



# Families & Free-Choice Learning

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"During childhood people develop a foundation for lifelong learning...family members play a vital role in helping children develop a joy for learning and an understanding that learning is a process, something that all children *and* adults do, all their lives."

-- From *Lessons Without Limit; How Free-Choice Learning is Transforming Education*



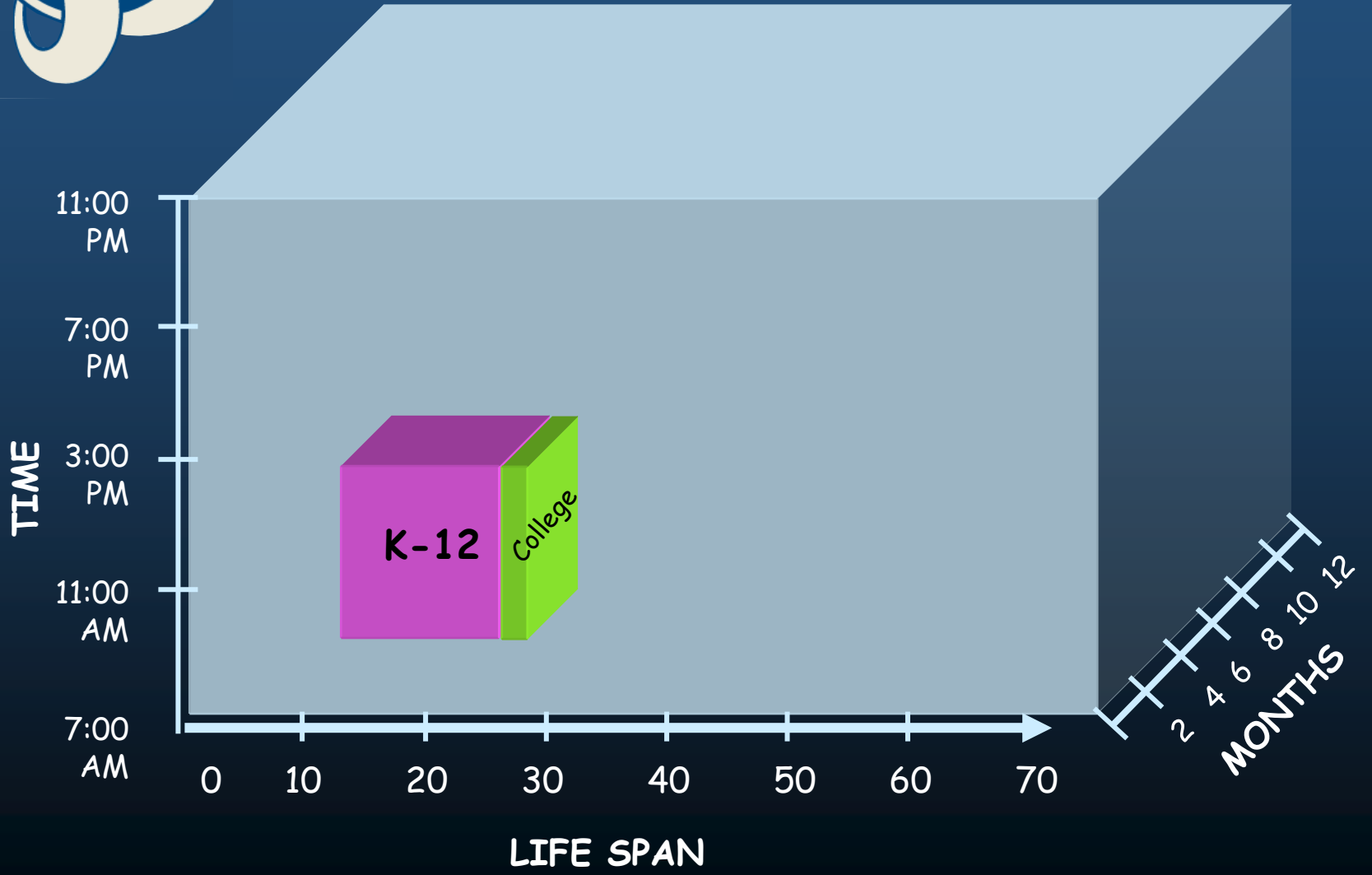
# Overview of Talk

- Situate family learning in the arena of free-choice learning
- Discuss family learning: its importance, what models work, & some of its outcomes
- Share ideas for how each of you can facilitate family learning in your own work
- Suggest ways for museums to be resources for families' free-choice learning



# Framing Learning Broadly

- We live in a Learning Society
- Learning is 24 - 7 - 52 - 80+
- Learning is rapidly becoming the number one industry and leisure activity





# Learning Infrastructure





## Free-Choice Learning

- Most of what we learn, we learn through free-choice learning, learning guided by a person's (or group's) needs and interests.
- People engage in free-choice learning to find out more about what they find useful, compelling or just plain interesting.
- Family learning is a special kind of free-choice learning



# Why is Family Learning Important to Museums?

- First & foremost learning institution—the context in which we learn to be free-choice learners
- Families constitute the largest percentage of visitors
- Home & community is critical to a person's success
- Visiting museums as a child with one's family correlates highly with adult use of museums



# A MODEL FOR FAMILY LEARNING

An effective model recognizes that learning:

- Occurs within contexts that families find appropriate and engaging to them
- Can & should be an enjoyable experience
- Involves social interaction
- Is about finding value in personal observations & experiences
- Is making meaning by working, talking & solving problems together



# General Family Learning Outcomes

- **Perspective & Awareness**
  - Forged connections between topics and the daily lives of families (relevance)
- **Social Development**
  - Enhanced self-perception and feelings of competence
- **Interests**
  - Interest in various topics and learning in general increased
- **Knowledge & Skills**
  - Conceptual understanding of the content and processes of a discipline broadened



# Specific Family Learning Impacts for Children

- **Perspective & Awareness**
  - Self-confidence
  - Independence & autonomy
  - Attitudes & perspectives on learning
- **Social Development**
  - Interacting with others—peers & adults
- **Interests**
  - Personal interests
- **Knowledge & Skills**
  - Personal knowledge & skills outside of school



# Specific Family Learning Impacts for Adults

- Perspective & Awareness
  - Enriched perception of importance of supporting child's (& their own!) learning
- Social Development
  - Enhanced sense of sharing time together
- Interests
  - Increased awareness & appreciation for child's (& their own!) interest, curiosity & creativity
- Knowledge & Skills
  - Boosted confidence, interest & understanding for how to support learning of child (& their own!)



## What Can I Do To Support Family Learning?--Personal Context

- Understand how families move from novices to experts in an area
  - Topic in which family happens to become interested or CAME interested in
  - Museum can be a launching pad
    - Help families develop a working vocabulary, conceptual knowledge, facts, personal memories
  - Can develop relatively deep knowledge which emerges over weeks, months, years if woven through multiple family activities



## What Can I Do To Support Family Learning?— Socio-Cultural Context

- Some move together, interacting & conversing
- Some, even with small children, break off into smaller groups & interact more independently
- Families can be adult or child directed or collaborative
- Be respectful of the families' style
- Encourage conversation & collaboration & recognize that sometimes the best facilitation is no facilitation!



## What Can I Do To Support Family Learning?— Physical Context

- Create spaces that encourage collaboration and conversation—set chairs up in groups for example
- Lay out activities in inviting ways
- Know where the nearest bathrooms are with changing tables & *gladly* accommodate strollers



## A few pointers.....

- Notice what is going on among your family visitors
- Support their collaborative learning
- Support their extended learning
  - In place and time
  - Encourage them to come back
- Be open to spontaneous teachable moments
- Be an enthusiastic learner yourself!



## Museums as Resources for Families' Free-Choice Learning

- There is a tremendous opportunity for museums to participate more fully in the lives of families
  - Collaborate with family-oriented partners
  - Support family hobbies and events
  - Offer structured learning opportunities (classes, family outings, etc.)
  - Facilitate family learning before, during & after visits



# What Can Museums Do To Support Families' Free-Choice Learning ?

- Capitalize on primary assets
  - Collections, knowledge and expertise
  - Ability to immerse families in rich experiences
  - Opportunities for collaborative learning
- Think Broadly about Education
  - Respect the knowledge/experience families bring with them
  - Proactively facilitate their learning by encouraging collaboration and conversation



## Critiquing for Family-Friendliness

- Is this a productive and meaningful approach which will facilitate family learning?
- Does it accommodate a diverse range of families?
- Does it accommodate multiple family agendas?
- Are there multiple strategies for family interaction?