

Cross-Institutional Study of Virtual Programming: What Do Parents Want Now?

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Children's museums need actionable data from audiences to plan virtual programs during this pandemic. However, few large-scale surveys gathering such data have been administered to date. At Rockman et al, a research and evaluation company based in Oakland, California, we wanted to address this issue. In the fall of 2020, we approached Carol Tang, CEO at the Children's Creativity Museum, to conduct a pro bono survey on behalf of Bay Area children's museums to learn more about how their guests view virtual museum programming for children. Survey questions, developed in collaboration with museum CEOs, covered program content and formats as well as children's age and school or care situation.

We soon expanded the opportunity to include any interested museums in the member network of the Association of Children's Museums (ACM). Ultimately, thirteen museums participated by distributing the online survey to their audiences. We prepared real-time web reports to provide participating museums with immediate access to the survey results. Over 950 responses were collected between November 2020 and January 2021. The majority came from the Minnesota Children's Museum, Chicago Children's Museum, Bay Area Discovery Museum, and Explora (Albuquerque). Additionally, the Children's Museum of Indianapolis incorporated a subset of the questions in their own survey and shared those results with us.

While our deeper analysis of the data has just begun, results clearly show that parents are quite divided in their interest in virtual programming from children's museums.

Percentages indicating no/slight interest in virtual programs for their child were even with those indicating moderate/high interest. Sixty-two percent of those with moderate/high interest indicated they would be willing to pay for programs. We also found that a child's age was not a driving factor in determining interest: parents of two- and three-year-olds were just as likely to be interested in virtual programming as parents of seven and eight-year-olds—a surprise given the different attention spans of children these ages.




Children's Creativity Museum

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Interest does appear to be linked to the child's school or care situation, however. Parents of children attending in-person school or daycare expressed less interest in virtual programs than those who attend school online, which begs the question: Will families continue to seek virtual programming after the pandemic ends? We invited open-ended feedback for participants to explain their current interest levels. Those with greater interest in virtual programs said they wanted to provide their child with a diversity of meaningful educational experiences. They also seek programming that is developmentally appropriate and provides for safe socialization opportunities with other children. Those who were less inclined towards virtual museum programming were most concerned about excessive screen time, lack of attention span, or the age of their children.

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These are just a few of our findings, and there is much to learn from this dataset. You can find further analysis through our website (<https://bit.ly/3o3KC4I>). 

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