



THE GROWNUP'S GUIDE TO EXPLORING MUSEUMS WITH KIDS

Adventure awaits!

Universal tips to make visiting any museum with the kid(s)
in your life easier, more fun, and more memorable.



museum & editorial services

BEFORE YOU GO: PLAN AHEAD



Pick your destination

It may sound obvious, but the first step is choosing which museum to visit. Think about your child's age and interests, the amount of time you have for your visit, and how far you want to travel. Then check out a website like TripAdvisor for recommendations. It's okay to start small; nearly every town and city has a historical society or historic house that could make for a perfect outing.



Do (a little) research

Check the website or call to find out the days and hours the museum is open. Check the online calendar to see what events or special activities might be going on when you're planning to visit. Many museums are closed on Mondays. Weekday afternoons tend to be the quietest time, after the school groups have visited in the mornings.



Look for a discount

Many museums have regular weekly or monthly hours when they offer free admission. Public libraries may have museum passes that you can check out with your library card, as you would a book, and use for free or discounted admission. These are usually in high demand, but most libraries let you put them on hold. Most museums have some type of discount, through clubs like AAA or AARP, another cultural organization (like a public radio station), or even your employer. Check the website or call to ask so you'll know what to expect. If you have a group of ten or more people, many museums will offer a group discount. Usually this doesn't need to be a formal group; it can just be a couple of families visiting together. Note: Group visits often have to be planned in advance.



Pack your supplies

In addition to all the usual gear you may be accustomed to bringing when you're out with kids, consider these: a small notebook or sketchpad and a pencil (many museums prohibit pens in the galleries); a print out of the companion to this guide, the KID'S GUIDE TO VISITING MUSEUMS WITH A GROWNUP; and a clipboard (or ask to borrow one at the front desk). Because museums may restrict bag size, you may want to pack a bag-within-a-bag so you can carry the essentials and leave the rest in the coatroom. Don't forget easily portable snacks and a water bottle. Eating is usually not allowed in the galleries, but it should be fine in the lobby or outside on a nice day. Also, consider putting a few dollars in an envelope for your child to spend on a souvenir at the museum shop (more on that later).

WHEN YOU ARRIVE

Get oriented

At the admissions desk, present your pass or discount card (such as a AAA card) and pay your admission. If the museum is free, you still may need to check in. Take a map if there is one. Ask whether there are any special guides for kids; the museum may have one available even if it's not displayed. Ask if there is a recommended itinerary or place to start. Hang up your coat, take your essentials (including your writing/sketching materials), check any large bags, and it's time to go!

Less is more

Look at the map or a floor plan with your child and together identify 3 to 5 things you want to see. These can be individual objects, entire spaces, or programs like tours or hands-on activities. Don't try to cram everything in; you'll only leave exhausted. Plan for around an hour of exploring before you shift gears. If you've made a long trip to visit the museum and want to get your time and money's worth, plan to take a long lunch break. Some very large museums offer the chance to return the next day, or within the next week, at no additional cost when you show them the ticket you just purchased.

Set expectations

A visit is likely to be more successful if your child knows what to expect. Tell him or her about how long you plan to stay and when you'll take a break. Go over some basic rules. At museums that are not designed to be hands-on (like a children's museum or a living history museum), let children know that they need to look at the art and objects with their eyes, not their hands. Touching can damage objects. Look for opportunities where you *can* touch, such as an interactive area. These should be well-marked.



In most museums, only part of the collection is on view at any one time. In some very large museums, it can be as little as 5%. While that fact may make you feel disappointed about what you're not seeing, the good news is that most museums rotate displays on a regular basis. Every time you visit, you're likely to see something new.

DURING YOUR VISIT

Explore!

Find your way to the first item on your "to see" list; feel free to ask a staff person or guard if you need help—they'll be happy to point out the way. You'll probably see some interesting things on the way. Make a mental or written note to come back to them later after you've seen your top three to five things.

Really Look

It sounds simple, but concentrate on actually looking at the art, objects, and displays you're seeing. Research suggests that the average person at an art museum spends just a few seconds looking at each work of art! The questions in this guide can help you and your child look closely.

Get Talking

A few simple questions can prompt you and your child to do some focused looking, and can spark fascinating conversations. You don't need to be an expert to have a conversation about what you're seeing! Museums are places where you and your child can make your own observations and connections to what you're seeing--there's no right or wrong answer. See the next page for some techniques that museum educators use every day. Give one or two of them a try!

Sketch

You don't have to be "good" at drawing to break out the pencil. The kid's version of this packet has a blank page for drawing; grown ups can use the back of this guide or your sketchbook if you brought one. The goal of drawing is to prompt you to look more closely, not necessarily to copy something you see. One approach: find a detail in an object—a line in a painting, the curve of a fossil—and just draw that. If you have time for more than one sketch, you could continue on a theme: for example, finding and drawing a geometric pattern you see in several different objects.

Museum professionals use the term "object" to refer to any item in the collection. It could be a work of art, an artifact, an historic document, a fossil, and so on. It's a kind of catch-all word for a huge variety of things.



ACTIVITIES

See, Think, Wonder

This is a simple but powerful series of questions. What do you **see** when you look at the artwork or object, what do you **think**, and what do you **wonder**?

Look for Evidence

After you or your child makes an observation about an artwork or object, think about **what you see** that brings you to that conclusion. For example, if a child says that a person in a portrait looks sad, ask what *shows* that the person is sad. It might be somber colors, the person's body language, or something similar. Just this one question can get you both looking closer and can even help build critical thinking skills.

Ask Creative Questions

"How might this sculpture move if it could?"

"What sound would this painting make?"

"If you could own one thing you see in this gallery, what would it be, and why?"

"What would these two works of art say to each other if they could have a conversation?"

If these questions seem a little silly, that's the point! Conversation starters like these are a fun way to delve right in to what you're seeing. Use these or come up with your own. (Hint: adults and older kids tend to enjoy this activity as much as the little ones.)

Windows & Mirrors

Ask kids to find a work of art or an object that **reflects** something about them (the mirror) and to find another work of art or object that lets them **see into** someone else's life or culture for a new perspective (the window).



Many museums are closed on Mondays in part so they can have one day to work in the galleries or to maintain them without disrupting visitors. In a lot of museums, Mondays, rather than Fridays, are the staff's casual wear-jeans-to-work day because the building is closed to visitors.

WRAPPING UP

Debrief

Talk with your child about what they liked best, and share your own favorites. Your child may want to draw his or her favorite part of the visit on the last page of the Kid's Guide. If there's anything you would do differently, or any new information you gathered about logistics, like directions or parking, make a note for your next visit.

Bring home a memento

This could be a small item from the museum shop, like a pencil; a postcard of a favorite item; or a children's book to help you explore further (or make a mental note of the title and stop by the library on the way home). Often, kid-friendly shop items are in a separate section so you can avoid navigating through the section full of breakables. Some people identify one particular type of item to buy and purchase the same item at every museum they visit. Small, inexpensive items work well, like magnets or coins from an elongated penny machine. After a few visits, you have a collection that's fun to build on when you go somewhere new.

You *don't* need to spend money, though. Some museums have freebies like stickers or bookmarks available for kids at the front desk. Or, gather a few brochures. At home, kids can cut out the images from the brochures and make collages. If you received an admission sticker to wear, bring it home and put it on your calendar on today's date. Even these small activities will help your family build memories of your trip to the museum.

Before you leave: consider becoming a member

Assuming you had a great visit and the museum is easy for you to get to on a regular basis, consider becoming a member. Most memberships pay for themselves after just two or three visits. If you purchase a membership at the end of your first visit, many museums will credit the admission fee you paid that day toward the membership. Membership has lots of perks; these vary by museum, but usually include free regular admission, discounts on shop or café purchases, discounted programs and special events, and members' publications. Tip: ask if the museum is running any membership specials. Around the winter holidays, many museums offer discounts on memberships, as gifts and for yourself. Some museums belong to consortia, meaning that your membership card will allow you benefits at multiple museums.