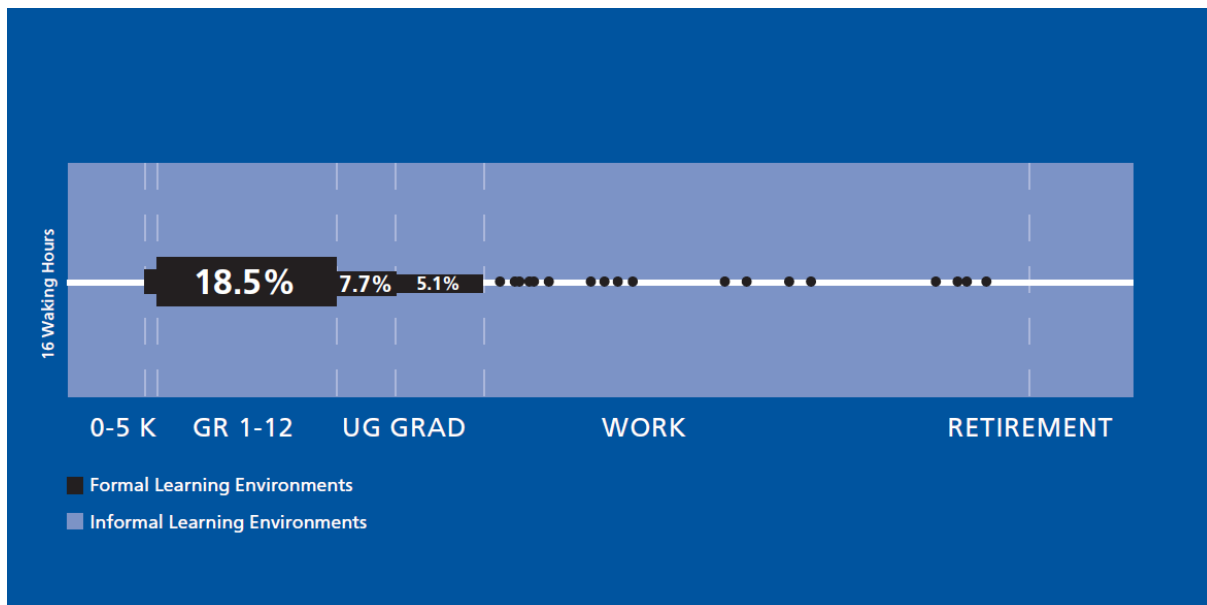
Gross and Zimmerman (2002) directly compared parks and museum mentioning their common audiences, methods of communication, and roles in protecting items of cultural value. Today the NPS “preserves 100 million museum items” within visitor centers and other park buildings (NPS, 2011, p.2). Therefore, when families visit national parks elements of their visit often include settings similar to museums.

Although parks sometimes feature settings similar to museums, the 397 units of the NPS are actually very diverse and learning in parks can take on many forms and occur indoors or outdoors in a variety of different venues. Whether a family is hiking with a ranger in the Tetons, touring Independence Hall in Philadelphia, reading a roadside sign along the Blue Ridge Parkway, or perusing exhibits at Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center, learning is happening! The similarities between free-choice venues arguably outweigh the differences in their subjects and environments.

It is also worth noting that Dierking and Falk (1994) recognized that much of the research in the field of free-choice learning involved middle class, Caucasian families and that in order to ensure generalizability more research on underrepresented population’s use of free-choice settings was needed. While conducting a search for literature on underrepresented families’ use of free-choice settings only a few articles were found (e.g. Archer et al., 2012; Gaskins, 2008; Honey et al., 2010; Melber, 2006; Shouse, Lewenstein, Feder, & Bell, 2010; Stein, Garibay, & Wilson, 2008). Almost two decades after Dierking and Falk (1994) noted the lack of literature on diverse visitors, free-choice settings are still not seeing the diversity of visitors they had hoped for and research on underrepresented populations, while increasing, still remains scarce.

## Significance of the Project

Our national parks have the potential to fulfill some of our country’s educational needs in a unique way. As learners we spend only a small percentage of our lifetime in formal learning settings such as schools. Banks et al. (2007), in their report on life-long, life-deep, and life-wide learning, explained that most learning takes place outside of schools. *Figure 1* illustrates the small percentage of time people spend in formal learning environments compared to informal learning environments.



*Figure 1.* The LIFE Center Lifelong and Lifewide Learning Diagram (LIFE Center, 2005)

Outside of formal schooling, learning tends to be self-motivated and driven by individual interests, activities, social groups, and surrounding environments. Falk and Dierking (2010) pointed to the United States’ “vibrant free-choice learning landscape” as a unique and valuable asset to the country’s education system (p. 486). Within this learning landscape national parks and other venues are “contextually relevant and rich places; they are full of real things, situated

within relevant contexts” (Falk, 2009, p. 150). The benefits of experiences in these settings are many. However, free-choice settings can continue to make improvements to engage families and contribute to deeper levels of learning. Focusing on educational improvements may lead to far-reaching, positive outcomes for the NPS and the people it serves.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this paper, the following definitions will be used.

*Family* - “Two or more people in a multi-generational group that has an on-going relationship, they may be biologically related, but not necessarily.... If a group defines itself as a family they are one” (Dierking, 2010, para. 3).

*Learning* - “A personally and socially constructed mechanism for making meaning in the physical world.... It is broad and includes changes in cognition, affect, attitudes, and behavior” (Falk, Dierking, & Foutz, 2007, p. xix).

*Family Learning* - “Includes the products and processes of social interaction, collaboration, and sharing among members... across the lifespan of the family” (Patchen & Rand, 2007, p. 170).

*Free-Choice Settings, Learning Environments, and Venues* - Places where individuals have significant control over their learning (Falk 2005). Most of the research in the field has taken place in science museums, but free-choice settings as diverse as art museums, zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens, children’s museums, and natural history museums have also been studied. All these places are often included under the umbrella term *museums* in many studies.

*Free-Choice Learning* - “Learner motivated, guided by learner interests, voluntary, personal, ongoing, contextually relevant, collaborative, nonlinear, and open-ended” (National Research Council, 2009, p. 11).

*Underrepresented Populations* - Groups of people who do not often visit free-choice settings, including but not limited to particular ethnic or cultural groups and people of different economic backgrounds



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Family Learning Research Background

What we know about family learning has steadily increased in the last 30 years as more research on family groups has been conducted. In their review of the literature, Dierking and Falk (1994) noted that studies in the early 1990s began to focus on more specific elements of family learning in free-choice settings. They categorized free-choice family learning studies up until 1994 as those that either a) determined conditions that facilitate family learning and examined whether families adopted learning agendas in free-choice settings, or b) found evidence of family learning in free-choice settings (p. 62).

Since family learning is complex, researchers first systematically counted signs and behaviors which pointed to the idea that families were “adopting learning agendas” (Dierking & Falk, 1994, p. 62). An agenda is “a set of desires, needs, and expectations for what the visit will hold” (p. 61). When families gave their attention to exhibits, directed curiosity behaviors toward exhibits, or exchanged verbal or nonverbal information related to the exhibits, these behaviors were considered evidence of a family learning agenda (Dierking & Falk, 1994).

However, evidence of learning agendas is not the same as evidence for learning. Direct evidence of family learning was challenging to quantify because of its complex nature and most researchers were only beginning to recognize those complexities. At first research studies revealed indirect evidence of family learning, but soon studies were developed that clearly showed relationships between learning agendas and actual learning.

In the mid-1990s, Minda Borun and her colleagues at museums in and near Philadelphia embarked upon an extensive and ultimately groundbreaking research project on family learning in museums. *The Family Learning Project* was conducted by researchers from the four museums

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

of the Philadelphia-Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC) and ultimately aimed to use research to enhance family learning by improving exhibit design (Borun et al., 1998, p. 3). Borun, Cleghorn, and Garfield's (1995) literature review concluded that no one had shown "a correlation between observable behavior in the free-choice museum environment and an independent measure of learning" (p. 264). PISEC researchers decided to find out whether or not families that appeared to be learning were actually doing so (Borun et al., 1998).

First, cognitive tests were deemed insufficient to use to measure free-choice learning since they do not take into account the nuances of family learning. Researchers instead measured learning qualitatively through interviews and concluded that individual learning is enhanced by other family members' input (Borun, Chambers, & Cleghorn, 1996). Their data revealed that families in their study did learn from exhibits and that there was a relationship between learning levels (depth of learning) and observable behaviors. The PISEC study suggested that "families engage in three levels of discourse: identifying, describing, and interpreting and applying" (Borun et al., 1996, p. 126).

Next, PISEC researchers took into account prior research and the results of their interviews and created a list of seven characteristics of family-friendly exhibits to incorporate into their museums and test further. According to Borun & Dritsas (1997) family-friendly exhibits are:

1. Multi-Sided -- Family can cluster around exhibit;
2. Multi-user -- Interaction allows for several sets of hands (or bodies);
3. Accessible -- Comfortably used by children and adults;
4. Multi-Outcome -- Observation and interaction are sufficiently complex to foster group discussion
5. Multi-Modal -- Appeals to different learning styles and levels of knowledge;

6. Readable -- Text is arranged in easily understood segments; and
7. Relevant -- Provides cognitive links to visitors' existing knowledge and experience. (p. 180)

Borun, Chambers, Dritsas, and Johnson (1997) used exhibits in four different science museums to test whether or not exhibits enhanced using the above criteria led to more active family learning than control exhibits. They concluded that the enhanced exhibits did indeed increase active family learning (Borun et al., 1997). These seven characteristics are still being implemented in museums today (Borun 2008).

In summary, the PISEC Family Learning Project advanced the family learning research field by:

1. Developing new methods for observing families
2. Using both qualitative and quantitative assessments of learning
3. Finding a list of "performance indicator" behaviors that show learning is taking place
4. Showing that exhibits that included family-friendly characteristics can improve family learning, and
5. Testing and re-testing both theory and application at a variety of free-choice venues helps show the potential generalizability of approaches to improving family learning (Borun et al., 1997).

Ultimately, "PISEC found that families are learning in science museums and that this learning can be enhanced and extended through thoughtful exhibit design" (Borun et al., 1998, p. 52).

A decade after the PISEC study, Ellenbogen, Luke, and Dierking (2004) took another look at the state of research in this field. Upon examining the literature from the mid-1990s through 2004, Ellenbogen et al. (2004) noticed three trends. First, converging theoretical perspectives led to shared understandings as to what constituted family learning. Second, more

rigorous and standardized methodologies were emerging. Finally, the authors noted that researchers were increasingly regarding families as learning institutions in their own right (Ellenbogen et al., 2004). The authors suggested that these three elements were beginning to reveal a more cohesive body of family learning research.

### **A Shift in Theoretical Perspectives**

In the early years of family learning research (1980s), most studies were based on behaviorist models of learning that assumed that visitors would learn the right material or the right answer if visitors were simply provided with a well-designed exhibit (Falk, 2007). This perspective was a museum-centered approach that did not take into account the visitor's background. To a certain extent behaviorist ideas persist today although most researchers agree that a complex suite of factors contribute to learning in free-choice settings (Falk, 2007). Current researchers are primarily influenced by sociocultural and constructivist theories which advocate taking a holistic view of learning (Ellenbogen et al., 2004; Falk, 2007; Phipps, 2010). These broader perspectives require researchers to look beyond the museum itself to examine "the ways in which the family group is situated within the larger social and cultural context" (Ellenbogen et al., 2004, p. S50).

### **Families as Learning Institutions**

While Ellenbogen et al.'s (2004) literature review concluded that the field was beginning to focus on the family as an educational institution in its own right, Dierking (2010) agreed with the importance of putting the family at the center of the researcher's focus. She said,

The very first learning group a person belongs to is her family and this group is so important that anthropologists, sociologists and social psychologists refer to the family as an educational institution, similar to a museum or school but without the bricks and mortar. (Dierking, 2012, para. 1)

Ellenbogen et al. (2004) went on to explain that families use free-choice settings as tools or resources they can use to build family identity. Adams, Luke, and Ancelet (2010) also recognized that researchers and museums were beginning to consider families as educational institutions unto themselves. Other terms used in the literature are “communities of practice,” and “communities of learners” which are defined as, “groups that, through social interaction come to common understandings of a topic” (Astor-Jack, Whaley, Dierking, Perry, & Garibay, 2007, p. 222). This shift to a more holistic perspective in the research literature indicates that many researchers have been taking a more family-centered approach that attempts to view family learning broadly from multiple perspectives.

### **Methodologies for Measuring Free-Choice Learning**

The challenges of measuring free-choice learning have been well-documented. Falk and Dierking (2000) explained that,

Over the years providing compelling evidence for museum-based learning has proved challenging. As it turns out, this is not because the evidence did not exist but because museum learning researchers and the public alike have had the wrong search image and were using flawed tools. (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 9)

Methods such as testing cognitive gains are ultimately “impractical, disruptive, and at times impossible, given the features, norms, and typical practices in museums” as demonstrated by the fact that visitors are on their leisure time and free to do whatever they wish (Shouse et al., 2010, p. 147). Falk and Dierking (2000) argued that researchers have asked fundamentally flawed questions in the past such as “What does an individual learn as a consequence of visiting this museum, or seeing this exhibition, or attending this lecture?” (p. 11-12). The authors believe “The better, more realistic question is, ‘How does this museum, exhibition, or lecture contribute to what someone knows, believes, feels, or is capable of doing?’” (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p.11-12; Falk, 2005). Researchers in free-choice settings have come to the conclusion that

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

“assessments should fit the kind of participant experience that make these environments attractive and engaging . . . [and] should not undermine the features that make for effective learning there” (National Research Council, 2009, p.77).

Therefore, researchers have adopted methodologies that have evolved in complexity and scope since there are multiple interacting factors in the venue’s setting and in its audience that researchers must address in order to identify or measure learning that is taking place (Allen et al., 2007). Studies have built upon procedures that Borun et al. (1996) developed and have included “discourse analysis, video and audio recording of moment-by-moment interactions, pre, post, and post-post-interviewing, journaling, talk-aloud cued visits, and providing family members with cameras as a documentation and meaning making tool” (Ellenbogen et al., 2004, p. S51).

Another important element of free-choice learning is that learning is often revealed over time (Ellenbogen et al., 2004). Rennie and Johnson (2007) felt the best way to deal with the issue of time without shadowing a visitor indefinitely was to use different data-gathering techniques during and after the visit to collect and examine “snapshots” of visitors’ experiences and memories.

Sanford’s (2010) study noted that researchers are still refining which methods are most feasible to use in order to reveal the richness of family learning in free-choice settings. Some indicators (time spent, exhibit engagement, and interpretive talk) are easier to measure because they take less time and effort. However, her study revealed that measuring only one learning indicator creates an incomplete picture of free-choice family learning. Falk (2007) agreed when he wrote, “Understanding learning in and from museums requires the simultaneous investigation of multiple variables. . . . Simple, reductionist approaches to understanding learning from museums will simply not suffice” (p.14). Researchers have continued to invent new ways of

interviewing and observing families and gathering data in order to create a more appropriate picture of family learning.

In addition to not knowing exactly how many factors and to what degree those factors influence learning, researchers also agree that the myriad outcomes that can indicate museum impact are also not fully understood (Rennie & Johnson, 2007). Therefore, measuring free-choice learning is an on-going challenge researchers must approach creatively as more and more institutions are looking for clearer indications of visitor learning as a result of their experiences with programs and exhibits.

### **The Contextual Model of Learning**

While measuring the true depth and breadth of learning in free-choice settings is an ongoing challenge for researchers, models have been created that frame the multiple contexts that influence free-choice learning. Falk and Dierking's extensive research led them to develop an initial framework of contexts that visitors bring with them and experience before, during, and after their visits to free-choice settings. Falk and Dierking's (2000) Contextual Model of Learning illustrated how Personal, Sociocultural, and Physical contexts overlap and influence visitor learning. Their model has evolved with further research, to include 12 factors that influence learning. Those factors are:

#### **Personal Context**

1. Motivation and expectations
2. Prior knowledge and experience
3. Prior interests and beliefs
4. Choice and control

#### **Sociocultural Context**

5. Within group social mediation
6. Facilitated mediation by others
7. Cultural background and upbringing

### **Physical Context**

8. Advance organizers
  9. Orientation to the physical space
  10. Architecture and large-scale environment
  11. Design of exhibits and content of labels
  12. Subsequent reinforcing events and experiences outside the museum
- (Falk & Storksdieck, 2005, p. 747)

Falk & Storksdieck (2005) explained that

Research has shown that these 12 factors contribute to the quality of a museum experience, though the relative importance of any one of these factors may vary between particular visitors and venues (e.g., science centers, natural history museums, zoos, planetaria, nature centers, etc.). While there exists evidence that each of these factors influences learning, we do not currently know to what extent each of these factors contributes to learning outcomes, in what ways, and for whom. (Falk & Storksdieck, 2005, p. 747)

Rennie and Johnson (2004) came to a similar conclusion that learning is personal, contextual, and takes time. They reiterated that the factor of time is important, since a visitor's free-choice experiences have the potential to be applied elsewhere in a visitor's life. Over time families may talk about the visit, use it as a catalyst to pursue related learning or experiences, or build upon what they learned about each other to grow closer as a family (Astor-Jack et al., 2007).

### **The Museum Visitor Experience Model**

Falk (2009) has since expanded on the Conceptual Model of Learning to create a Museum Visitor Experience Model (see *Figure 2*). He used the Contextual Model of Learning as its base (represented by the intersection of the Personal, Physical, and Sociocultural Contexts at the center of *Figure 2*). It also illustrates how visitors bring motivations, identities, and perceptions of what the museum can offer to the visit and subsequently the museum itself has its own messages and physical setting that influence visitors' experiences. The arrows in the figure represent time as an additional consideration for visitor experiences. According to Falk (2009),



## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

visitors make meaning of their experiences during and after the visit as a result of the confluence of all the factors in the model.

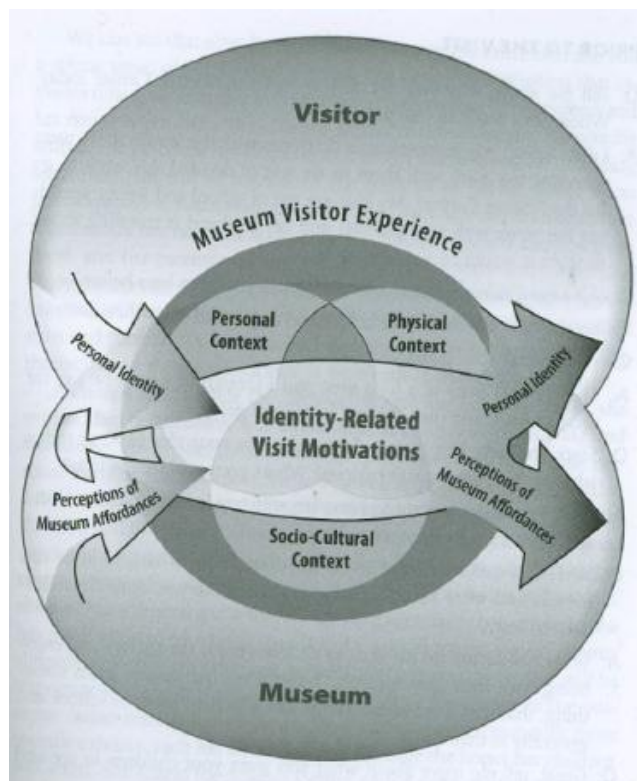


Figure 2. The Museum Visitor Experience Model (Falk, 2009, p. 161)

Portions of the models mentioned above will be used in the following sections as lenses through which to examine the recent literature on family learning in museums. It is important to keep in mind however, that even though the contexts or factors may be examined separately, they are inseparable and the interaction of the factors is unique for each family and to a certain extent, for each family member. The following section addresses the Personal context that family members bring to their visit and identity-related visit motivations are discussed within the Personal context. Next, the Sociocultural context, which is especially important to family groups, is examined. Finally, the Physical context of the museum is addressed with family learning in mind.

### **The Personal Context of Learning in Free-Choice Settings**

**Motivations and expectations.** Motivations, expectations, and visit plans are negotiated among family group members before and during the visit on both a personal level and collectively as a family unit (Moussouri, 2003). Some research studies have interviewed children about their free-choice learning experiences, but because it is more difficult to obtain permission to interview children, most data comes from interviews of adult members of family groups. Moussouri (2003) interviewed and obtained responses from adults and children from 29 families who visited a science and technology exhibit in the United Kingdom. Her study led to a framework for understanding factors that contribute to a family's museum-going agenda. She accounted for factors such as the role the museum serves in the family's social life and the family's perception of the visit as a social activity (Moussouri, 2003).

Families in Moussouri's (2003) study said they were motivated to visit the museum for multiple reasons including for education, life-cycle traditions (returning to a museum they had visited as a child), entertainment, and/or as a family outing. Moussouri (2003) also found that prior experiences in museums influenced their visit plans and expectations.

**Parents' motivations and expectations.** Moussouri (2003) and Briseño-Garzón, Anderson, and Anderson's (2007b) studied family museum-goer motivations and expectations and conducted interviews with 13 parents. They found that their adult subjects' motivations were child-centered. Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007b) found that "overall, the adults of the participating families entered the venue with a three-fold recreation-learning-social motivated agenda" (p. 81). In addition, Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007b) and Falk, Moussouri, and Coulson (1998) believe visitors see a connection between fun and learning throughout their free-choice experiences.

Packer (2006) also concluded that, “learning for fun is a unique and distinctive offering of educational leisure experiences” (p. 329).

Many visitors to museums and other educational leisure settings, when asked whether they came to learn something, will answer, ‘No, we just wanted to have a look.’ On the surface, this may suggest that visitors are not highly motivated to learn. However, further questioning often indicates that the experience visitors are expecting or hoping to find is one of discovery, exploration and adventure, which at the very least primes them for a learning experience. What they seek from their visit is not so much to *learn something* as to engage in an *experience of learning* that is inherently valuable or enjoyable in its own right, regardless of the learning outcomes that may or may not ensue. (Packer, 2006, p. 329)

While the experience of learning is fun for many visitors, there are some visitors who arrive at a free-choice setting with the goal of learning about a subject that is important to them. In other words, the reason for their visit involves a particular learning outcome. Other visitors find out by accident during their experience that learning is fun (Packer, 2006). While the formal education field tends to emphasize the *learning* end of the learning- fun continuum, the free-choice education field may have more freedom to offer experiences on the *fun* end of that continuum. Packer and Ballantyne (2004) argued that, “Education and entertainment are not only compatible, but synergistic, in the context of educational leisure settings” (p. 54).

**Agendas.** Researchers have continued to delve deeper into understanding more about visitor motivations and expectations and how visitor agendas evolve over the course of their visit as a result of the interaction between the visitor’s agenda and the museum’s agenda. A museum’s agenda can be defined as its overall goals for visitor behavior and the messages it wants visitors to consider during and after their visit (Moussouri, 2003). These agendas tend to be static. Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007b) found that for the 13 adults they interviewed, intrinsic factors such as developing interest in a particular subject during the visit and extrinsic factors such as attention span, weather, and crowdedness resulted in adjustments in family agendas during

aquarium visits. Moussouri (2003) and Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007b) found that family agendas are dynamic since they are influenced by several complex factors. This supports Falk and Dierking's (2000) and Falk's (2009) models that illustrate the multiple factors influencing learning outcomes.

*Grandparents' motivations and expectations.* Grandparents often bring their grandchildren to free-choice settings. As American families continue to increase in diversity, Bengston (2001) noted that, "Family relationships across several generations are becoming increasingly important in American society" (p. 1). Bengston (2001) also pointed out that many grandparents play important roles in their extended families such as serving as caregivers for grandchildren while parents work. Studying grandparent-grandchild groups in free-choice settings is arguably becoming more important as the American population ages.

Few research studies have focused on grandparents and grandchildren as museum audiences (Beaumont & Sterry, 2005; Sanford et al., 2007). Beaumont & Sterry (2005) conducted a study on the motivations and experiences of 44 grandparents who visited a United Kingdom art gallery with their grandchildren. Grandparents gave several reasons for visiting the museum including but not limited to: (a) their grandchildren wanted to visit, (b) they wanted to share specific exhibits with their grandchildren, (c) they had watched the new gallery being built, (d) they themselves had visited as children, or (e) they were fulfilling their children's request to visit with their grandchildren (Beaumont & Sterry, 2005). Moussouri (2003) interviewed grandparents who were altruistic in their responses to questions about their personal motivations for their visit to a museum. In these cases, the "grandparents denied any personal expectation and stated that their visit was child-oriented" (p. 482). These responses were similar to the responses Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007b) found when interviewing parents. However, grandparents' motivations

may be more socially- oriented than parents'. Grandparents in Moussouri's (2003) study expected to reminisce and share family history with their grandchildren and the social aspects of the visit were the central focus of the experience.

*Home-educating families' motivations and expectations.* One special type of family group that Bachman and Dierking (2010) studied was home-educating families. They found that the 11 home-educating families they studied "use museums to augment on-going projects, engage in community service, and as starting points for new learning efforts" (p. 51). The families valued "connecting with people, institutions, and real artifacts in order to contextualize and deepen their learning" (p. 51). Home-educating families are a particular group that may be a relatively small audience for free-choice settings, but nevertheless come with unique expectations and assets that venues may choose to explore further.

**Prior knowledge, experiences, interests, and beliefs.** While prior knowledge, experiences, interests, and beliefs are typically examined on an individual basis in free-choice learning research and individual family members may be at different developmental levels, families arrive at free-choice settings as communities of learners. Family members often share similar beliefs and prior leisure experiences as a collective group. The importance of visitors' prior knowledge and experiences has been emphasized in the free-choice learning literature (e.g. Briseño-Garzón et al., 2007b; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Moussouri, 2003). Briseño-Garzón et al.'s (2007b) study revealed that "participants' interests and what they looked forward to obtaining from the aquarium experience were shaped by particular and personally relevant prior events and knowledge" (p. 87). For underrepresented audiences in particular, a potential lack of experience in free-choice settings and differing interests and beliefs are factors that influence some families' free-choice learning experiences.

*Underrepresented families' prior knowledge, experiences, interests, and beliefs.* We do know that for National Park visitation “Latinos, Asians, and African Americans are underrepresented among visitors compared to their percent of the U.S. population” (Sheffield & Roberts, 2011, p. 4). However, few studies have focused on underrepresented families who engage in free-choice learning opportunities. Stein et al. (2008) noted that many free-choice learning institutions aim to serve diverse audiences and therefore it is important to consider visitor needs “through the lens of the visitors themselves” (p. 180). Understanding visitors’ prior experience, or their lack of experience, in free-choice settings can help practitioners to better meet visitor needs. Parents who do not have prior experience in free-choice settings may not feel comfortable mediating the experience for their families. During her doctoral research in which she interviewed Latina mothers at two California natural history exhibit halls, Melber (2006) found that

Latina mothers who had never visited their local museum before explained a fear of not being welcome, not knowing the answers to questions their children may ask, and not feeling that they were knowledgeable enough to appreciate the museum as a learning environment. (p. 37)

Based on this research, it is clear that museums could do more to support parents of any cultural background who are unfamiliar with such environments.

Another factor to consider is that families may have different perspectives on free-choice settings as places for learning. Shouse et al. (2010) found that,

The role of museums and other cultural institutions in education varies across cultural groups and may complicate their relationship to museum experiences. For example, some cultural groups may simultaneously express a very strong commitment to education, fail to see museums as a place where education happens, and defer to teachers and schools on matters related to educational practice. (p. 146)

Overall more research is needed to discover how the prior knowledge, interests, and beliefs of underrepresented families may be influencing their choice not to visit free-choice settings as often as other groups.

**Children's choice, control, and expectations.** Wu, Holmes, and Tribe (2010) conducted a study in Taiwan that shed some light on the role children play in deciding to visit free-choice settings. Thirty-seven families with children were interviewed. In this study, researchers consciously included children in the interview process and considered them “potential active participants” in museum-visit decision making” (p. 711). The study revealed that children wanted to visit museums after hearing about them at school or because they had had positive experiences during previous visits (Wu et al., 2010). The authors found that the more children knew about a museum, and the older they were, the more active part they had in the decision-making (Wu et al., 2010).

Moussouri (2003) interviewed children from 29 family groups and asked about them about their expectations for their visit. She found that children were interested in specific exhibits, particularly in the hands-on and active elements of the visit (Moussouri, 2003). Children have also been observed making choices about which exhibits the rest of the family visited. Szechter and Carey's (2009) study of 20 parent-child dyads in an informal science education center showed that children were the ones who chose exhibits for their families and used hands-on elements more than parents did. Wood and Wolf (2010) also found that parents at children's museums preferred to let children older than toddlers initiate the activity across a variety of exhibition types. These observations ultimately point to interesting relationships among family members in regards to choice and control in museum settings. Children should not be overlooked as potential leaders during museum visits, as they often take on that role.

**Identity-related visit motivations.** An emerging area of the research field has centered on the concept that visitors arrive with a museum-goer “identity” and that adults usually fall into one of five identity categories. Identities could be considered a combination of a person’s motivations, expectations, needs, interests and desired roles for a particular visit. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, research on museum-goer identities has been included under this “The Personal Context of Learning in Free-Choice Settings” section.

*Adult museum-goer identities.* The concept of a museum-goer identity is one Falk and his colleagues began using to better understand and simplify complex visitor agendas (e.g. Falk, 2009; Falk, Heimlich, & Bronnenkant, 2008; Falk & Storksdieck, 2010). They have been researching ways to use information about visitor identities to make predictions about what the visitor is likely to value and focus on during their visit, even during their visit with a group, as is the case with adults who visit with their families.

Falk et al. (2008) grouped free-choice adult visitors’ descriptions of themselves, their experiences, expectations, and reasons for visiting into 5 categories: (a) Explorers, (b) Facilitators, (c) Professional Hobbyists, (d) Experience Seekers, and (e) Rechargers<sup>2</sup> (p. 57) (see Appendix B for descriptions of each identity). Visitors may enter a museum with one or more of these identities and identities may change between visits and venues (Falk 2009). Falk et al. (2008) found that for the 1500 adults in their study, “Roughly 55 percent began their zoo or aquarium visit with a single, dominant, identity-related motivation” (p. 71).

These identity categories reflect the situations most people find themselves in when visiting free-choice settings. However, Falk has not yet studied the concept of children’s

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<sup>2</sup> The initial term used for this category was “Spiritual Pilgrims”



museum-goer identities. Falk (2009) concluded, through extensive interviews and studies, that knowing adult identities can generate basic, predictable clues for how the visit will generally progress. Ultimately, identities along with the personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts of the visit strongly influence a visitor's choices during his or her visit (Falk 2009).

*How identities influence family group dynamics and learning perceptions.* The adults Falk et al. (2008) interviewed were all members of visiting family groups that included children, so the researchers were able to gather information about how identities influence family group dynamics. It is important to note that Falk (2009) found that although it may seem as if all parents would take on a Facilitator identity and be focused on enabling their children's learning not all parents operate in the Facilitator role. Although many visitors may "display continuous concern" for their children and their children's well-being, Falk (2009) found that for many adult visitors in family groups, their behavior is not primarily motivated by their children (p. 103).

For example, Falk et al. (2008) found that families in which adults were categorized as Facilitators were "child-driven," meaning the children primarily chose what to see and do. Experience Seeker visitors, however, "were evenly divided between those who said the visit was adult-driven and those who said it was child-driven" (p. 68). In addition, "individuals identified as Explorers, Professional/Hobbyists and Spiritual Pilgrims were the least likely to allow their children to lead the way" (p. 68). It is clear from this study that adult identities do influence family group dynamics in free-choice settings.

Interestingly, Falk (2009) concluded that generally Facilitating parents want to be perceived as good parents. He found that they recognized and insisted that their museum visit was a great learning experience, but when asked what their child learned, these adults were unable to provide any details of what their child learned (Falk 2009). On the other hand, Briseño-

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

Garzón, Anderson, and Anderson (2007a) found that parents in three of the thirteen families they studied could identify that their children had made cognitive developments as a result of their aquarium visit.

Facilitating parents in Falk's (2009) study may have struggled to state what their child learned, and both Falk (2009) and Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007a) found that adults did not report their own learning. Presumably this was because the adults were focused on their children's learning rather than their own. The Facilitators interviewed were often reluctant to offer examples of what they had learned. When they did, what was learned seemed to be the result of an exhibit having caught their attention (Falk & Storksdieck, 2010).

Although Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007a) were studying adult learning and not focused on visitor identities, their interviews revealed parent responses similar to those that Falk and Storksdieck (2010) compiled. They were surprised to find that overwhelmingly the 13 parents they interviewed did not consider their experience at the aquarium to have been a learning experience for them personally. These results were surprising for a few reasons. First, some of the adults had mentioned in pre-visit interviews that they were at the aquarium to learn. Second, the adults were observed exhibiting learning behaviors during their visit. Finally, the researchers found evidence of cognitive, social, and affective learning in their study, yet the adults did not see themselves as learners.

Adults in the Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007a) study visited an aquarium and displayed new knowledge of conservation-related issues. Other visitor outcomes that the adults talked about were their families' social dynamics and learning styles. Furthermore the adults demonstrated affective learning by expressing "appreciation and recognition of marine life diversity and exceptionality" (p. 310). Nevertheless, in the post-visit interviews those same visitors "did not

see themselves as learners, but rather as caregivers whose main task was to provide educational and entertaining experiences” for their children (p. 307).

Moussouri’s (2003) data differed from Briseño-Garzón et al.’s (2007a). She recognized in her adult subjects’ language that they considered themselves active learners, that they used the museum as a learning tool, and that they used the museum to spark their children’s interest in science and technology. These results indicate that her subjects may have been Explorers or perhaps were balancing both Explorer and Facilitator roles.

Falk and Storksdieck (2010) shared some interviews that illustrated commonalities among Explorer parents. They found that Explorer parents’ visits were shaped by their own curiosity and their need to find interesting things to learn during their visit, not necessarily their children’s learning needs. One response Explorer parents had in common with each other was that in interviews these adults “specifically and enthusiastically talked about what they learned...with little or no prompting from researchers” (p. 208-209). While the concept of a museum-goer identity is relatively new, it is a tool researchers are developing to ultimately find ways to better meet visitor goals and needs. However, it is important to keep in mind that these identities are not yet labels that museum-goers would recognize.

The Personal context of family visits to free-choice settings includes many complex factors that influence family learning and the ways families experience their visit. Families that are motivated to be entertained also seek the enjoyment that comes from learning about new things. It is important for practitioners and researchers to continue to develop understandings about how families arrive expecting to experience various degrees of fun, learning, and socialization and that the museum’s agenda will also influence how their visit progresses. Grandparent – grandchild, home-educating, and underrepresented family groups may have needs

and motivations that are slightly different from those of other family groups. Adult identities also affect family dynamics during free-choice experiences.

### **The Sociocultural Context of Families' Museum Visits**

Falk and Dierking's (2000) Contextual Model of Learning calls for researchers and practitioners to recognize the social and cultural contexts that visitors bring with them to free-choice settings. For families this context is extremely important because they interact with each other frequently throughout their visit. Family members mediate the visit for one another, often taking turns teaching and learning. Staff and volunteers at free-choice venues may also mediate the experience for family visitors by answering questions and leading programs. All visitors experience free-choice learning through lenses informed from their cultural background and upbringing. The free-choice venues themselves present content and experiences through cultural perspectives that are sometimes intentional, but most often unintentional. These factors and their influence on family learning are considered in the following sections.

**Family learning behavior.** McManus (1992) compared families during museum visits to hunter-gatherer groups searching for knowledge. Ash (2003) and Falk and Dierking (2000) observed families that split into dyads and triads during their visit and regrouped to share what they had learned. They also observed that some families stayed together throughout their whole visit.

Research from two decades ago (e.g. Blud 1990), and more recent work (e.g. Packer & Ballantyne 2005) emphasized the importance of family interaction in family learning. Blud (1990) went so far as to say that, "Interaction between visitors may be as important as interaction between the visitor and the exhibit" (p. 43). Borun et al. (1998) emphasized how visitor learning can be enhanced by other family members' insights and input. Families themselves often tell

researchers they value the collaborative aspects of learning in museums (Allen & Gutwill, 2009; Briseño-Garzón et al., 2007a). Astor-Jack et al. (2007) argued that in order to understand the nature of learning in museums, one must understand the social processes of learning. As a result, researchers have put substantial focus on studying conversations as a way to better understand family learning.

**The power of conversation for family learning.** One way in which the social nature of family learning is evident is how frequently families talk throughout their visit. Researchers have studied family conversations as a way to gain insight into how and what families are learning in these settings. For families, time spent at free-choice settings is typically dominated by conversation, which includes asking questions (usually about specific objects), and sharing knowledge (Falk & Dierking 2000).

Borun et al. (1996) found the most consistent indicators of learning were in conversations that included analysis, synthesis, and explanation. References to or discussions about previous experiences often come up in family conversations and are used as a way for families to connect what they are learning to what they are familiar with from their shared past (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Ellenbogen et al., 2004). That new learning experience then becomes a shared family memory that can be referred to in the future. One reason why it might be particularly easy for many people to access memories of museum visits is that they are rare experiences for most visitors. Crowley and Jacobs (2002) proposed that learning conversations in museums can be powerful foundations upon which further learning can be built because the novelty of the visit can make it particularly memorable.

**Parents' social mediation strategies.** In addition to conversations, parents take on a variety of approaches when they mediate their children's experiences in free-choice settings.

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

Mediation can mean taking on the role of teacher, navigator, questioner, helper, or interpreter of the experience. Children's museums in particular, are often settings for parent-child interaction research. Gaskins (2008) observed that when parents came upon children's museums exhibits they quickly assessed their child's interest and ability as well as the exhibit's potential for engaging their child, to see if there was a match and whether or not they should participate.

If the exhibition appears simple and straightforward, caregivers will tend to let children act on their own. If the exhibition looks somewhat more complicated, then they will tend to interact with their children to bridge the gap between what the children can do on their own and the exhibition's activities. (Gaskins, 2008, p. 12)

According to Gaskins, (2008) in order for parents to best support children, adults must quickly understand the exhibit's message and goals and it must be constructed in such a way that it is big enough for adults to use.

Several recent family learning research studies have focused on parent-child interactions (Astor-Jack et al., 2007). Parents have been observed exhibiting what Moussouri (2003) called *spontaneous 'teaching' behavior* while at exhibits and during post-visit interviews with family learning researchers. Parents, especially those of young children, posed questions and provided clues and explanations in order to assist their children (Moussouri 2003). Parents and caregivers have a variety of styles they use to interact with their children in free-choice settings, depending on the context. Szechter and Carey (2009) found that parents described evidence, gave directions, provided explanations, made connections, and elicited predictions when working with their children during their time using types of exhibits that encourage "Active Prolonged Engagement" through minimally guided, open-ended activities (p. 846). Other forms of parent-child interaction are explained in the sections that follow.

***Parents who stand back at children's museums.*** When visiting children's museums, many parents do not intervene in the children's activities at exhibits unless their child needs help (Downey, Krantz, & Skidmore, 2010; Wood & Wolf, 2010). Overwhelmingly parents revealed in post-visit interviews that they stood back because they enjoyed letting their children discover new ideas independently (Wood & Wolf, 2010). Parents also have reported that they value observing their children's learning behavior in order to learn about their children's learning styles and strengths (Moussouri, 2003; Briseño-Garzón et al., 2007a; Wood & Wolf, 2010). However, Wood and Wolf (2010) cautioned that

When a parent stands back, or appears not to be interacting in the exhibition setting, it should not necessarily be interpreted as non-engagement, nor can the parent be seen as unprepared or unable to interact. It is indeed possible that family learning is still taking place, but understanding the motivation and choice of the parent can provide new directions for the design and development of exhibitions or individual elements. (Wood & Wolf, 2010, p. 48)

The above findings point to the importance of using caution when interpreting family dynamics while observing free-choice visits.

***Challenges cultivating parent-child interaction.*** Improving caregiver-child interactions is an area of research that has received more attention recently. The Indianapolis Children's Museum chose to change its mission from "serving children" to "serving families" (Borun, 2008; Wood & Wolf, 2010) after taking into account sociocultural learning research that emphasized the importance of adult-child interaction as well as literature that "identifies the benefits to children's learning when parents act as play facilitators" (Downey et al., 2010, p. 15). The change in the Indianapolis Children's Museum's mission can be described as a change in the museum's agenda. Museums wanting to improve their programs and exhibits may incorporate research-based practices or shift their mission.

In a study that was conducted in the four years after the museum changed its mission statement and modified programs accordingly, Wood and Wolf (2010) found that parents continued to stand back at both interactive and non-interactive exhibits. These observations revealed stark differences between the museum's agenda and approach and the parent's agenda and behavior that warranted further examination. In a similar study, Downey et al. (2010) found discrepancies between parents' beliefs about play and museum professionals' beliefs about play.

While parents may have good intentions, they may not be aware of the museum's agenda or latest research that supports it. Some parents may see the museum as a place where their child can safely make choices, experiment, and learn better without their help. Museums that use play as a mechanism for children's learning need to do more to help parents learn about the learning benefits of play and also help them to play alongside their children (Downey et al., 2010). Those resulting understandings could mean more enriching experiences for families (Downey et al., 2010).

***Helping parents mediate children's free-choice learning.*** Astor-Jack et al. (2007) explained that adults must feel comfortable with the subject matter and the museum setting in order to mediate the experience for their children. Schauble et al. (2002) warned that, "unless careful attention is paid to helping the helpers, the energy and resources devoted to deepening museum learning may be wasted, or at best, underexploited" (p. 449).

Researchers have begun studying how pre-exhibit instructions might help children's caregivers be better teachers. Benjamin, Haden, and Wilkerson's (2010) findings suggested that even brief instructions can improve parent mediation skills at children's museum exhibits. In addition to further information about exhibit concepts, some caregivers in Benjamin et al.'s (2010) study were also given instructions on possible conversational styles and questions to use.



When they used the prompts, there was an increase in their interactions with their children and joint talk between children and caregivers compared to caregivers who did not receive these types of instructions (Benjamin et al., 2010).

Gutwill and Allen (2010) ultimately found that “offering parents (or care-givers) a structured, coinvestigative role in exploring phenomena may significantly enhance families’ inquiry” (p 738). This coinvestigative role helped parents avoid teaching their children didactically and also helped them to avoid delegating simple tasks to children while taking on more difficult tasks themselves (Gutwill & Allen, 2010). When parents in the study articulated their thoughts, questions, and discoveries, the family’s inquiry skills were also enhanced (Gutwill & Allen, 2010).

**Rotating behavioral roles.** Parents are not always the ones leading or mediating experiences in free-choice settings. Family members have been observed taking on various roles during visits to free-choice settings. Examples of behavioral roles include a child taking on the role of exhibit chooser in a particular part of the museum, a parent taking on the role of storyteller, or a grandparent acting as a questioner at a living history museum. According to Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007b), leading roles are often shared among members of visiting family groups. They observed that the role of leading the family through an exhibit by choosing what the group sees and does was rotated and shared by both children and adults in most every group in their study of 13 families at the Vancouver Aquarium (Briseño-Garzón et al., 2007b).

**Grandparents’ roles as mediators.** As is the case with other special types of family groups, there were a limited number of studies on grandparent-grandchild interactions (Leinhardt & Knutson, 2006). This research has revealed that grandparents, more than parents, are inclined to focus on their grandchildren’s enjoyment and the social and emotional aspects of their time

together in free-choice settings (Moussouri, 2003; Sanford, Knutson, & Crowley, 2007).

Grandparents tend to prioritize spending time and talking with their grandchildren in these settings (Sanford et al., 2007). They also often choose to co-learn with their grandchildren. Sanford et al. (2007) studied 31 pairs of grandparents and their grandchildren who visited the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. They observed that 70% of the pairs were learning collaboratively (p. 140).

Researchers have observed grandparents taking on a variety of roles in free-choice learning contexts. Leinhardt and Knutson (2006) in their study of one grandparent-grandchild group visiting a natural history museum categorized and provided examples of three roles that particular pair of grandparents took on during their visit. They named these roles “family storyteller and keeper of family memories,” “playmates,” and modelers of “social interactions that are respectful of children’s emerging understandings” (p. 239). The role of storyteller may stem from grandparents who wish to build relationships and share family history with their grandchildren (Beaumont & Sterry, 2005). The various roles grandparents assume during their visit illustrate the ways in which grandparents choose to mediate their grandchildren’s visit experiences.

Sanford et al. (2007) asked 31 grandparents to explain their museum roles in post-visit interviews and found their reported roles to be similar to parental roles in museums. They found that these grandparents self-reported their roles as *teacher*, *playmate*, or *coach*. They felt that it contrasted Leinhardt and Knutson (2006) who found their grandparent group to be storytellers, playmates, and social modelers. Ultimately, Sanford et al. (2007) concluded that grandparent and parent roles in museums were similar.

**Children's roles as mediators.** When children visit museums with their families, they too can serve as mediators. They often act as leaders, choosing which exhibits to explore or they can take on a teaching role in free-choice settings. A number of studies have cited examples of children excitedly sharing with their families what they had learned during a previous school visit (Beaumont & Sterry, 2005; Lyons, Becker, & Roberts, 2010; Moussouri, 2003).

In fact, the initial decision to visit a free-choice setting can be a result of a child's particular interest or *island of expertise*. Crowley and Jacobs (2002) defined islands of expertise as topics, such as dinosaurs, that children develop an intense interest in over a period of time. They describe the process of developing an island of expertise as fundamentally social since the child's subject of interest often becomes woven into other family activities (Crowley & Jacobs, 2002). Lyons et al. (2010) noted that during museum visits some children will act as teachers when they have developed this type of expertise.

**Facilitated mediation by others: Family interactions with staff and volunteers.**

Another element of the social nature of family visits to free-choice settings is that families often interact with free-choice learning staff and volunteers during their experience. This can be a form of facilitated mediation by others.

Falk and Dierking (2000) suggested that skilled staff and volunteers can positively influence and facilitate visitors' experiences. In a living history museum setting where visitors ask questions of docents dressed as historical characters, conversation is the primary means of learning. Rosenthal and Blankman-Hetrick (2002) discovered in their study of five families who visited a living history museum that family conversations were inspired by staff interpreters who engaged in the right balance of dialogue involving all family members. However, if the interpreter provided too much monologue or too little conversation, the researchers found little

indication that visitors were learning. In most museum settings Astor-Jack et al. (2007) made an anecdotal claim that, “most interactions between museum staff and the public remain didactic” and advised museum staff to create more participatory experiences for families (p. 226).

**Cultural differences in mediation styles.** Although Astor-Jack et al. (2007) noted a lack of research on potential cultural differences in the ways families socially interact in museums, a few recent studies were found. Melber (2006) and Stein et al. (2008) cautioned that some family groups may not encourage children to take on the role of teachers or leaders. Shouse et al. (2010) and Stein et al. (2008) also pointed out that museum agendas that encourage children to lead, teach, or challenge their elders’ ideas may conflict with families that value didactic approaches in which adults are seen as knowledge holders. Gaskins (2008) reminded practitioners to avoid the assumption that cultures share the same theoretical perspectives of how children learn best.

Gaskins (2008) studied 12 African-American families’ interaction tendencies in a children’s museum and found that adults from African-American visiting groups in her study spent 60% less time at child-directed exhibits than at non-collaborative exhibits. Gaskins (2008) concluded that “child-directed interaction was definitely not a comfortable style of interaction for African-Americans” in her study (p. 16). Conversely she found that

Hispanic American families embraced the opportunity for engaging in a joint activity, but... the focus for them was not on the children’s learning experience, but in accomplishing the goal of building something and that adults, particularly male caregivers, maintained control of the event (p.17).

This is relevant information for the NPS to consider because of the NPS’s desire to welcome and include diverse communities in park experiences (NPS, 2012). Perhaps those groups would be better represented if they were able to engage in exhibits that incorporated the strengths of their family dynamics.

Gaskins (2008) pointed out that U.S. children's museums are often dominated by the theoretical perspective that play leads to learning and that it is appropriate for adults to play alongside their children. However, play carries different meanings in different cultures and caregiver expectations differ as well (Gaskins, 2008). It is important that free-choice settings provide accommodations for these potential differences.

Families learn through their interactions and conversations with each other in free-choice settings. It can be challenging, however, for museum practitioners to effectively cultivate parent-child interactions so as to maximize family learning. Varieties of perspectives, parenting styles, and cultural values call for a flexible approach to helping parents mediate learning experiences for their children. Parents are not the only ones that mediate free-choice learning experiences, however. Other family members including grandparents and children have been observed taking on different roles throughout their visit. Staff and volunteers also contribute to the sociocultural context of family learning experiences in free-choice environments. Cultural differences must also be considered when attempting to engage underrepresented populations in free-choice experiences.

### **The Physical Context of Learning for Families: Exhibits**

The Physical context of a museum or free-choice setting has a strong influence on family museum visitor experiences. The Physical context encompasses elements such as a venue's website, its architectural layout, whether or not seating is available, the order exhibits are arranged, the way information is displayed, and ways visitors might continue their experience after the visit. These factors all play a role in family free-choice learning experiences.

**Advance organizers, orientation, and supplemental materials for families.** Moussouri (2003) found that families' perceptions of exhibits were heavily influenced by their own personal

and social agendas. Even so, when free-choice venues provide elements that orient visitors to the experience or guide or influence the way visits progress they still can influence a family's experience. Museum brochures, special exhibit guides, and websites are examples of what Falk and Dierking (2000) call advance organizers.

Gutwill and Allen's (2010) research exemplified how games can add structure to inquiry-based, hands-on science exhibits. "Visitors do not always have the expertise and confidence needed to conduct coherent, in-depth investigations to answer their questions" (Allen & Gutwill, 2009, p. 290). Therefore they designed and tested inquiry games to assist visitors in family groups learn these skills. Gutwill and Allen (2010) compared inquiry games with control conditions for 200 families and found that their "inquiry games increased the quantity and quality of families' scientific inquiry" (p. 722). In particular a "juicy questions" game was deemed successful at increasing families' inquiry behaviors and everyone in the family participated, collaborated, and articulated their interpretations of the experiment's results (Gutwill & Allen, 2010).

In a fashion similar to an inquiry game, the use of technology can enhance or detract from families' interactions at exhibits. Lyons et al. (2010) predicted that technology will infiltrate informal learning environments more and more and that museums can use technology to support both individual and collaborative learning. Hatala et al. (2009) developed a technology-based activity to enhance social interaction at exhibits. They described the design and initial stages of an evaluation process for determining if the activity could be successful with family groups. Their preliminary results from 18 families' use of the technology in a history museum were promising.

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

Electronic technology is not the only tool that can be used to enhance family learning. Materials can also be produced that supplement exhibits. Tenenbaum, Prior, Dowling, & Frost (2010) concluded from their study of 58 families' visit to a cultural and history museum in the United Kingdom that family learning can be assisted with the support of booklets or activities designed to guide families through exhibits that may have originally featured family-friendly design elements. Families in Tenenbaum et al.'s (2010) study "spent more time at the exhibits when assigned to the booklet and backpack conditions compared to the control conditions" (p. 248) and "children engaged in more historical talk when using the booklets" (p. 241). These findings point to ways in which free-choice settings may supplement existing exhibits to assist families without completely redesigning them.

**Exhibit design.** Exhibit design is certainly a factor that affects family learning in museums. Exhibits serve as the starting point for conversations among family members, but some exhibits facilitate conversation more than others. Museums used to have primarily static exhibits. In the past few decades, thanks to recommendations from Borun et al. (1998) and others (e.g. Falk & Dierking, 2000), free-choice settings have begun to incorporate more interactive, hands-on exhibits conducive to family learning.

Astor-Jack et al. (2007) noted that progress has generally been made in museums over the years to design exhibits to better meet families' needs. They claimed that progress has been made "particularly in exhibition and program development where there has been some effort to embed socially mediated notions of learning into the design process" (p. 225). Active Prolonged Engagement (APE) exhibits have been shown to increase time spent and learning talk for parent-child dyads in science museums (Szechter & Carey, 2009). Allen and Gutwill (2009) added that non-science museums also have been creating opportunities for visitors to ask questions and

investigate the museum's collection in an inquiry-based way. It must be noted, however that 12 years after the PISEC Family Learning Project provided seven characteristics of family-friendly exhibits, there is more room for growth in exhibit design for museums to better meeting the needs of family groups (Borun, 2008).

When it comes to the exhibit elements family visitors are drawn to most if they have visited the venue before, Wood and Wolf (2010) observed that hands-on exhibit elements in a children's museum were revisited much more than the exhibits labels. They also observed less interaction among family members who were repeat visitors. The authors concluded that better understanding the influence of repeat visits to museum settings would help develop aids to support family learning in the future.

**Reinforcing events and experiences outside free-choice venues.** Family learning does not end when visitors walk out of free-choice venues. Learning conversations often continue during the car ride home or around the dinner table. Allen and Gutwill (2009) followed-up with families who used their inquiry games during their museum visit and found 15% of families had used the skills they had learned after their visit. The authors proposed adding web components that would allow families to join citizen science communities to continue their experience beyond the museum (p. 301). These proposals were not intended to replace, but instead supplement the experiences.

Bachman and Dierking's (2010) surveys of home-educating families found pre-and post-visit materials would be helpful to families. Home-educating families in their study valued building long-term relationships with museums and appreciated service opportunities and behind-the-scenes opportunities. Their results indicated that many families may be interested in extending their free-choice learning beyond the confines of the site itself. Adults from 6 of the 13



## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

family groups interviewed by Briseño-Garzón et al. (2007b) indicated that they intended to engage in future activities related to their aquarium visit. Although the researchers were not able to follow-up on whether subsequent related activities occurred, the researchers concluded that “The learning impact of an informal experience not only resides in the experience itself, but also in the days and weeks following the visit” (Briseño-Garzón et al., 2007b, p. 87). This supports the importance the element of time plays in free-choice learning experiences.

In summary, research-based best practices can enhance family learning by optimizing the Physical context of a family museum visit. Strategies for enhancing the physical elements of a free-choice setting include using inquiry games, technology that enhances family interactions, and pre-and post-visit materials that allow families to extend the experience over time.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Conclusions from the Literature

Ellenbogen et al. (2004) concluded that “The field of family learning research remains in a critical development period” but that researchers have benefitted from using diverse methods and ideas while still uniting around common language, beliefs, and values (p. S55). These common values often center on constructivist and socio-cultural theories. Reflecting upon the last decade of research on learning in and from museums, Falk, Dierking, and Foutz (2007) recognized advances in the field and the need for further growth. They said, “The museum community continues to struggle to meaningfully document the impacts of its exhibitions, media, community-based programs, websites, and other educational efforts, and to apply those findings to the creation of useful and valid frameworks for exemplary practice” (Falk et al., 2007, p. xiv).

David Ucko of the National Science foundation agreed and wrote,

We certainly have a greater [theoretical] understanding than we used to have 10 to 20 years ago, but that has still not been translated into the different ways in which people design informal science education experiences. Not all practitioners have knowledge of this research. And for those who do, it’s not obvious how to translate it into specific applications.... [Professionals are] not necessarily learning from evaluations that are done elsewhere or even from their own institution’s evaluations done in previous years. So the field needs to do much better in terms of building on resources based on prior experience. It’s the only way for a field to move forward. (Falk, Dierking & Foutz, 2007, p. xv)

Given that the field is still developing and refining ways to document its impacts, it is clear that further research is needed to continue to increase understanding of families and their experiences and learning from free-choice environments.

Two models that have helped unify understandings about the nature of learning in free choice settings include Falk and Dierking’s (2000) and Falk & Storksdieck’s (2005) updated Contextual Model of Learning and Falk’s (2009) Museum Visitor Experience Model. These

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

models summarized the factors that influence learning and can be used as starting points from which to examine family experiences during and after visits to free-choice settings. Since multiple factors influence family experiences at free-choice settings, these models are particularly useful for simplifying and categorizing the complex elements visitors bring to their visits. These models have been used in this paper as frameworks through which to categorize the last five years of research in the field.

Family learning in free-choice settings can be measured using a variety of approaches, but measurements must go beyond cognitive tests to encompass social and affective elements as well. Ultimately learning is personal, contextual, and takes time (Rennie & Johnston, 2004). Research studies have consistently revealed that families learn through their social interactions with each other and their conversations. Given these understandings, there are a number of implications, considerations, and recommendations the NPS should consider in order to improve family experiences at NPS units. Striving to make learning easy and enjoyable for families is a simple starting point, Borun (2008) suggested. A more extensive list follows.

### **Implications for the National Park Service**

The NPS must grow as an educational innovator and can more effectively meet the needs of its millions of family visitors by considering the results of family learning research in free-choice settings. Further research, evaluation, and implementation will require institution-wide collaboration and comparison of best practices. Incorporating family-centered goals and action items into changes inspired by *A Call to Action* (2012) NPS may be one way to address park visitors' needs.

*A Call to Action* (2012) (see Appendix A) aims to implement practices that will reach the goals of Connecting People to Parks and Advancing the NPS Education Mission. However,

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

families are not directly addressed in the document. By more effectively engaging families in park programs, exhibits, and interpretive media, the NPS can help foster visitors' life-long connections to parks and as a result, enhance visitors' life-long learning since children who visit free-choice settings often return as adults (Beaumont & Sterry, 2005; Moussouri, 2003). In addition to reaching young people through school partnerships, the NPS needs to connect youth to parks through more effective family programs. Programs that involve older adults are another way to connect multi-generational families to parks.

Enhancing family connections to national parks by using current free-choice educational research and best practices will also help reach the NPS *A Call to Action* (2012) goal of Advancing the NPS Education Mission. Much of the literature about the Physical context of learning can be connected to *A Call to Action* item #19 - "Out with the Old" (see Appendix A). It states that the NPS will replace thousands of interpretive exhibits and other media. This action item, if carried out with family free-choice learning research and recommendations in mind, could substantially increase family learning in parks.

The NPS must create both national and site-specific educational objectives in order to ensure that changes and success can be measured. Clear education and interpretation objectives and specified "take-home" messages for families should be assessed so that progress in family learning in parks can be tracked over time.

### **Considerations**

Families are certainly not the only park visitors and more research is needed to understand the importance of social interaction for other visitor groups (Packer & Ballantyne, 2005; Novey & Hall, 2007). However, exhibits and programs that encourage social interaction

and allow for multiple users to participate will work not only for families but also for visiting school groups and other adult groups (Borun, 2008; Kiihne, 2008).

It is important to remember that park units provide other benefits and outcomes for families besides learning. Packer (2008) argued that,

Even the most broadly defined learning outcomes may not be sufficient to explain the value and benefits of the museum experience. In seeking to demonstrate the social worth of museums, researchers are starting to look beyond their undeniable educational value, to a range of other beneficial outcomes for visitors. (pp. 33-34)

For example, 44 interviews of visitors to the Queensland Museum revealed that their visit improved their well-being (Packer, 2008). Fifty-nine percent of participants experienced psychological benefits such as personal growth and 57% reported that their visit resulted in restorative benefits (pp. 46-48). These visit outcomes are just as important, if not more important than learning outcomes for many families.

When considering cultural differences it is appropriate for practitioners and researchers to consider that we all come from cultural contexts and that it is valuable to recognize the lenses through which we experience a museum visit before considering other visitor's experiences as well. When the NPS makes changes in order to serve families better, it is possible that the changes may not have the intended effect. Factors such as cultural differences or differences in parenting style could cause results similar to The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, where even after their mission changed from "serving children" to "serving families" parents still stood back while their children experienced exhibits. These changes will require further education and training for staff and volunteers, and most importantly, evaluations that are used to inform ongoing changes in exhibits and programs.

Additionally, NPS exhibit and program designers must "explore diversity as a positive resource" that adds richness to visitor understandings and perspectives (Shouse et al., 2010, p

145). Shouse et al. (2010) recommended that institutions consider alternatives to the term “outreach” because this term does not imply the partnering or reciprocity that has been shown to be more effective and valuable to the process of involving underrepresented populations in free-choice learning experiences (Honey, Augare, & Sachatello-Sawyer, 2010; Stein et al., 2008). Additionally, the NPS must consider looking into ways to use culturally relevant program evaluations (Honey et al., 2010).

### **Recommendations from the Literature**

The Personal, Sociocultural, and Physical contexts from Falk and Dierking’s (2000) Contextual Model of Learning were used in the following sections to frame recommendations from the literature. The use of this model is not to encourage the separation of these recommendations, as some of the recommendations may fall under multiple contexts, but instead to organize them in a usable fashion.

**The Personal context: Maximizing family engagement and learning.** In order to fulfill both individual family member needs and the family’s collective needs as a community of learners, the NPS should consider the following recommendations in order to take into account the motivations, expectations, knowledge, experiences, interests, and beliefs that families bring to their visit.

1. **Visitor Agendas** – The NPS must seek to further understand family visitors’ individual and collective agendas, motivations, and expectations. Subsequently NPS sites must better meet these agendas while providing families with the “tools and resources they need to evaluate what the museum offers against their agendas for that visit. Priority should be given to first-time family visitors” (Moussouri, 2003, p.486). Agendas of special groups such as grandparents visiting with their grandchildren, underrepresented populations, or multi-generational families should also be considered.
2. **Prior-Knowledge** - Help families relate their everyday experiences and prior knowledge to what they see and do in the museum and allow them to investigate issues that interest them (Moussouri, 2003).

3. **Adult Learners** - Reach adults who visit as part of family groups as “learners in their own right,” not just facilitators of their children’s experiences (Briseño-Garzón et al., 2007a; Sanford et al. 2007, p.148).
4. **Exhibit Elements** - Differentiate exhibit elements in order to reach individuals from ages 2 to 92 who arrive with different developmental needs, learning styles, and museum-goer identities (Falk, 2009; Gaskins, 2008; Lyons et al., 2010; Moussouri, 2003).

**The Sociocultural context: Maximizing family engagement and learning.** Families learn in free-choice contexts by conversing with each other and helping one another mediate the experience. NPS staff and volunteers also serve as mediators of programs and park experiences. The following recommendations will enhance those processes.

1. **Social Connections** - Develop ways to reward and foster connections between family members since family groups, especially those with grandparents, value the social elements of interacting during their visits to free-choice settings (e.g. Falk & Dierking, 2000; Moussouri, 2003; Sanford et al., 2007).

***Help parents facilitate learning.***

1. **Optional Help** - Create opportunities for “parents to self-select interpretive support, but not assume that such support will or should be utilized” (Falk 2009 p. 222).
2. **Support Multiple Roles** - Provide information that helps adults quickly recognize what role they should play if the child is the focus audience for the exhibit or experience (Downey et al., 2010; Falk 2009; Gaskins, 2008). Offer ideas for multiple roles family members can rotate through during their visit (e.g. teacher, learner, storyteller) (Gaskins, 2008; Leinhardt & Knutson, 2006).
3. **Inquiry Skills** - Roles that allow parents to co-investigate with their children using a structured approach can help enhance inquiry skills (Gutwill & Allen, 2010).
4. **Technology** – Electronic mobile technology has the potential to enhance parent-child interactions or even create new types of interactions if designed well (Lyons et al., 2010). Technology such as Hatala et al.’s (2007) Kurio system may promote new forms of family interaction in free-choice settings. Devices could be used to provide memory cues and prompts when family members regroup to share experiences (Lyons et al., 2010). Helping parents

with question-posing strategies during their visit is one way technology could be used to improve parent mediation strategies (Lyons et al. 2010).

***Help NPS staff and volunteers facilitate family learning.***

1. **Communication Training** - Continue to foster “talking with, rather than talking at visitors” (Astor-Jack et al 2007, p. 225; Moussouri, 2003). Train facilitators to communicate well with visitors of all ages. Good facilitators will be able to reach children especially, but also engage other members of multi-age families (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Rosenthal & Blankman-Hetrick, 2002).
2. **Collaborate** - Create opportunities for novices to work with knowledgeable mentors collaboratively (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

***Cultivate culturally relevant partnerships.***

1. **Model after Successful Programs** – Program leaders of the Blackfeet Native Science Field Center successfully engaged youth and their families in ongoing informal science education programs by valuing reciprocity, involving multiple generations, and implementing four effective strategies: (a) ongoing communication, (b) dependable and consistent programs for adults and youths, (c) responsiveness to the community, and (d) community and parent participation (Honey et al, p. 122-126). Similar approaches could be applied in parks.
2. **Go Beyond an Invitation** - Attracting new audiences will require collaboratively developing a setting in which “a multitude of cultures feel both welcome and valued and see personal relevance” (Melber, 2006, p. 36; Stein et al., 2008).
3. **Translate and Interpret** - Create a welcoming atmosphere by providing translated materials, bilingual labels, and interpretation services for those who speak another language (Melber, 2006; Shouse et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2008).

**The physical context: Maximizing family engagement and learning.**

The third context necessary for maximizing family learning and engagement is the Physical context. A *Call to Action* (2012) action item #19 - *Out with the Old* (see Appendix 1) addresses some of the changes that need to be made in NPS physical contexts. What follows are research-based recommendations for preparing families for their visit, extending the visit’s benefits beyond the NPS site, and improving the content and physical structure of NPS venues.



## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

1. **Pre-Visit** - Provide pre-visit materials for families (Bachman & Dierking, 2010). Create a “for families” section on NPS websites. Inform parents of “the full range of possible types of learning so that they could take full advantage of all the museum had to offer” (Falk, 2009, p.234).
2. **Post-Visit** - Develop questions that prompt families to extend their visit conversations to the drive home or around the dinner table (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Provide opportunities for families to contribute to ongoing citizen science projects based on skills they learned during their visit may help them extend their experience.
3. **Exhibit Characteristics** - Create Exhibits that are Multi-sided, Multi-user, Accessible, Multi-outcome, Multi-modal, Readable, and Relevant (Borun & Dritsas, 1997, p 180). The best exhibits for families are collaborative and “feature repetition (multiple stations offering the same experience)” (Borun, 2008, p. 9; Kiihne, 2008).
4. **Flexibility** - “Implement design elements that intuitively support the kind of interaction that works best for children and parents – and that are also flexible enough to support multiple orientations to parent involvement” (Wood & Wolf, 2010, p. 48).
5. **Supplemental Materials** - Supplement existing exhibits with booklets and/or backpacks that scaffold family learning and promote interaction (Tenenbaum et al., 2010).
6. **Seating** – Provide seating and other accommodations for visitors with limited mobility, including grandparents (Beaumont & Sterry, 2005; Moussouri, 2003).

### Conclusions

Instead of approaching the above recommendations as add-ons to what already exists in the parks, the NPS must rethink all exhibits, programs, and other interpretative media and experiences from a family perspective (Moussouri, 2003). Parks have welcomed families for over 100 years and the future is bright for the NPS to lead the way in innovative, relevant, engaging, and educational opportunities for families. Packer (2006) concluded that, “learning for fun is a unique and distinctive offering of educational leisure experiences” (p. 329). She added, “Perhaps one of the most important contributions that museums and other educational leisure

settings can make to society is in enabling their visitors to rediscover the joy of learning” (p. 341).

In addition to the recommendations above, it will be important for the NPS to encourage, even promote, research on all types of learning, including family learning. That there was no research to draw from for this literature review indicates the extreme need. This research, however, does not need to start from scratch; it should be built on the quarter century of solid work done in museum-like settings, some of which has been highlighted in this paper. An initial direction would be for researchers to look for ways in which the specific nature of learning in NPS settings differs, if at all, from what we know from other free-choice settings.

While budgets and logistics may be hurdles to overcome, now is the time to consider bolstering the NPS’s approach to family visitors as the NPS looks to its second century. To engage more Americans and secure funding, the NPS must find ways to promote their activities, conduct further research, and communicate research findings in order to increase public and policy maker awareness that the NPS provides exceptional places for life-long learning and fulfills an important role in society. Free-choice learning has far-reaching beneficial effects on families and these benefits must be shared and promoted. “There is evidence that such learning can support lifelong hobbies, encourage career decisions, and teach people the joy of learning” (Astor-Jack et al. 2007, p. 227).

To lead, the NPS must continue to build structures through which NPS staff can collaborate with each other and with other educational and community organizations. Involving families in exhibit and program planning, design, and evaluation will be critically important (Bachman & Dierking, 2010; Moussouri, 2003; Sanford et al., 2007). Overall, creating family-centered opportunities and seeking to engage families in deeper levels of learning and

## Family Learning in Free-Choice Settings: A Literature Review for the NPS

collaboration will enable the NPS to reach its *A Call to Action* (2012) goals and will make our national parks and historic monuments exemplary places for family learning.

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## Appendix A

### *A Call to Action*

#### *A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement*

(NPS, 2012) Retrieved from

[http://www.nps.gov/calltoaction/PDF/Directors\\_Call\\_to\\_Action\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/calltoaction/PDF/Directors_Call_to_Action_Report_2012.pdf)

The themes, goals, and actions most relevant to this paper:

#### **Connecting People to Parks**

Develop and nurture life-long connections between the public and parks—especially for young people—through a continuum of engaging recreational, educational, volunteer, and work experiences....

Welcome and engage diverse communities through culturally relevant park stories and experiences that are accessible to all.

**2- Step by Step-** Create deep connections between a younger generation and parks through a series of diverse park experiences...

**3- History Lesson-** Expand the meaning of parks to new audiences and provide an opportunity for communities to learn more about their heritage ...

**7- Next Generation Stewards-** Create a new generation of citizen scientists and future stewards of our parks ...

**13- Stop Talking and Listen-** Learn about the challenges and opportunities associated with connecting diverse communities to the great outdoors and our collective history... (NPS, 2012, pp. 9-11)

#### **Advancing the NPS Education Mission**

Strengthen the Service as an education institution and parks as places of learning that develop American values, civic engagement, and citizen stewardship.

Use leading-edge technologies and social media to effectively communicate with and capture the interest of the public.

**16- Live and Learn-** Provide multiple ways for children to learn about the national parks and what they reveal about nature, the nation's history, and issues central to our civic life...

17- **Go Digital**- Reach new audiences and maintain a conversation with all Americans by transforming the NPS digital experience to offer rich, interactive, up-to-date content from every park and program...

19- **Out with the Old**- Engage national park visitors with interpretive media that offer interactive experiences, convey information based on current scholarship, and are accessible to the broadest range of the public. To that end we will replace 2500 outdated, inaccurate, and substandard interpretive exhibits, signs, films, and other media with innovative, immersive, fully accessible, and learner-centered experiences

20- **Scholarly Pursuits** - Sponsor excellence in science and scholarship, gain knowledge about park resources, and create the next generation of conservation scientists. (NPS, 2012, pp. 13-15)

## Appendix B

### Museum-Goer Identities

Falk et al. (2008) described the five museum-goer identity categories as follows:

*-Explorers* are curiosity-driven with a generic interest in the content of the museum. They expect to find something that will grab their attention and fuel their learning.

*-Facilitators* are socially motivated. Their visit is focused primarily on enabling the experience and learning of others in their accompanying social group.

*-Professional/Hobbyists* feel a close tie between the museum content and their professional or hobbyist passions. Their visits are typically motivated by a desire to satisfy a specific content-related objective.

*-Experience Seekers* perceive the museum as an important destination, so their satisfaction derives mainly from having “been there and done that.”

*-Rechargers (formerly called Spiritual Pilgrims)* are primarily seeking to have a contemplative, spiritual and/or restorative experience. They see the museum as a refuge from the work-a-day world. (p. 57)

## Appendix C

### Special Topic: Family Science Learning in Free-Choice Settings

Much of the research on family learning in free-choice settings was conducted in science museums. Additionally, science, as a subject matter learned in free-choice settings, often comes up in the literature. For example the National Research Council, (2009) argued that “Learning science in informal environments has the potential to bolster science education broadly on a national scale” (p.13).

Allen and Gutwill (2009) argued that free-choice settings are ideal environments for learning science inquiry skills. Some museums use open-ended, experimentation- based exhibits specifically to teach inquiry skills rather than science content. Active Prolonged Engagement (APE) exhibits were found to support scientific inquiry and increase observation making and predicting among family visitors to a museum (Szechter & Carey, 2009). APE exhibits have multiple options and lead visitors to ask more questions and spend more time at exhibits (Allen & Gutwill, 2009, p. 290).

Falk and Dierking (2010) agreed and provided additional context to the issue. Average Americans spend less than 5 percent of their life in classrooms, and an ever-growing body of evidence demonstrates that most science is learned outside of school. We contend that a major educational advantage enjoyed by the U.S. relative to the rest of the world is its vibrant free-choice science learning landscape... [including] national parks... We believe that non-school resources – used by learners across their lifetimes from childhood onward – actually account for the vast majority of Americans’ science learning. (p. 486)

Concern with declining youth interest in the study of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) prompted Archer, DeWitt, Osborne, Dillon, Willis, and Wong (2012) to survey of 9,000 elementary school children in the U.K about their attitudes toward science. Their study revealed that a complex mix of factors including family activities and parent’s attitudes toward science contribute to a child’s science career aspirations. Therefore, based on

their findings, a family's decision to visit a free-choice setting with science opportunities may impact a child's science career aspirations. "Parental attitudes to science play an important role in shaping children's science aspirations" (Archer et al. 2012, p. 8).

Children's aspirations and views of science careers are formed within families, and these families play an important, albeit complex role in shaping the boundaries and nature of what children can conceive of as possible and desirable and the likelihood of their being able to achieve these aspirations. (p. 22)

National parks can help improve science literacy by involving families in science and scholarship. To help children "see science as a 'conceivable' and potentially desirable career option" national parks need to increase family science programming, work with traditionally underserved audiences, and share and highlight science-related careers in the parks to parents and children, especially elementary aged children (Archer et al., 2012, p. 25). Citizen science projects that involve families could enhance science literacy and forge lasting relationships between families and parks that could have positive, far-reaching effects beyond their visit. Bertschi, Benne, and Elkins (2008) found success fostering children's' emerging science literacy by creating a learning environment that fostered parent-child interactions and featured skill-building activities, subjects intriguing to both adults and children, and elements that required parents to get involved and help. Finally, exhibits designed using Active Prolonged Engagement (APE) principles allow for interactive experimentation and inquiry and may be appropriate at certain NPS sites.



## Appendix D

### Special Topic: Intergenerational Programs

*Intergenerational Learning* - “Arises from activities which purposely involve two or more generations with the aim of generating additional or different benefits to those arising from single generation activities... it may or may not involve members of the same family” (Thomas, 2009, p. 5).

Intergenerational programs can promote social growth and learning between the young and the old. As the baby boomer generation ages intergenerational learning will become increasingly important and relevant and that “there is now a global recognition of the need to see older people as learning resources and as assets to their communities” (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008 p. 38). Intergenerational learning can occur when different-aged members of the same family interact, but some institutions’ free-choice educational programs have paired older adults and children who may or may not be related. This type of learning can include the exchange of skills, knowledge, and history while promoting citizenship and social inclusion (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008). In their study of intergenerational program, Newman and Hatton-Yeo (2008) found that both adults and children considered the program to be an enjoyable learning experience.

Co-learning workshops conducted at various locations in the United States over a 3 year period were found to be more successful than a tutoring approach for youth and older adults in Morgan, Bertera, and Reid’s (2007) study. 2,826 older adults completed post-assessment evaluations and 4,103 children, most under 9 years of age, also provide evaluations. The researchers found “significant gains in science knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs for older adults

and children” (p. 35). Older adults reported that they had learned something and that the children had learned too. 79.5% of children reported that they liked the session a lot and 70.2% reported that they thought they had learned a lot from the session (p. 38). They found that “both biologically related and unrelated intergenerational pairs benefitted equally in the workshop settings” and participants found the experience to be an “appealing and ‘fun’ learning environment” (p. 38). The researchers’ program evaluations revealed that their workshop approach was a successful model that was replicated across the country. Based on this success the NPS should consider implementing intergenerational programs to enhance learning.

## Appendix E

### 10 Steps to Encourage Family Learning at Your Institution

The following is a resource from [familylearningforum.org](http://www.familylearningforum.org)

USS Constitution Museum Foundation (2006)

Retrieved from: <http://www.familylearningforum.org/resources/forms.htm>

### 10 Steps to Encourage Family Learning at Your Institution

**Developed by the Family Learning Team of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston, MA**

*Funded by an IMLS National Leadership Grant*

We invite you to explore family learning and assess where your institution is along the ten steps! Families of all shapes and sizes are visiting our institutions in record numbers. Family learning in a museum takes place when two or more people (with an on-going relationship) walk around, look, converse, and engage in activities together. Conversation is key to encouraging family learning so the steps focus on elements of visitor services and exhibition offerings that will assist families in their personal engagement. Below is a list of ten steps to consider if you want to foster family learning. Each step is explored further in an exercise on the following pages. We welcome your comments and suggestions via e-mail on these ten steps and accompanying exercises. ([www.familylearningforum.org](http://www.familylearningforum.org))

1. Get acquainted with your family visitors: How many are coming in?
2. Step into the shoes of your family visitor: How family friendly is your facility?
3. Check out your exhibitions: Are there effective elements for family interaction?
4. View your program schedule: What types of events do you offer for families?
5. Reread your institutional mission and goals: Are you ready to welcome families?
6. Consider your commitment: Are you willing to be a family learning advocate?
7. Observe your visitors: Find out what they already enjoy in your museum!
8. Practice a family-friendly perspective: Transform a program to attract families!
9. Revisit your exhibition: Try a new technique to engage all family members!
10. Reflect on your “family friendliness”: Strategize possibilities at your institution!

Additional materials related to the above list can be found at:

<http://www.familylearningforum.org/resources/forms.htm>

## Appendix F

### Family-Friendliness Checklist

From (Kelly et al, 2004, p. 49-51)

According to Kelly et al. (2004), “this checklist was developed by Denise Fowler, Public Programs Coordinator, National Museum Australia (d.fowlder@nma.gov.au), as part of a Master’s degree in Environmental Education and Interpretation at the Queensland University of Technology” (p. 49).

### Family-Friendliness Checklist

#### Pre-visit

- effective promotion aimed at families
- pre-visit family packs and/or activity guides
- resource and reference material available

#### Orientation

- clear map with family facilities marked
- attention to families’ social agenda
- handouts aimed at children/families

#### Exhibit design

- safe, robust, and easily maintained
- indoor/outdoor access
- accessible
- multi-sided: more than one person can access
- multi-user: promotes and encourages social interaction
- multi-modal: reflects multiple ways of doing and knowing
- multi-outcome: allows for variety of learning outcomes and information
- multi-sensory: engages all the senses
- open-ended
- participatory, interactive, hands-on
- encourages children to apply principles rather than just push buttons
- staffed
- appeals to different stages of development
- offers choice
- updates/new things for repeat visitors
- dedicated spaces for children
- uses bold, primary colours
- challenging, but non-threatening
- provides enjoyment
- allows for different types of movement
- juxtaposes scale

- special areas for children under five
- encourages play
- provides for a variety of educational experiences
- interactive displays, a variety of high quality exhibits, audio and visual displays
- provides a balance of sensory stimulation sensitive to the cues and signals of visitors
- appeals to adults as well as child

### **Content**

- appeals to children's interests
- links to children's existing knowledge and experience
- emphasizes the child's perspective
- takes children from:
  - simple to complex
  - known to unknown
  - self to other
  - whole to part
  - concrete to abstract
  - enactive to symbolic
  - exploratory to goal-directed
  - impulsive to self-controlled
- recognizes children's work and reflects children's interests
- developmentally appropriate
- novel and unusual
- provides supporting information for accompanying adults

### **Labels/text**

- words used cautiously
- text arranged in easily understood segments
- text provides concrete information about the exhibits
- child's language used where appropriate and possible
- humor used where appropriate

### **Programs**

- opportunities for families to be together
- facilitates developmentally-appropriate child-centered programs
- opportunities for storytelling activities
- allows for role play and play
- provides inter-generational programs

### **Practical Considerations**

- shopping opportunities, with suitable merchandise to suit family budgets
- access for strollers, with alternatives to stairs
- family tickets
- opening hours and program times suitable for families
- adequate cloak rooms, appropriate toilets and parent rooms
- access to simple, reasonable cheap food in clean, cheerful surroundings

### **Audience-Specific**

#### **-Infants and toddlers:**

- programs are language-rich
- centered around one-on-one interactions with significant adult

- encourage imagination, role play, and dress-up
- reflect the child's environment and everyday life
- include music, drawing and sculpture, dance, tactile experiences and group activities
- activities involve exploring, investigating, and imagination

**-Primary/secondary:**

- programs build upon curriculum goals
- make interdisciplinary connections while learning across subject areas
- provide opportunities for practical and investigatory work
- written materials and resource lists provided
- links made to other information sources

(Kelly et al, 2004, p. 49-51)

## Appendix G

### Family Amenities Checklist

From: (Wilkening & Chung, 2009, p. 55-56)

#### **Overall:**

Museum should be clean and tidy (especially restrooms and food-service areas)

#### **Restrooms/ Nursing Areas:**

Handicapped restrooms that can do double-duty as family restrooms

Stools to help little ones reach sinks

Diaper changing stations (in men's and women's restrooms)

Nursing rooms for private nursing (not a restroom)

Spare, clean children's clothes... just in case

#### **Food Service**

Designated place for snacks, inside and out (especially if there is no food service available)

High chairs and booster seats

Child-friendly menu options

Peanut-free food preparation (including no peanut oil)

#### **Exhibit Amenities**

Children's activity pages

Interactives that involve small groups rather than one person

Labels that use language parents can use when talking to their children

Outdoor trails and exhibits

Family tracks on audio guides

Stools to reach interactive components

#### **Safety and Miscellaneous**

Small baggies with ice cubes in freezer (for bumps and bruises)

Assorted bandages, etc.

No exposed cords or outlets

All cleaning supplies secured

Lots of benches and seating

Stroller loan

(Wilkening & Chung 2009, p. 55-56)

### **Author's Biography**

After graduating from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota with a B.A. in English Literature and a B.A. in French, Colleen joined the Lasallian Volunteers, and served as a middle school and high school tutor and field trip coordinator in Oakland, California for a year. Colleen then continued her service and spent two years teaching middle school students on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northern Montana. Fieldtrips in Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks with her students inspired Colleen to complete a year-long Professional Residency in Environmental Education graduate program at the Teton Science Schools in Jackson, Wyoming. She also completed her M.A. in Instruction at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. After working with learners of all ages in a variety of education settings in the West and in the Midwest, Colleen pursued her M.S. in Natural Science at the University of Wyoming and hopes to continue growing as an educator.

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