

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY YOUNG AUDIENCES EXPERIENCE FRAMEWORK & ACTIVITY PLAN

BACKGROUND. The mission of the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) is to present experiences that preserve, explore, and celebrate the history of Jews in America. In accordance with its mission, NMAJH wanted to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire. This commitment guided planning of a new 100,000sf² facility in Philadelphia. Located adjacent to Independence Mall that draws tourist and local families and telling a story that speaks to all ethnic groups, NMAJH intended to serve families and children and youth in groups. Children three through 16 years were a key audience for designated exhibits and programs. Exhibition planning brought together a team of distinctive American Jewish historians, Gallagher & Associates (Bethesda, MD) exhibit designers, and researchers and evaluators from the Institute for Learning Innovation (Edgewater, MD). Intersecting stories of individual Jews, communities, and America's own expansion and change clustered around four themes, richly presented through environments, cutting-edge technology, and collections.

As compelling and dynamically presented as this story would be, reaching and engaging children and youth with it would be a challenge. The same life experiences, appreciation for family history and historic perspective that make this story engaging to adults are virtually inaccessible to most children. Abstract concepts of time, culture, identity, and change illuminate the hopes and dreams of immigrants coming to America, seizing opportunities, and facing adversity but are at the conceptual limits of the personal, immediate, and concrete world of children through eight or nine years. Furthermore, children's active exploration that converts their experience into understanding benefits from a range of activities unlike adults' standing, reading, viewing, and reflecting.

PROCESS. To shape exhibit experiences for children and youth, NMAJH and G&A worked with museum planner, Jeanne Vergeront (Minneapolis, MN) to develop the Young Audiences Experience Framework and Activity Plan. Intended to guide exhibit (and program) planning for children, it was based on four factors critical to creating engaging young audiences: consideration of age-related development affecting a grasp of content related to time, place, identity and change; how children learn through experience; clarifying content for a broader age range; and highlighting a range of environments and activities that support children's exploration, play and learning.

The process developed a segmentation of NMAJH's young audience with each segment described in terms of its developmental capacity to understand time, place, and identity - concepts relevant to exploring and grasping messages interpreted in its exhibits and programs. To help make the Museum's content more accessible to a young audience, and likely for some adults, the narrative was translated into a set of take-away messages. These exhibit messages distilled the most important points and shifted the voice of content closer to the visitor's experience. Finally, a set of activities targeted for children 16 and under was developed and described. Aligned with the audience segmentation, these activities carried the messages and emphasized what children do.

RESULTS. The Framework and Plan provided NMAJH and its designers with a developmental perspective capable of guiding exhibit planning for a set of appropriate activities that will be integrated with experiences geared to adult visitors. Going forward, the Framework and Plan will serve as a set of tools for advancing the Museum's understanding its young audience, planning programs, and making operating decisions.