



Inside/Outside: Mothers and Children Recover Together

Anne Mannell, Tulsa Children's Museum Discovery Lab

Seated at a round table, “Susan” watches while her two children, ages six and twelve, work together to connect the wires to the battery pack and the bot. As the connection is made and the bot springs to life, the museum educator wraps up the session, asking about the circuitry vocabulary learned that day. The kids and their mom excitedly yell out words, and the children leave the session on a high note from the activity they all shared. Back at the table, Susan takes off her gray sweatshirt, revealing her orange Department of Corrections shirt beneath and prepares to head back to the cell area. This museum experience didn't take place in a classroom or at a museum—it was part of the visitation program in a local jail. And it plays an important part in creating emotional connections for the large female prison population in Tulsa and their children in the foster care system.

Since opening our first museum with walls in May 2013—in a former 12,000-square-foot city recreation center—Tulsa Children's Museum Discovery Lab has delivered outreach programming to more than 30,000 children and families each year. But our approach to programming has shifted. Still committed to identifying and meeting a broad range of community needs, our ideal program partnership model is one in which the partner's goals and missions not only align with our own but actively advance them—on both sides.

The Outreach Starting Point

A 2007 museum-conducted needs assessment of low-income families in the Tulsa area revealed that local families needed more opportunities to breach the deficit in access to informal learning experiences. Beyond the typical barriers of economics and transportation, a more significant one was fear of the unknown or perceiving museums as “not for them.”

After surveying a number of museum outreach programs, in 2013 Discovery Lab launched Accessible Discovery, a three-pronged school-based program engaging an entire school's student population in a field

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trip to the museum, a museum class, and an outreach class back at the school. Through this program, we have been able to serve five to six local elementary schools annually, reaching around 5,000 students each year.

However, we wanted to find ways to connect with families more directly. It was difficult to track impact and reach families not already seeking enrichment experiences for their children. Local schools were happy to give out guest passes and memberships, but the museum found that families did not redeem passes for reasons ranging from transportation to unfamiliarity with the children's museum—or any museum, for that matter.

In 2015, museum leaders met with organizations serving low-income populations. We formed a number of partnerships with organizations such as Domestic Violence Intervention Services, Parent Child Center of Tulsa, Department of Human Services, New Hope Oklahoma, Housing Authority of Tulsa, and Sooner Start. The museum provided content for their programs. Many of these programs, some scheduled, some drop-in, were—and still are—successful. They were well-reviewed and well-attended. But we still wanted to pursue deeper connections with outreach audiences, both to

improve the quality of our programming and to better gauge programmatic impact.

During an exploratory meeting in 2016, a longtime funder connected us with a forward-thinking organization interested in a new approach to accessibility: the Women in Recovery (WIR) Program at Family & Children's Services of Tulsa (FCS). WIR was the first organization that sought our assistance in helping their clients achieve a better life. WIR valued the museum's educational programming not just for its content, but as a connector for their client families—a much deeper interest than distributing guest passes. WIR had been in existence for six years when Discovery Lab joined as a partner, but this partnership became the model to which future partnerships aspire.

Women in Recovery

The Family & Children's Services Women in Recovery (WIR) program is an intensive outpatient alternative for eligible women facing long sentences for non-violent alcohol and drug-related offenses. In partnership with the George Kaiser Family Foundation, the organization has worked closely with the criminal justice system and various community partners for more than ten years. Program participants receive supervision, substance abuse and mental health treatment, education, workforce readiness training, and family reunification services. The WIR office contains a classroom and counseling facility where WIR holds voluntary monthly meetings for women who have graduated from the program, some living in transitional living centers, and some now on their own. The museum provides hands-on STEM and health-and-wellness programming at these meetings, which typically involve fifty to sixty attendees, including both mothers and their children, ranging in age from birth to teens. These meetings provide mothers with a support system, and in many cases, a means to reconnect with their children as some are in the delicate reunification process.

During the meetings, museum educa-

tors are flexible, adapting the curriculum on the fly depending on the age and number of attendees. One month they may make “jiggle-bots” together and another month build canister rockets. Every activity sparks curiosity in the children, paving the way for increased connections within families and modeling meaningful play behaviors. Kids love these fun activities, but more importantly for WIR, their enthusiasm spurs attendance for the mothers. These lively Discovery Lab meetings facilitate relationship-building not only with the children and their mothers, but among the other mothers as well, making their group more cohesive as they lean on each other to stay the course.

Twice each year, we host a program alumnae meeting at the museum. Participants have an opportunity to connect with their children, but in a new environment. Most of the mothers have never been to a children’s museum, but many of the children have attended on school field trips. As the mothers continue to attend alumnae meetings and become more comfortable with the museum, they can receive memberships and scholarship spots for their children in summer or spring break museum camps.

Parenting in Jail

Women are the country’s fastest growing prison population, and 80 percent of them are mothers, according to the Vera Institute of Justice. In addition, Oklahoma has one of the highest female incarceration rates in the country.

In 2018, FCS staff talked with museum staff about a new program they had created for incarcerated women. Family & Children’s Services had been working for some time to try to change visitation rules at The David L. Moss Detention Center, located blocks from Discovery Lab. Previously, children under the age of sixteen were not allowed to visit their mothers in prison, and

children sixteen and older were only allowed to visit their mothers sitting behind a glass partition. FCS began a program in 2017 which allowed women who exhibited good behavior and participated in a parenting class to have visitors within the detention center. The new program, called Parenting in Jail (PIJ), allowed weekly visits from children ranging in age from newborns to mid-teens.



Plans for the future home of Tulsa Children’s Museum Discovery Lab

Children whose mothers are incarcerated have usually experienced significant trauma in their lives. Emotions run high on both sides during these visits. Some children arrive with frightening ideas about what their mother’s life is like in the detention center, even imagining them chained to a wall with only food and water. There is a lot to overcome in a short period of time, and dwelling on a child’s worries and fears can make the visitation detrimental rather than an opportunity to connect with their mother. Based on the WIR program’s success at strengthening the connections between mothers and their children, staff at both FCS and the museum theorized a similar co-learning experience could help facilitate connecting behaviors in the PIJ program as well. And some of the PIJ women would eventually feed into the WIR program, so the museum could start improving those relationships earlier in the continuum of care.

But running a program inside a prison was a little more involved than conducting one at a social services office. Led by the warden, museum educators attended a tour of the detention center and took part in training that covered topics ranging from how to

interact with the inmates to lockdown procedures. The warden also conducted an extensive review of the programming materials to be sure no contraband was entering the facility. Beginning in 2018, museum educators began offering monthly hands-on, STEM and health-and-wellness programs to incarcerated women and their children. On average, about a dozen mothers with their children take part in each program, but the number varies with each visit. Many factors affect participation, including the mothers’ continued good behavior and whether caregivers reliably bring the children for the visit. During the hour to hour-and-a-half program, a second museum educator meets with the caregivers who have brought the children to visit their moms and talk about the activity the kids are

doing that day. In addition, caregivers are given free guest passes to the museum and gas cards to encourage them to bring the kids there.

Learning from Mothers and Caregivers

In 2019, WIR alumni and PIJ caregivers took part in focus groups to help determine the strengths and opportunities of the two programs. Among PIJ caregivers, there was a poor rate of return on guest passes. When we asked why, caregivers said they were unaware of the location and hours of operation of Discovery Lab. As a result, staff have changed their approach to communicating with caregivers, making sure to provide all relevant information and answer any questions. As a result, guest pass utilization has increased from zero to 12 percent. Additional feedback from PIJ caregivers indicated that the children enjoyed “Discovery Lab days” and looked forward to visitation more on the days they knew there would be an activity.

The mothers in the WIR focus group reported that the Discovery Lab programming built excitement among their children

Scaling for the Future

to attend alumnae meetings. They noted the connections their children made with other children, and the ones they made with fellow WIR alumnae, as one of the most beneficial outcomes. Further, many children showed a greater interest in STEM learning as a result of the programming and enjoyed the opportunity to attend museum camps during school breaks. Mothers were learning with their children and feeling more comfortable talking about STEM and participating in Discovery Lab activities, which led to a greater use of the gift memberships.

Creating a Model for Greater Impact

After our experiences with WIR and PIJ, we look at organizational partnerships differently. The most powerful program model starts by going to where the clients are—in this case, social services sites or jails—to involve them in co-learning with their children.

The goal of each of our partnerships is a continuum of engagement; we maintain levels of outreach, based on need, that range from distributing guest passes and memberships to full programmatic partnerships. The pacing and the nature of that engagement changes to match the program. We have found that key elements for success are 1) the partner organization's client group, such as mothers in recovery, identifies as a peer group, 2) they experience the museum programming through this peer group, and 3) the partner organization tracks attendance, engagement, and results. Through this feedback loop, we are able to improve both content and delivery of our programs, paving the way to reach other need-specific audiences.

Discovery Lab is embarking on a new expansion, and in the next eighteen months, the museum's facility will more than triple our current size. Scaling the Accessible Discovery program to continue to meet community needs has begun in earnest. A capital campaign donor has made an additional gift of \$500,000 to start this process while retaining the spirit of the current program.

Expanding on our experiences with both WIR and DIJ, the museum is currently planning programming at Kate Barnard, a prison facility in Oklahoma City, partnering with New Hope Oklahoma to deliver hands-on co-learning experiences during children's visitation time with their mothers. New Hope focuses on helping to break the cycle of incarceration by focusing on the social, emotional, and educational well-being of the children of incarcerated parents. The museum is also developing a program that will work with support groups for foster parents reinforcing the connection of the foster children with their foster families, and with their biological parent(s) in the case of reunification. The model for all new partnership programming involves identifying shared objectives and working with established peer groups to develop a programming plan—with the end goal of converting program participants to museum-goers through a progression of impact.

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The Responsive Children's Museum

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