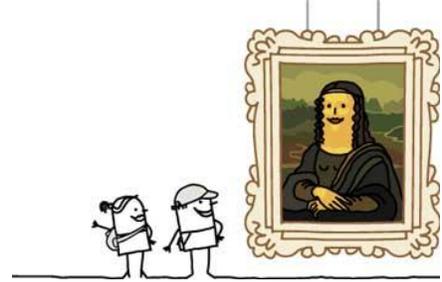


The Educational Benefits of Visiting Museums

By Arline Zatz

Head to museums for wall-to-wall fun

New Jersey is blessed with a wide variety of museums, large and small. They teach families about science, the arts, history, and much more, and offer the opportunity to enjoy quality, fun time together. For children, the educational benefits of visiting museums go beyond reinforcing the lessons kids learn in school. Museums add depth to understanding, and they open new worlds of interest. For parents, visiting a museum is a time to explore with kids, explain and fill in missing gaps in book learning, and simply be there during a shared journey of discovery.



Getting children motivated to attend a museum can be as simple as lending advance encouragement, said Emlyn Koster, former president of Liberty Science Center in Jersey City. “Start joint planning, get recommendations from previous visitors, and explore the museum’s website” in preparation for your visit, he says. Once there, stop and enjoy demonstrations, go to special programs, or take in a film (LSC, for example, is home to the nation’s largest IMAX dome theater).

Some museums, such as the Garden State Discovery Museum in Cherry Hill, exist for the sole pleasure of children. They’re imaginative in a kid-friendly way, and children up to about 10 years old will discover a world just their size—that adults can share. The hands-on nature of these museums “encourages and supports parent/child interaction and provides educational experiences where families can play, create, and learn together about art and music, science and nature, math and reasoning, language, communication, and health,” says Judy Shapiro, director of sales and marketing.

Even if there are no hands-on exhibits in museums, it’s important to remember that children can still enjoy themselves by simply viewing the paintings, sculptures, and collections, and by learning about the historical contexts that may have inspired the art.

Ask your children what an artist is trying to convey in a picture, or what a certain scene reminds them of. Bring a drawing pad for them to sketch their own versions of art they find particularly appealing. They may also want to jot down notes about a favorite exhibit and, if cameras are allowed, snap some photos to share with friends or siblings when they get home. In this way, they can keep special memories of their museum trips.

What else do museums offer to kids? The [New Jersey State Museum](#), in Trenton, has fine art on display, but there's a rich connection to history in the exhibits that bring dinosaurs to life and captivate the imagination with archaeological finds. Here, as well as at the [Newark Museum](#), kids can peer into outer space at the museum's planetarium. (The State Museum planetarium has no age restriction; the Newark Museum's Dreyfuss Planetarium does not recommend planetarium shows for children under age 4). Many museums also offer programs to expose families to dance and music as art forms, and they offer classes, workshops, and summer camps to guide children in using their own creative energy.

Plan your visit

Before going to any museum, it's a good idea to check whether special activities are on the schedule for the day you plan to visit. Also find out if there are interactive exhibits, an admission fee, a restaurant or snack bar, and if you'll have a place to stow your bags or coats. Most museums allow strollers and wheelchairs, while others provide them free or for rent.

Once you're there, stop at the gift shop as a way to get your children excited in what they're about to see. Find a postcard or picture that interests them, and then try to find the object or exhibit in the museum. Also ask for a map, and then find locations in the museum that hold particular interest—such as the dinosaur exhibit. Head to those locations first, before kids get tired. Above all, plan on numerous rest breaks, and don't rush kids away from any exhibit that intrigues them.

If a museum turns out to be a hit with your kids and you know you'll go back again and again, consider buying an annual pass so you can return when exhibits change. You may also be able to take advantage of price breaks for classes and special events, you may get reciprocal admission at other museums, and you may be able to skip the lines and enter through a members-only door when you visit.

Some nearby kid-friendly museums

[Crayola Factory](#)

Easton, PA; 610/515-8000

[Garden State Discovery Museum](#)

Cherry Hill, NJ; 856-424-1233

Liberty Science Center

Jersey City, NJ; 201/200-1000

Madame Tussauds

New York, NY; 800/246-8872

Montclair Art Museum

Montclair, NJ; 973/746-5555

Morris Museum

Morristown, NJ; 973/971-3700

Museum of Early Trades & Crafts

Madison, NJ; 973/377-2982

Newark Museum

Newark, NJ; 973/596-6550

NJ Children's Museum

Paramus, NJ; 201/262-5151

NJ State Museum

Trenton, NJ; 609/292-6464

Whippany Railway Museum

Whippany, NJ; 973/887-8177

[Click here for a complete list of kid-friendly museums in NJ.](#)

New Jersey Family Magazine, June 2011