

Difficult Knowledge and Children's Museums:

A Reflection Guide for Educators



Introduction

This reflection guide compiles resources, frameworks, and strategies that are intended to support museum workers to think through issues and possibilities of representing controversial, diverse, and/or difficult knowledge with children and families.

Land Acknowledgment

This guide was written in the area known as Tkaronto (Toronto), which has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat. Now home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, the current treaty holders are the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. As a multi-site project, the report was also written on the traditional lands of the Lenape Peoples in the area known as Lenapehoking (New York City). As researchers and writers of this guide, we hold intersecting positions in relationship to the land and ongoing colonial legacies that continue to shape and thwart relationships with First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and Indigenous Peoples.

Author Biographies

Lisa Farley is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her research examines the status of difficult knowledge in learning from history, the emotional aspects of education, and theories of child development in relation to curriculum and pedagogy.

E.Y. Zipris is a doctoral candidate and adjunct faculty at Teachers College, Columbia University and former Director of Education at the Museum of the City of New York. Her research focuses on creative technologies and social justice practices in museum contexts.

Suad Ahmed is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research focuses on the experiences of Somali children in schools and the emotional and social impacts of anti-Black racism.

A Note of Gratitude

We would like to thank the museum community who submitted resources to include as part of this guide. Dr. Helen Yaqing Han executed the guide design, and we thank her for this work. Dr. Han is a graphic designer, design educator and researcher. We also thank Dr. Aaron Richmond for his accessibility review of the report design and layout, which informs the design and layout of the guide. Dr. Richmond is currently a Resource Facilitator at the Happy Valley-Goose Bay Campus of the College of the North Atlantic located in Labrador.

This guide draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. We are grateful to the agency for their support of this work.



Social Sciences and Humanities
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Canada

Research Team & Collaborators

Debbie Sonu is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hunter College and The Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Her research examines how teachers engage social conflicts and difficult histories with children in public schools.

Sandra Chang-Kredl is a Professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University. Her research explores children's popular culture and play, with a focus on teachers' efforts to support children's understandings of difficult topics such as hate speech and othering.

Gillian Parekh is an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Disability Studies in Education within the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research draws on critical quantitative and institutional ethnographic methods to trace patterns of inequity experienced by children and young people from kindergarten to postsecondary education.

Jennifer Rehkamp is the Senior Director of Field Services and Research at the Association of Children's Museums. She has extensive experience in leading projects that support museum educators in thinking about the role of museums in children's learning and community engagement.

Kiera Brant-Birioukov is from Kenhtè:ke (Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Ontario). She is a Senior Consultant and Co-Founder of Ridge Road Training and Consulting, with expertise in Indigenous thought, educational research, and professional development.

Michael Harcourt has been a social studies teacher and is a lecturer at the University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Tasha Henry is an Inclusive Education teacher and writer of truth and reconciliation curricula.

Joana Joachim is an Assistant Professor at Concordia with expertise in Black feminist art histories and critical museology.

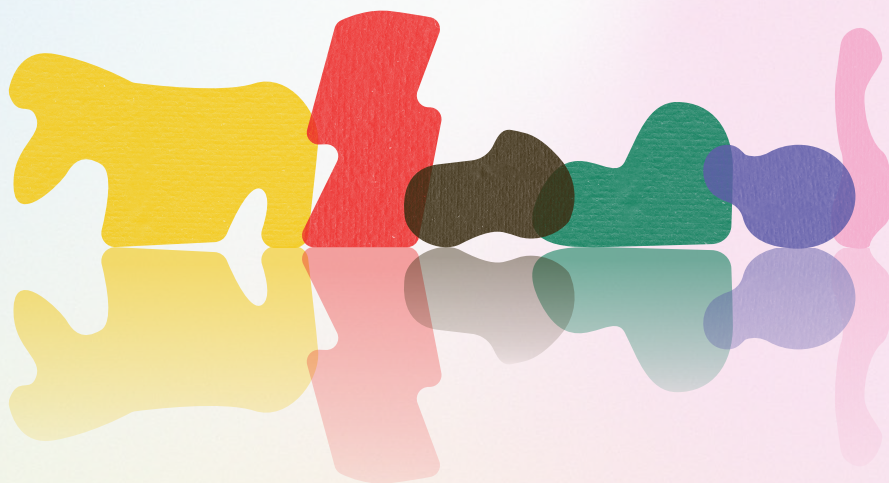
Andrea Milligan is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Wellington and Learning Manager at Experience Wellington.

Jessica Ticktin is a public radio producer of stories about race and reconciliation from the perspectives of children and youth.

A Note on Representation

This reflection guide gathers materials, examples, and resources that aim to support educators in efforts to represent and respond to difficult knowledge in children’s museums. We acknowledge that different people may have different views on the meaning and significance of the descriptions, definitions, events, and experiences represented. We also acknowledge different interpretations about the uses of difficult knowledge. Understanding that no representation is complete, we acknowledge that this guide is itself a work-in-progress and that the resources found within it will shift in importance, significance, and relevance over time.

In this guide, resources that support children and families in learning from Indigenous Peoples and communities most often emerge from the Canadian context. Differences in national policy may play a role. For instance, in 2015, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* released its [Final Report](#) detailing the oppressive conditions of Residential Schools across the nation. Based on millions of documents and thousands of testimonies from witnesses from over 300 communities, the TRC Report catalogues the ongoing impacts of “over 100 years of mistreatment of more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children placed in these schools” (Volume 1, p. viii). As a direct result of the TRC Report, the TRC Commission released 94 “[Calls to Action](#)” (2015) that outline specific measures for public institutions – including government, education, and museums and archives – to take in actioning their obligations to Indigenous communities in a larger effort toward reconciliation.



Background to the Project

This reflection guide emerges from a partnership project involving York University (Toronto), City University of New York (New York), Concordia University (Montreal), and the [Association of Children's Museums \(ACM\)](#). The project explored how museums represent diverse and difficult knowledge with and for children, with a focus on the role of storytelling in these efforts. In our project, difficult knowledge refers to events and experiences of social violence, conflict, and injustice *and* to the complex responses they can elicit – for example, grief, anxiety, and outrage – in contexts of teaching and learning. Storytelling refers to the multiple forms that children's museums use to represent the diverse and sometimes difficult experiences of the communities they serve.

Storytelling Practices

Museum respondents reported using a variety of storytelling practices.

Tactile 84%

artefacts and objects

Written 70%

narratives on placards, short stories, poetry, prose, picture books

Oral 66%

telling or reciting stories, legends, folk tales, singing, chanting

Visual 55%

images, movies, films, television shows

Interactive 38%

in-person digital – storytelling that combines multimedia, multimodal, or interactive elements

Performance 35%

historical re-enactments, stage plays

Testimony 33%

eyewitness accounts, survivor narratives

Online 33%

virtual programs, pre-recorded programs, educators' guides, museum website, social media

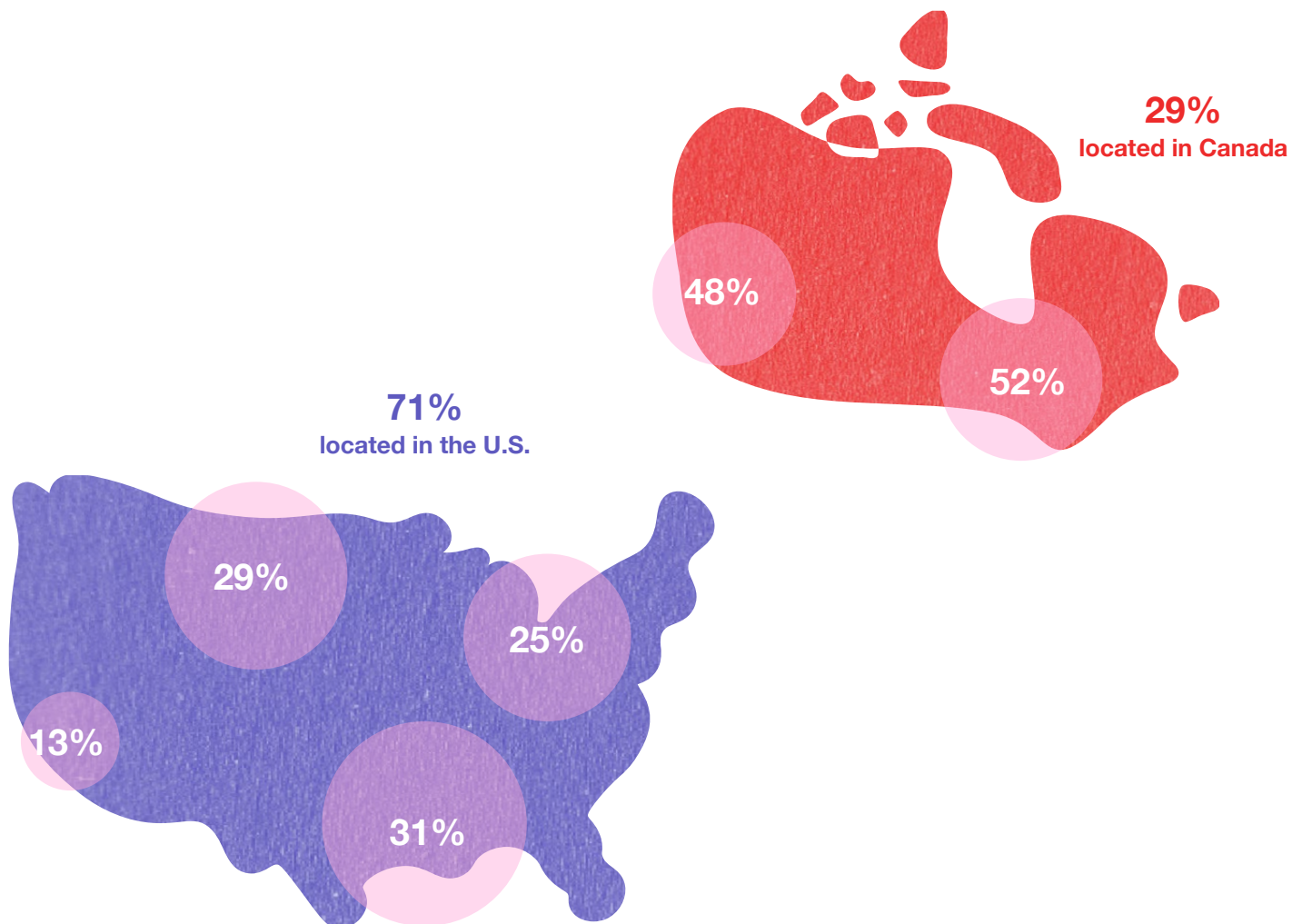
Between February-May 2024, the research team, under the leadership of Professor Lisa Farley, launched a survey open to museum educators, directors, and curators working with children and families in the United States and Canada. The survey was developed in consultation with community members and the ACM Senior Director of Field Services and Research. Questions covered several areas including museums programming topics and practices, ages of child audiences, examples of initiatives with children, and perspectives on pedagogical challenges and supports.

One of the goals of the survey was to learn about how museums are developing programming and practices to support children’s learning in the context of their commitments to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. We were specifically interested in the meanings and challenges of efforts to represent difficult and/or controversial topics with children.

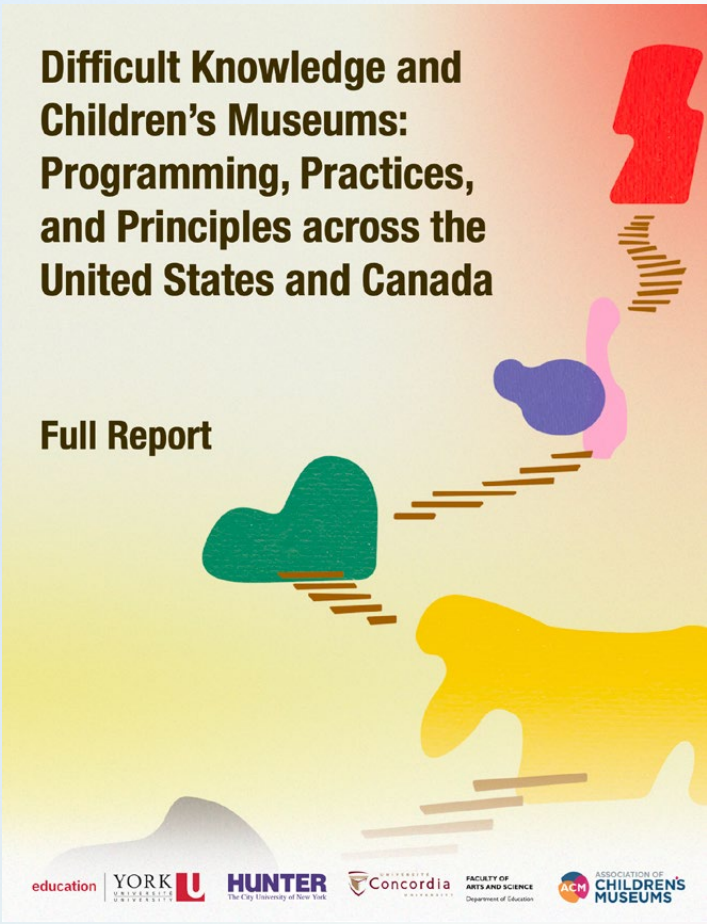
With the help of ACM’s network as well as targeted outreach to non-ACM museums, the research team drew responses from 106 museum workers across the United States and Canada.

The Museums

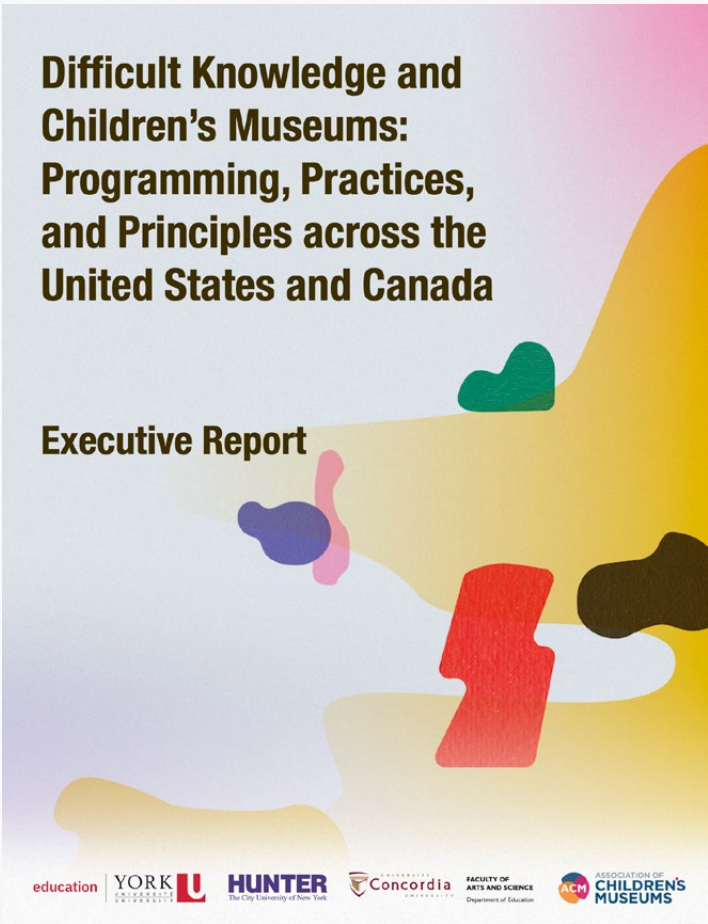
Most museum respondents were located in the US (71%) with 29% in Canada. US museums were evenly distributed across the Midwest (29%), Northeast (25%), the South (31%), with fewer in the West (13%). Canadian museums are evenly straddled between the West (48%) and the East (including Ontario and Quebec) (52%).



Our study found that children’s museums excel in their uses of a wide array of storytelling practices to engage children, families, and communities in diverse and difficult topics. We also found that children’s museums are continually at work to develop and deepen programming to serve the ever-changing needs of local communities. Throughout, the project findings document the creative and critical ways that museum educators and directors think about the pedagogical importance, complexities, and challenges of their work.



[CLICK TO VIEW THE FULL REPORT](#)



[CLICK TO VIEW THE EXECUTIVE REPORT](#)

How to Use this Reflection Guide

This reflection guide is a resource for community partners to further develop critical practices and considerations when representing controversial content with and for children. We hope that the guide can facilitate thought and dialogue as experimental forms of action that supplement the already-existing expertise within children's museums.

Based on survey findings, the report made five recommendations for children's museums to consider in their ongoing efforts to program diverse and difficult topics for children.

Recommendations

- 1** Provide professional learning/workshops on issues and resources relating to the representation of social difference and difficult knowledge with children.
- 2** Invite continuing reflection on social positionality in relation to museum work; include professional development on self-reflection, solidarity, and allyship.
- 3** Support the integration of counter-stories in museum programming and practices by sharing examples, resources, and models across institutions and borders.
- 4** Include children in programming – particularly from marginalized communities.
- 5** Diversify staffing without tokenism.

The sections of this guide are organized by the first four recommendations, which address programming and practices in museums. Each section spotlights critical frameworks, exhibits, and/or community-based initiatives and practices that engage children and families in working through difficult topics.

1 **Difficult Knowledge and Age-Appropriate Considerations**

2 **Social Positionality, Solidarity, and Allyship: Frameworks and Strategies**

3 **Cross-Institution and Cross-Border Examples, Exhibits, and Stories**

4 **Kids' Corner: Resources and Curriculum For and With Children**

In addition to this four-part framing, the materials of this reflection guide were selected using four criteria. Each resource: 1) is open access; 2) addresses questions, issues, and/or examples of programming and/or practices that represent controversial, diverse, and/or difficult knowledge in public institutions; 3) focuses on and/or carries implications for work with children and families; 4) has been active and/or exhibited within the last 10 years, approximately 2015-2025, while prioritizing recent resources within this range. We also invited members of the museum community to make submissions to the guide.

This guide is not meant to be an application or a lesson sequence. The sections can be engaged separately or together to support critical conversations around curating, viewing, or development curriculum. The purpose of the guide is to offer a foundation of thinking and dialogue as necessary conditions of teaching, learning, and education itself.

Each section begins with an overview followed by a list of resources each with their own short description. At the end of each section are a series of questions designed to bring the user of this guide deeper into the materials provided.

Table of Contents

Section 1

Difficult Knowledge and Age-Appropriate Considerations

The first section features guidelines and strategies that support efforts to represent sensitive and/or controversial content using age-appropriate considerations and practices.

Section 2

Social Positionality, Solidarity, and Allyship: Frameworks and Strategies

This section offers frameworks and strategies to support the development of allyships and solidarities between museums and diverse and marginalized communities.

Section 3

Cross-Institution and Cross-Border Examples, Exhibits, and Stories

The third section provides examples of museum exhibits and initiatives that program diverse and difficult content for and with children.

Section 4

Kids' Corner: Resources and Curriculum For and With Children

The fourth section features resources, curriculum materials, and activities that are intended for children and/or that involve children in curation.

Section 1: Difficult Knowledge and Age-Appropriate Considerations

Overview

Children’s museums are champions of their young audience’s active and playful learning while also programming topics that may be considered controversial, sensitive, or difficult. Respondents of our study shared how their programming choices and practices are led by a dual commitment to children’s learning and social and environmental justice. Age emerged as a key theme at this intersection, where respondents described both successes and challenges of representing difficult and challenging topics in ways that were cognitively and emotionally accessible to younger audiences. Several respondents also noted how children themselves arrive to museums having already experienced difficulties – such as discrimination, prejudice, and social conflict – and pointed to the power of representation as a portal for children to work through these experiences.

This section presents resources and strategies that balance child-centred practices with a parallel aim to represent controversial or difficult topics. We also include resources that question how the idea of childhood innocence can do a disservice to children.

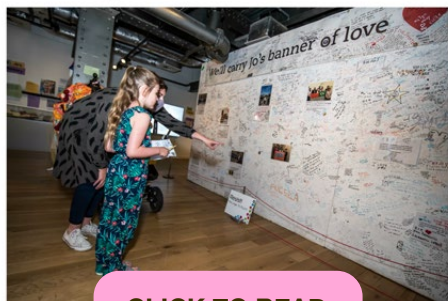
Resources

Created by [Kids in Museums](#), this three-part resource responds to the question of how museums can engage children in sensitive topics:

Part 1

Part 1: How can your museum engage children, young people and families with sensitive topics?

This resource is designed to support your work discussing and engaging young audiences with difficult, challenging or sensitive topics, including supporting staff and visitor wellbeing.



CLICK TO READ

Part 2

Part 2: How can your museum engage children, young people and families with sensitive topics?

Read the second part of our guide to how your heritage organisation can engage children, young people and families with difficult or challenging topics. This section discusses how to practically embed this work in your organisation.

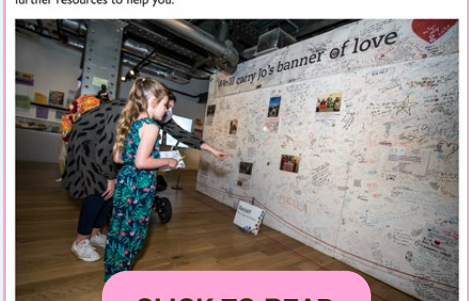


CLICK TO READ

Part 3

Part 3: How can your museum engage children, families and young people with sensitive topics?

Read the third and final part of our guide to how your heritage organisation can engage children, young people and families with difficult or challenging topics. This section discusses how to support staff and young participants, and provides links to further resources to help you.



CLICK TO READ

This resource was created by the [Canadian Museum for Human Rights](#) and contains several resource guides to address topics such as: LGBTQ rights, forced displacement, war and genocide, murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, wrongful convictions and systemic racism, and Residential Schools. Each guide is framed with text that prepares readers' encounters with difficult content.

Human Rights Learning

The screenshot shows the website for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Donate', 'Buy Tickets', 'Search', and 'Français'. Below that, a secondary navigation bar includes 'Visit', 'Exhibitions and Events', 'Stories', 'Education', and 'About'. The main content area features a dark background with a photograph of a library or study area. Text on the page reads: "Located on Treaty 1 territory, at the crossroads of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in a historic gathering place for the Anishinaabeg, Inninewak, Anishinewak, Dakota Oyate and Denesuline, and in the birthplace and homeland of the Red River Métis, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights continues to be a place dedicated to the evolution, celebration and future of human rights. The water in the Museum is sourced from Shoal Lake and has been cared for by First Nations in Treaty 3 territory for thousands of years." Below this text is a link for "Full version" and a prominent green button that says "CLICK TO VISIT".

The following resources offer guidelines, tips, and strategies for talking with children about difficult news and controversial content:

How to Talk to Children about Difficult News

The screenshot shows the top portion of an article from the American Psychological Association. The title is "How to talk to children about difficult news". Below the title, it says "Last updated: May 16, 2024" and "Date created: November 16, 2015" with a "3 min read" indicator. There are tags for "Journalism and Facts", "Children", and "Mental Health". A photograph shows a man and a young boy looking at each other. A yellow button at the bottom says "CLICK TO READ".

Tips for Tackling Controversial Content

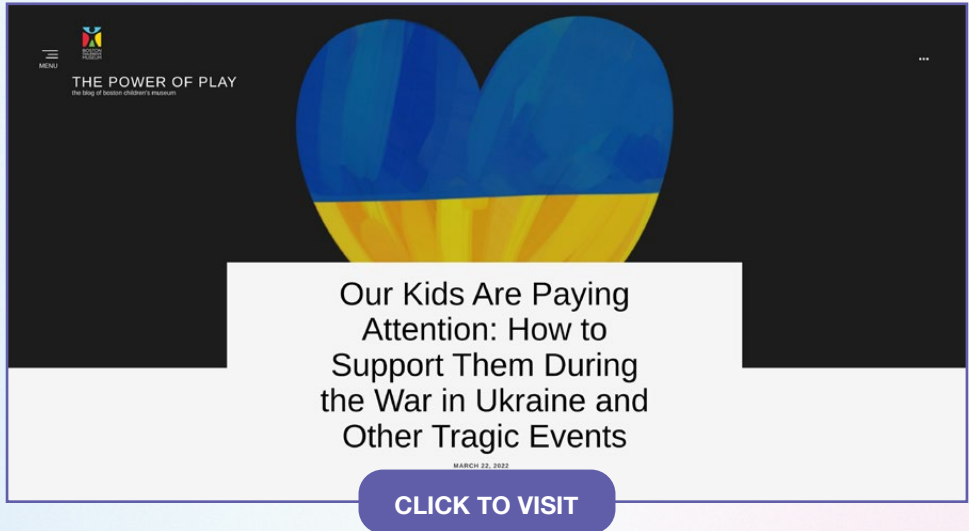
The screenshot shows an article from Carolina K-12. The title is "Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom". The text begins with a quote: "...our history is neither an unbroken march of progress nor a doom loop of despair. It's a complicated mess, just like the present. And having a sense of curiosity about where we came from is an act of civic pride." - Eric Johnson. The article discusses teaching history and provides advice on preparing to cover sensitive topics. A red button at the bottom says "CLICK TO READ".

Age-Appropriate Guidelines: Canadian Museum of Human Rights

The screenshot shows the "Guides for Exploring" section of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights website. It features three cards for different age groups: "Children Under 7", "Children 7 to 12", and "Teens 13 to 17". Each card includes a "Read the Guide" button. A dark green button at the bottom of the page says "CLICK TO READ".

Acknowledging “the inevitable truth that we cannot protect children from the sorrows of the world,” this blog post from [Boston Children’s Museum](#) provides resources that can support children and families - and all of us - to “find ways of understanding and coping” in the context of tragic global events.

Our Kids are Paying Attention: How to Support them During the War in Ukraine and other Tragic Events



Published by [Bank Street College of Education](#), this open-access collection of research-based papers explore how children’s literature can be used to facilitate conversations on difficult topics in classrooms that may be extended to other learning contexts. Topics include feelings of grief and trauma, race and policing, gender identity, and climate change.

Our Kids are Paying Attention: How to Support them During the War in Ukraine and other Tragic Events

Occasional Paper Series


Issue 44
Facilitating Conversations on Difficult Topics in the Classroom: Teachers' Stories of Opening Spaces Using Children's Literature

Introduction

Mollie Welsh Kruger, Susie Rolander, and Susan Stires

Educators have long extolled the brilliance of Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) and her exploration of how books can serve as both mirrors and windows for children—mirrors in which children can see themselves and windows that widen their world. What if we broadened her formulation to include the realm of conversation? We assert that books are the base and what follows is the possibility of rich, deep conversations in classrooms.

For this edition of the Bank Street Occasional Paper Series, we invited educators to share stories from their practice: times when they utilized children's literature and conversations to address real life; the difficult topics that children experience through the mirror of their own experiences or the windows of their peers, communities, or world.



As guest editors for this issue, we (Mollie, Susie, and Susan) are strongly influenced by Bank Street College, an institution that values the intersection of academic learning and the real world. In fact the credo states, “The mission of Bank Street College is to improve the education of children and their teachers by applying to the education process all available knowledge about learning and growth and by connecting teaching and learning meaningfully to the outside world” (Mitchell, 1951).

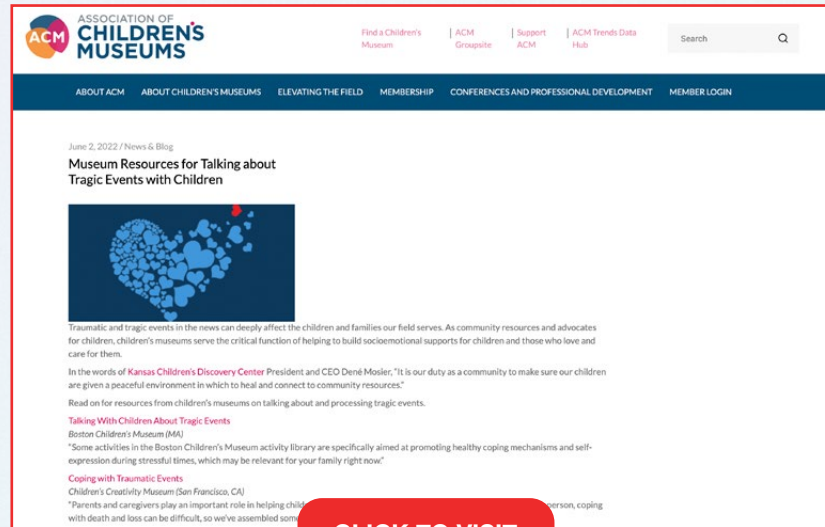
This edition underscores these beliefs. These stories are the stories of educators who have tried, and sometimes stumbled, and are showing us their vulnerabilities. In each story, there is profound learning from the conversations that emerge from books.

[Read the Full Essay](#) [Full PDF of OPS #44](#)

CLICK TO READ

This [ACM](#) blog compiles a helpful list of resources from children's museums that can support children to process tragedies.


Museum Resources for Talking about Tragic Events with Children



The screenshot shows the ACM website's navigation bar with links for 'Find a Children's Museum', 'ACM Groupsite', 'Support ACM', and 'ACM Trends Data Hub'. Below the navigation is a menu with 'ABOUT ACM', 'ABOUT CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS', 'ELEVATING THE FIELD', 'MEMBERSHIP', 'CONFERENCES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT', and 'MEMBER LOGIN'. The main content area features a blog post dated June 2, 2022, with the title 'Museum Resources for Talking about Tragic Events with Children'. The post includes a heart-shaped graphic made of blue dots and text discussing the impact of tragic events on children and families, and providing resources for talking about such events. A red button labeled 'CLICK TO VISIT' is overlaid on the bottom right of the screenshot.

Also from ACM, in collaboration with [New York Life Foundation](#) and [Knology](#), this website hosts the project, *Healing with Play* which aims to support children, families, and communities dealing with loss and grief. At this link, you will find resources for museums, resources for children and families, and a series of case studies that spotlight exhibits from children's museums that support children to work through difficult feelings while staying connected and building capacity for resilience in the face of loss.

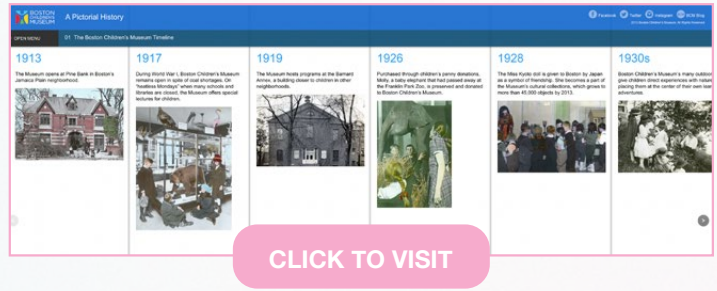
Healing with Play: Honoring Children's Grief Awareness



The screenshot shows the 'Healing With Play Home' page on the ACM website. The page features a green banner with the text 'HEALING WITH PLAY HONORING CHILDREN'S GRIEF AWARENESS MONTH' and logos for ACM, New York Life, and Knology. Below the banner, the text states 'Children's Grief Awareness Month is November 2025' and provides information about the campaign, including the Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model and the importance of support and resources for grieving children. A list of resources is provided, including 'Learn More About Healing with Play', 'Healing with Play Home', 'About Healing with Play', 'Project Team', 'Case Studies', 'Resources for Museums', 'Resources for Children and Families', and 'Register to Participate'. A pink button labeled 'CLICK TO VISIT' is overlaid on the bottom right of the screenshot.

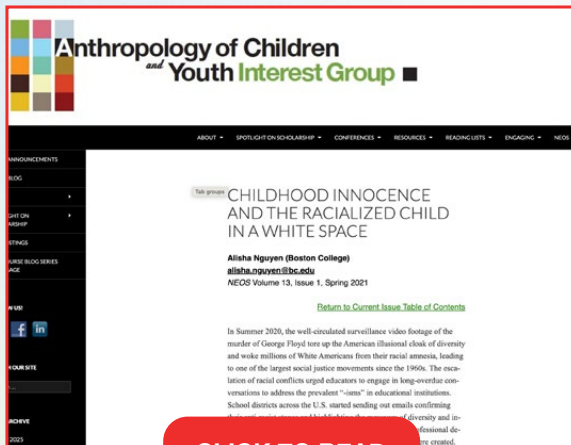
This timeline charts historic shifts in the institutional aims, leadership and location, and programming topics at [Boston Children's Museum](#). Spanning 100 years (1913-2013), the timeline highlights the vital role of museums as sites of learning and refuge during times of war, changes within museums from “do not touch” to hands-on programming, expanded community outreach in the 1980s, the development of art, music, and theatre programs in the 90s, partnerships with schools and teachers throughout, and the inclusion of exhibits addressing difficult topics, such as death and loss (1984), prejudice, discrimination, and racism (1990), multiculturalism and multilingualism (1991, 2001), and Black lives in Boston (2004). The timeline represents important moments in Boston Children's Museum's history, which are shared with the caveat and acknowledgment that exhibits and programs from the past represent important experiences for us to learn from, but are not necessarily reflective of language, approaches, and best practices that would be implemented in developing new experiences today.

Boston Children's Museum Timeline



The following pieces invite educators to question the meaning of childhood innocence: a construct that can sometimes be used to downplay or censor difficult topics with children. To be critical of innocence is not to say that children should be treated as adults, nor should it mean overloading children's dreamscapes with unfiltered images and narratives of violence. Critiques of innocence rather invite educators to recognize how innocence can be used to protect the most privileged children, while being denied to Black and racially marginalized children. Such critiques call attention to the ways children are already immersed in a world of social and political conflict and invite thinking about what forms of representation can support them to think through their unique positionality, vulnerability, and agency in these contexts.

Childhood Innocence and the Racialized Child in a White Space



Protecting the Idea of Childhood Innocence is a Disservice to Kids



Section 1 Reflection Questions

Difficult Knowledge and Age-Appropriate Considerations

- 1** Within your museum, how are age-appropriate materials understood and enacted? What adaptations, accommodations, and/or scaffolding have been used at your museum to engage children in difficult topics?
- 2** What frameworks exist to create welcoming spaces for multigenerational audiences of all backgrounds?
- 3** How do existing frameworks intended to support the creation of kid-friendly spaces marginalize or distance engagement with socio-historic topics?
- 4** How have you used or witnessed the use of sensitive materials in your museum and what lessons – from either challenges or successes – can inform future programming and pedagogical decisions at your museum?

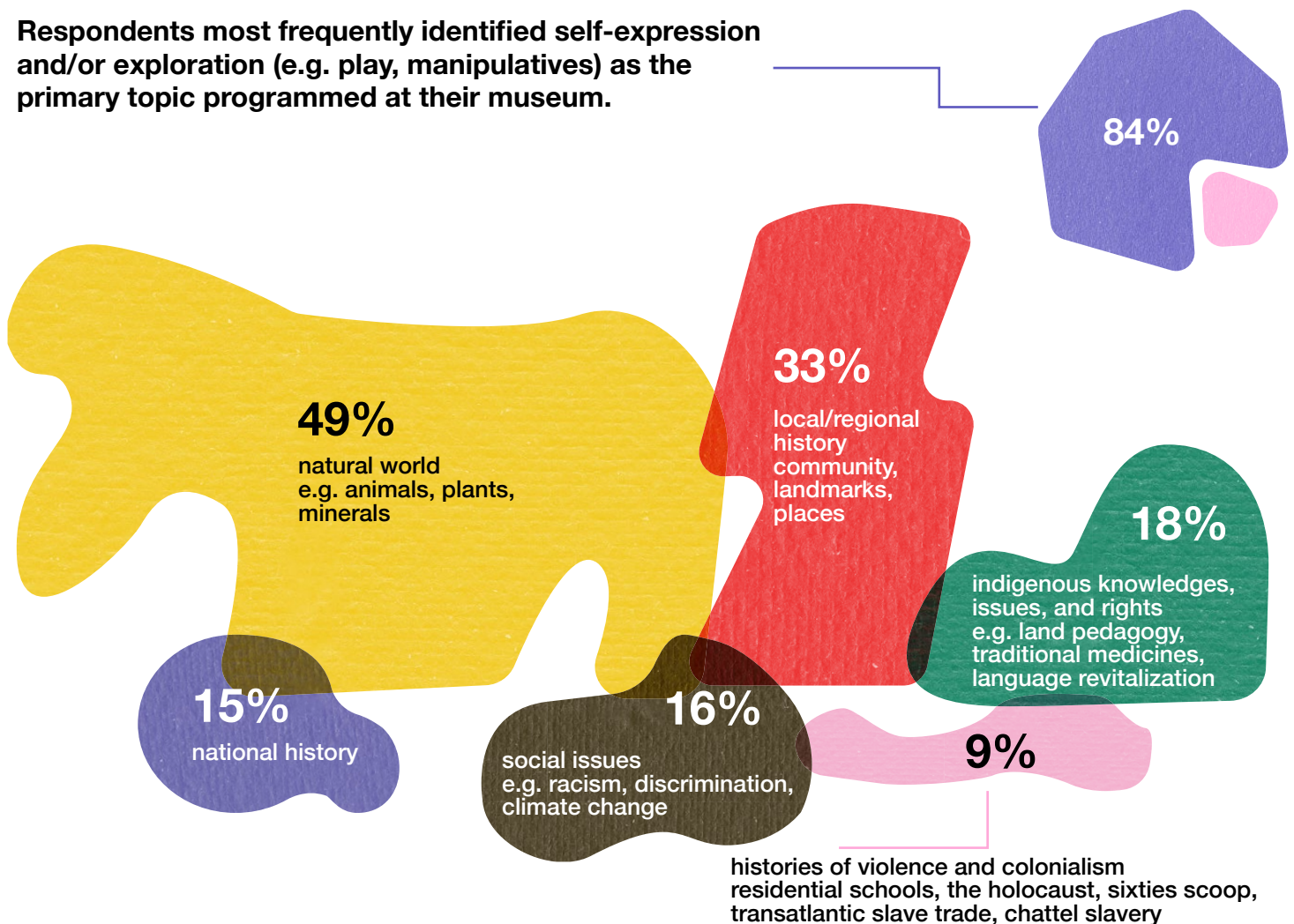
Section 2:

Social Positionality, Solidarity, and Allyship: Frameworks and Strategies

Overview

Questions about how to work ethically across differences and what it can mean to be a witness and/or to tell stories that are not one's own emerged as key themes in our study. Respondents of the survey expressed their ongoing efforts to forge solidarities and allyships with multiple communities, while sharing careful self-reflections on meaning, impacts, and limits of their own social positionality in these efforts. In this context, several museum respondents commented on the implication of museums in ongoing colonial legacies as posing a central challenge for building relationships with diverse communities, and Indigenous communities specifically. Our study findings reflect these challenges in that colonial violence and Indigenous knowledges were least often named as primary programming topics in children's museums.

Respondents most frequently identified self-expression and/or exploration (e.g. play, manipulatives) as the primary topic programmed at their museum.



The topic of self-expression was followed by the natural world and social-historical topics. These foci mirrored progressive pedagogies and developmental scaffolds that begin with children's experiences of self and then move to the larger world comprised of plants and animals including a child's immediate surroundings and/or local community.

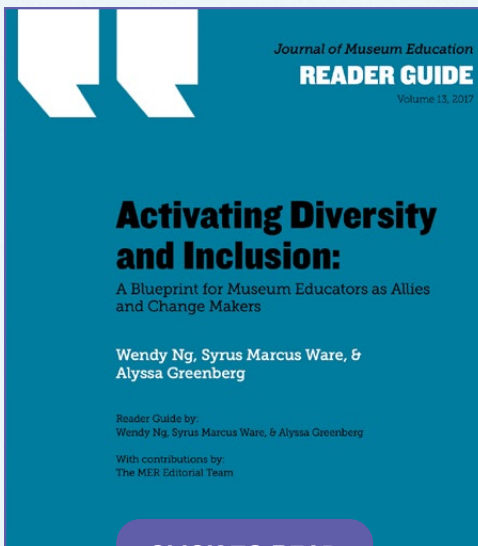
The resources in this section provide frameworks and strategies to support museum educators' ongoing efforts to reflect on social positionality and build solidarities that facilitate coming together across differences around shared commitments with diverse community partners.

Resources

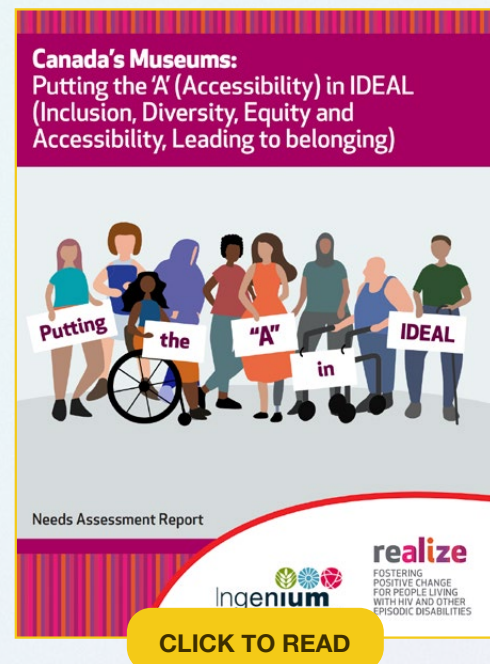
Based on a journal article published in the *Journal of Museum Education* (2017), this reader guide provides five principles followed by reflective questions and strategies for “enacting equitable relationships with visitors and staff across lines of social difference,” with an ultimate view to support museum workers to develop critical practice and action anti-oppressive museum education.

This report is the result of a collaboration between [Ingenium](#) (Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation) and [Realize](#) (Fostering Positive Change for People Living with HIV and other Episodic Disabilities). The report shares findings of a survey of Managers, Supervisors, and Administrative and Senior Clerical Personnel, with a view to improve representation among those who identify as having a long-term or episodic disability.

Activating Diversity and Inclusion: A Blueprint for Museum Educators as Allies and Changemakers

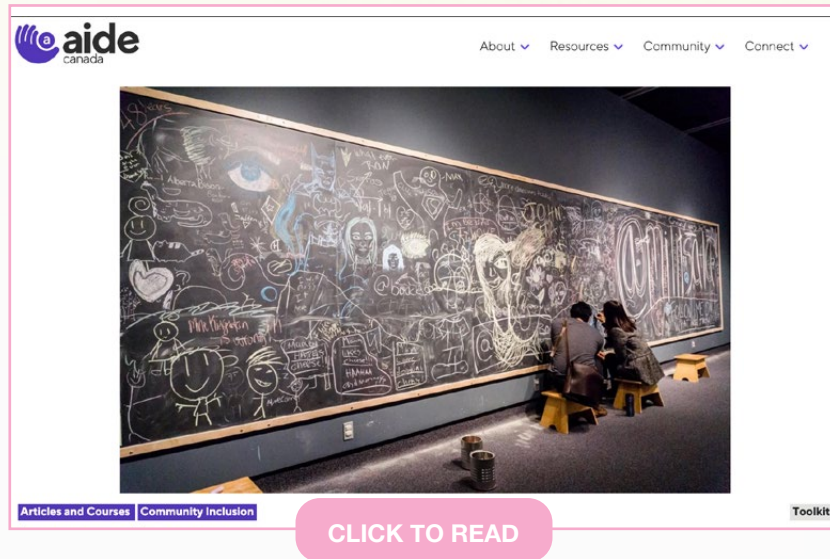


Canada's Museums: Putting the "A" in IDEAL: Needs Assessment Report



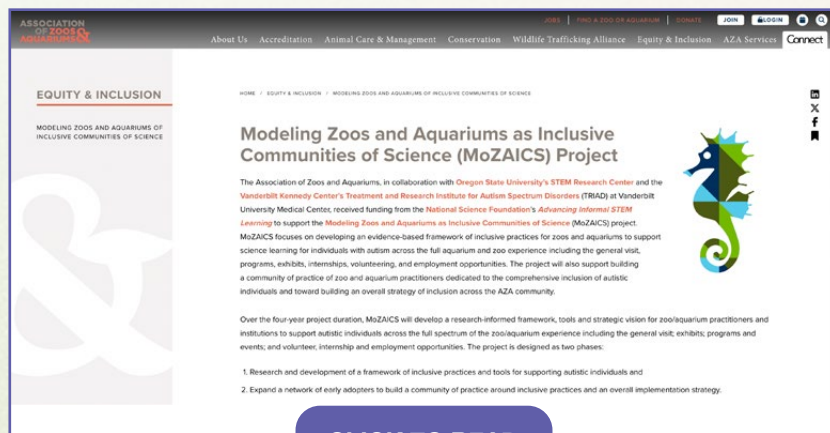
This toolkit offers resources and strategies that aim to benefit individuals with neurodiversity and their families, caregivers and friends. From an allyship point of view, it aims to provide support for those who work at museums to improve physical and social accessibility for all visitors.

Neurodiversity in Cultural Institutions



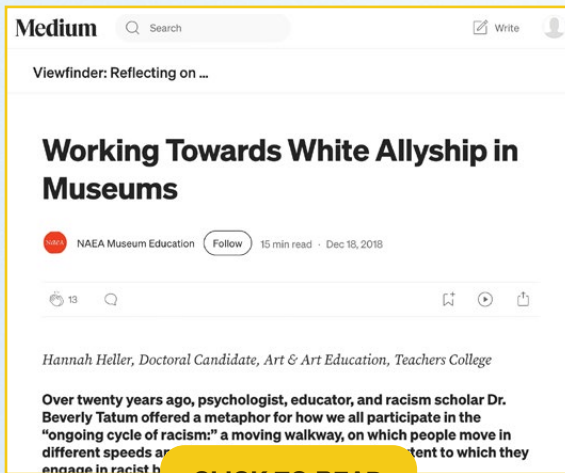
Led by the [Association of Zoos and Aquariums](#), this collaborative project offers an evidence-based framework and toolkit of inclusive practices for zoos and aquariums to support individuals with autism in science learning. The toolkit features 35 lessons for organizations and individuals to consider in becoming allies to autistic communities. A range of topics are addressed, including reviews of existing practices, feedback from the autism community, questions about leadership involvement, staff training and inclusive hiring, community engagement, case studies, as well as tools, templates, and resources.

Modeling Zoos and Aquariums as Inclusive Communities of Science (MoZAICS) Project



This article defines and clarifies the need for white allies in museums. It explains challenges and obstacles to white allyship and offers concrete steps to actively deconstruct white supremacy in museums.

Working Toward White Allyship in Museums



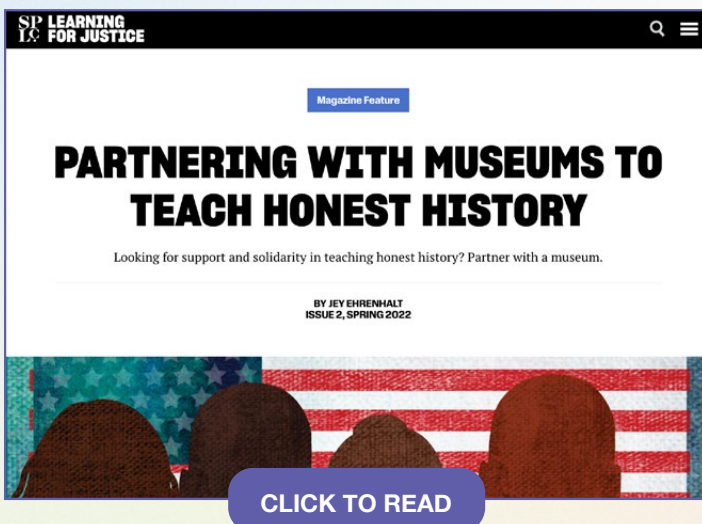
This guide offers tactics for change within museums and addresses topics such as allyship, privilege, networks, power, and generating change through diverse programming.

Power and Privilege in the 21st Century Museum



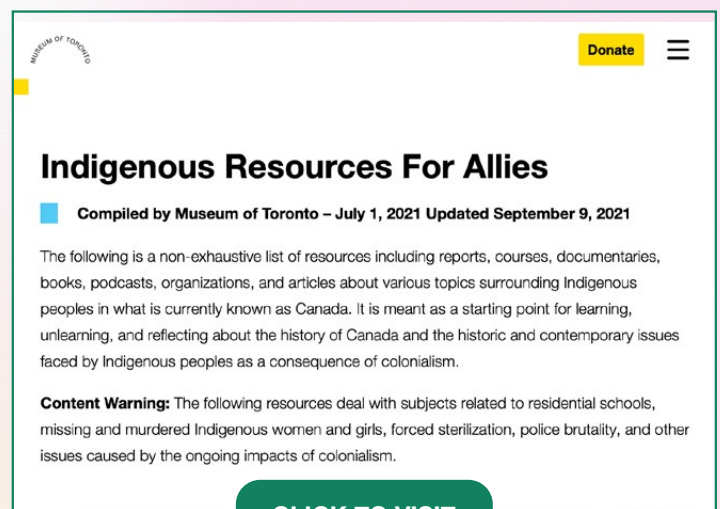
This article encourages solidarities between schools and museums overall to build strong communities that can represent controversial topics with children and acknowledge the risks of not doing so.

Partnering with Museums to Teach Honest History



Compiled by the [Museum of Toronto](#), this website offers a non-exhaustive list of Indigenous resources with the aim to support allies in learning from Indigenous Peoples in what is currently known as Canada. Resources include reports, courses, documentaries and films, maps, teacher resources, and podcasts and radio.

Indigenous Resources for Allies



In 2019, the [Montreal Indigenous Community NETWORK](#) created the following Toolkit to educate non-Indigenous individuals about becoming better allies, accomplices, and co-resisters to redirect privilege in an effort to listen, shift power dynamics, and work actively toward reconciliation. The kit outlines three concrete steps to take in becoming an ally, accompanied with resources and reflection questions about motivation, learning, actions, and respectful language and terminology.

Indigenous Ally Toolkit

CLICK TO READ

Edited by *Joaquin Muñoz and Dawn Quigley* and published by [Bank Street College of Education](#), this open-access journal collects essays and stories told by Indigenous Peoples with a view to “honour the sacrifices of those who came before,” “to bridge the gap between one another” and to “affirm Indigenous presence.” The essays featured here can be used to support efforts to engage Indigenous knowledges with children and young people through Indigenous Children’s and Young Adult Literature (ICYAL).

In 2021, the Canadian Federal Government announced the creation of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation: a statutory holiday to be regarded on September 30th every year. Before this, since 2013, September 30th had been regarded as [Orange Shirt Day](#), a day intended to mark the ongoing impacts of colonial violence and legacies of Residential Schools in Canada. As a response to the 2015 “Calls to Action” – released by the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) – Lakeshore Arts compiled a list of resources to support non-Indigenous individuals in learning about Indigenous communities and colonial legacies, with a view to become better allies and listeners who are open to unsettling colonial worldviews.

Indigenous Allyship Resources

CLICK TO READ

Why Indigenous Children’s and Young Adult Literature Matters

CLICK TO READ

Section 2 Reflection Questions

Social Positionality, Solidarity, and Allyship: Frameworks and Strategies

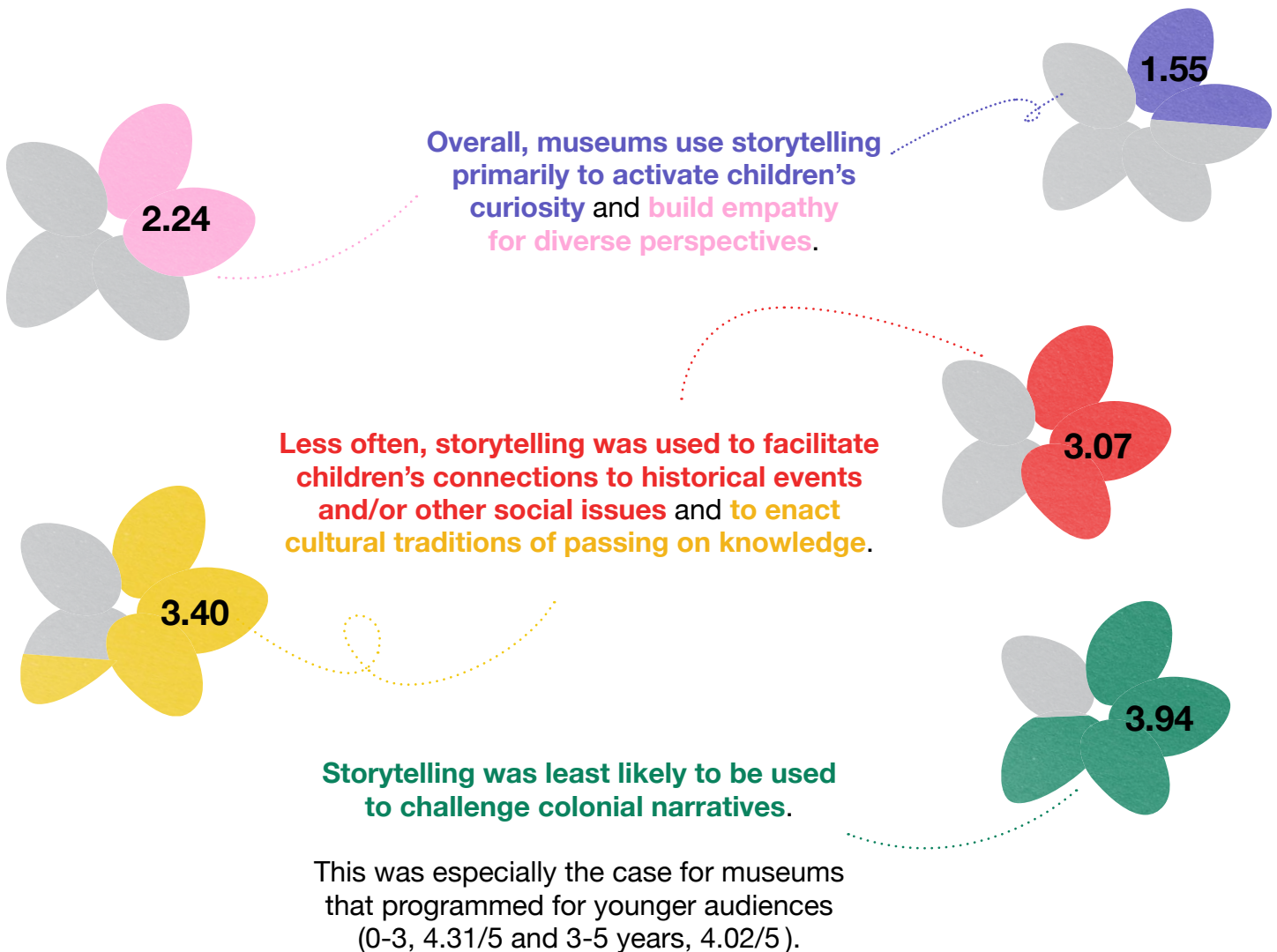
- 1** What does it mean for children's museums to be good allies?
- 2** How can museums meaningfully engage with diverse audiences throughout the year, beyond single events, commemorations, or holidays?
- 3** What role might local schools and educators play in supporting museums, especially considering practices that directly affect or engage with younger audiences?
- 4** What can it mean to build partnerships with racially marginalized communities, and specifically Indigenous communities and First Nations? What does it mean to acknowledge history, social location and positionality in this effort?

Section 3: Cross-Institution and Cross-Border Examples, Exhibits, and Stories

Overview

Children’s museums have a long history of addressing diverse, difficult, and/or controversial topics. Through storytelling and other interactive practices, children’s museums bring knowledge to life and make relevant social issues and historical experiences that might otherwise seem too distant from the present. Our study found that children’s museums excel in their use of storytelling to activate children’s curiosity about and empathy for the experiences of diverse communities that may or may not reflect their own. The respondents of our study reported that stories were most often used to activate curiosity, foster empathy, and generate links to social and historical events. Storytelling was least often used to challenge narratives of colonial violence.

The data below shows the purposes of storytelling practices in children’s museums, based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = most significant, 5 = least significant).



Of all the storytelling forms employed by the museums of our study, testimony emerged as a particularly powerful form used by museums to represent socio-historical topics, including local/regional history, Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights, social issues, national history, and histories of violence and colonialism.

This section gathers examples of exhibits, examples, and stories from the field that aim to support children and families to engage diverse histories and social issues. We also include initiatives and archives that feature testimony as an avenue to engage difficult socio-historical topics, including those that testify to colonial violence and genocide.

Resources

In 2022, [Boston Children's Museum](#) opened a gallery exhibit, "Protect Trans Dreams: A Portrait Project" that featured a series of large-scale portraits by Noah Gringi (they/them) "to celebrate transgender children and their dreams." The paintings portrayed themes generated from interviews with 7 transgender children (aged 6-12) from across New England about their dreams for the future. Themes included "making music and writing stories, fallen angels crying tears of joy, and celestial wolves circling the sky." Portraits were displayed alongside watercolour paintings featured in the book [It Feels Good to be Yourself](#) by Theresa Thorn. You can read all about the gallery exhibit in this [press release](#)!

Protecting Trans Dreams: A Portrait Project

BOSTON CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

CALENDAR | MUSEUM MEMBERSHIP | SUPPORT US | HOST AN EVENT

tickets visit explore learn museum at home

News Release April 13, 2022

"Protect Trans Dreams: A Portrait Project" Opens at Boston Children's Museum

April 13, 2022

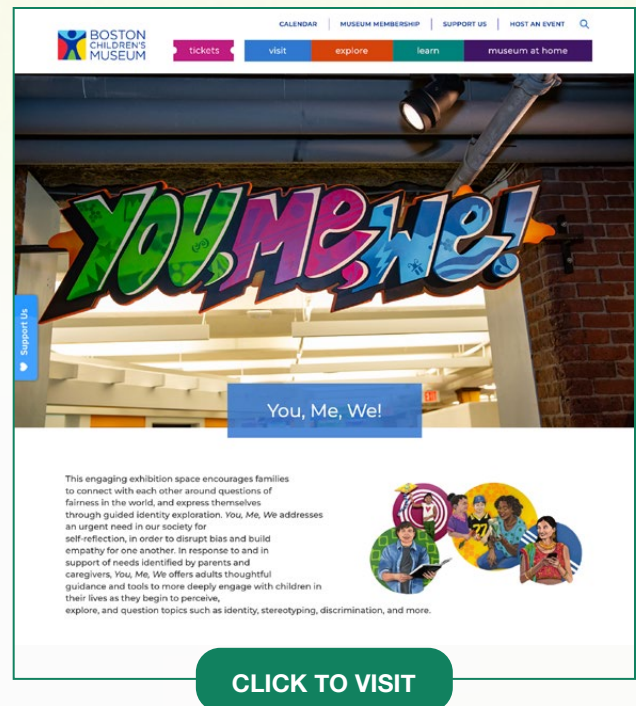
Art Installation by Noah Gringi

Boston Children's Museum recently opened the new gallery exhibit "Protect Trans Dreams: A Portrait Project." The installation features a series of large-scale acrylic portraits by artist Noah Gringi (they/them). These portraits celebrate transgender (trans) children and their dreams.

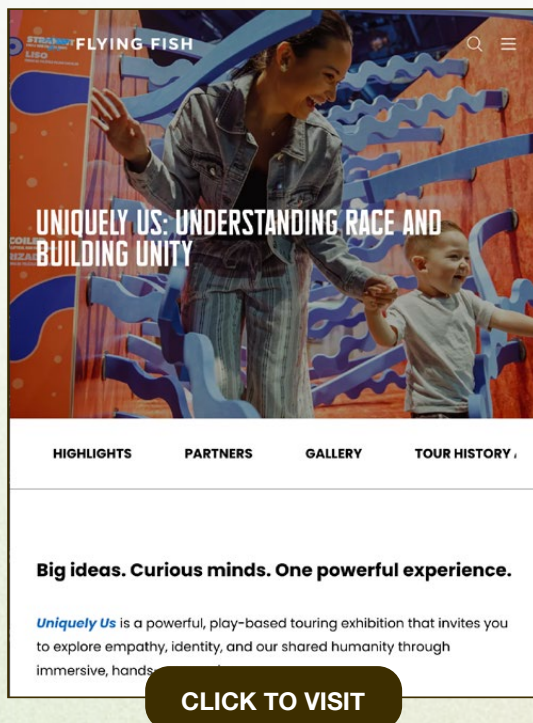
[CLICK TO READ](#)

You, Me, We

Also at Boston Children’s Museum is the interactive exhibit, “You, Me, We,” which “encourages families to connect with each other around questions of fairness in the world, and express themselves through guided identity exploration.” Through a range of hands-on activities and shared experiences, the exhibit provides opportunities for families to explore intersecting layers of identity, to contemplate multiple worldviews, beliefs, and values, to build positive connections across differences, and to disrupt bias, discrimination, and hate.



Uniquely Us: Understanding Race and Building Unity



The [Doseum](#) in San Antonio shares a traveling, play-based exhibition called “Uniquely Us: Understanding Race and Building Unity” that invites visitors to “explore empathy, identity, and our shared humanity through immersive, hands-on experiences.” Examples of exhibits include a “gene scanner” that reveals common human bonds at the deepest level, a “walking in their steps” immersive experience that invites visitors to walk alongside key historical figures (i.e., Ruby Bridges and Emma Tenayuca), an interactive “unity city” game that stages how to build more equitable communities, and a “whaddaydo” slate of scenarios that invite visitors to reflect on how our decisions affect others.

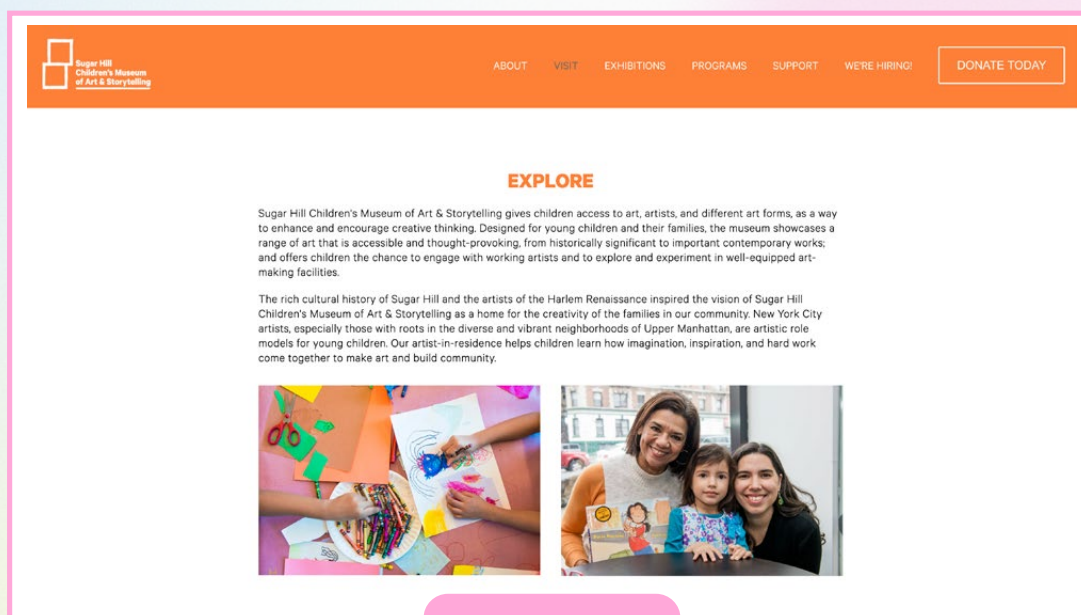
The lower level of the New York Historical Society is home to the [DiMenna Children's History Museum](#), a space dedicated to hands-on exploration of specific episodes in the city's past, present, and future with a focus on under-represented narratives and communities.

DiMenna Children's History Museum



The Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art and Storytelling opened as a site in Upper Manhattan to address communal needs ranging from early education to local poverty via exhibitions and programming designed to grow alongside neighborhood and visiting families.

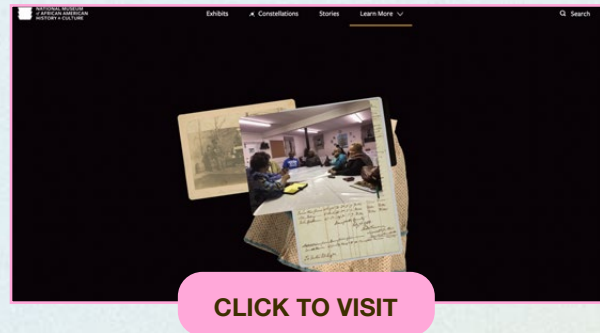
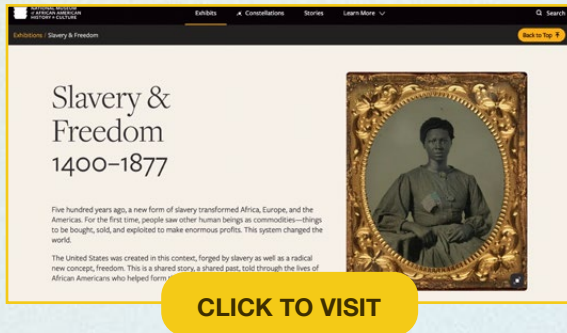
Sugar Hill Museum of Art and Storytelling



The [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) website holds several resources and curriculum materials that represent the history of slavery and freedom (1400-1877) in the United States. This site is divided into 5 thematic sections and within each section, you will find chapters that delve more deeply into history and context. Images and primary source documents accompany the narrative. The same site offers a dive into “How we Know What We Know” which not only offers an entry into the histories portrayed on site and online, but initiates students into the process of researching, collecting, archiving, and displaying the materials that create the histories on display.

Slavery and Freedom: National Museum of African American History and Culture

How We Know What We Know



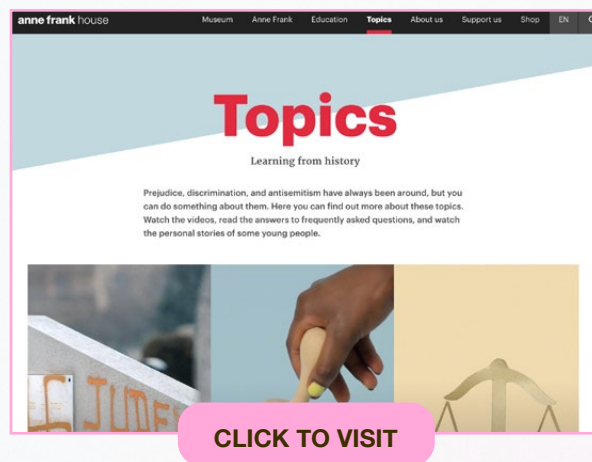
This website is based on an exhibit at [Children’s Museum of Indianapolis](#) that tells the stories of four notable children – Anne Frank, Ruby Bridges, Ryan White, and Malala Yousafzai – who each underwent and overcame egregious injustices in different contexts. In addition to narrative and images about each child, this website includes links to hands-on activities and live-streamed theater performances that highlight the power of children to change the world.

The Power of Children



Anne Frank House

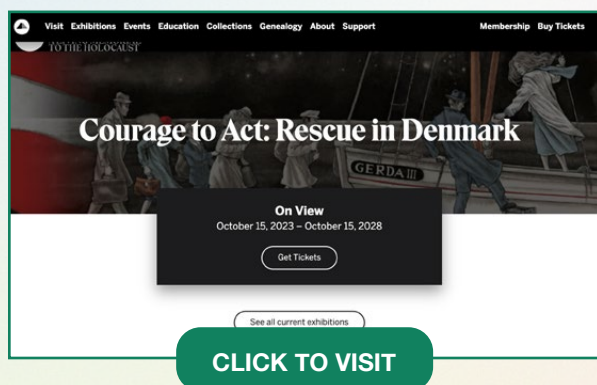
This website holds educational resources, videos, and single or full lessons on the life of Anne Frank. Themes covered include democracy, antisemitism, citizenship, and prejudice. Visitors to the site have the opportunity to learn more about her life as well as a broader range of topics on related issues. The site, for example, provides resources related to discrimination and (European) football demonstrating the need to offer resources that are both historically specific as well as contemporarily significant.



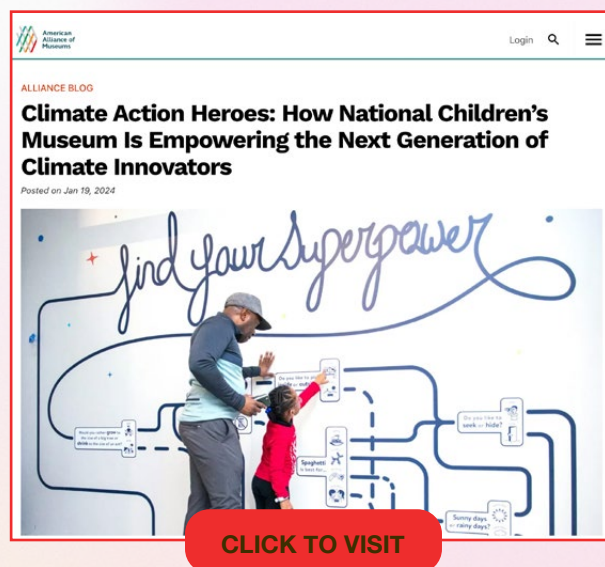
Based on a museum exhibition (October 2023-October 2028) in the Netherlands, this website tells the story of the rescue of Danish Jews during the Holocaust. You will also find a full curriculum of activities recommended for children aged 9 years and older. Themes are described as “age appropriate” and include such topics as “separation, bravery, and resilience” as well as “the dangers of prejudice” and “courageous collective action.” By focusing on the story of the Gerda III, a small boat used to rescue Jews, younger audiences are able to chart what could otherwise become a more complex narrative. In addition, the museum offers resources for those able to visit in person as well as a range of online materials for those outside of New York City.

Check out this account of an exhibit on climate action at the [National Children’s Museum](#) in Washington. In addition to describing the key aims and pedagogical aspects of the exhibit, the article also includes links to a digital exhibit headquarters, virtual field trip, at-home activity videos, and podcast episodes. To access these free resources, you will need to provide an email address and hold a subscription to one of several streaming services (i.e., *Spotify*, *Audible*) to listen to the podcast.

Courage to Act: Rescue in Denmark



Climate Action Heroes



Testimonies

Founded by filmmakers David Wilson and Bill Leeson, together with social entrepreneur Willemijn Verloop, [War Child](#) is a global alliance that is active in 16 countries and that aims to support children growing up in times of war. At this link, you can find testimonies of children from around the world who share their stories of war, resilience, and aspiration.

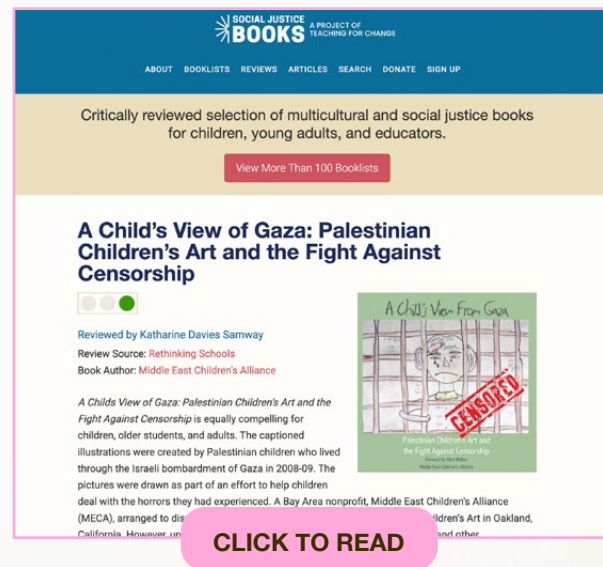
Children's Stories of Resilience



The screenshot shows the War Child website. At the top left is the 'WAR child' logo. To the right is a 'Donate' button. The main heading is 'CHILDREN'S STORIES OF RESILIENCE'. Below it is a paragraph: 'Lost, scarred, sad, helpless. Strong, funny, caring, powerful. Too often children who grow up in war get portrayed as if they are victims. Here they share their stories of resilience.' Underneath is a grid of 30 diverse children's faces. At the bottom is a yellow button that says 'CLICK TO VISIT'.

This book gathers drawings created by Palestinian children representing their experiences of violence during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza circa 2008-2009. However, while the drawings were slated to be shown at the [Oakland Museum of Children's Art](#), the exhibit was ultimately canceled.

A Child's View of Gaza: Palestinian Children's Art and the Fight Against Censorship



The screenshot shows the Social Justice Books website. At the top is the 'SOCIAL JUSTICE BOOKS' logo with the tagline 'A PROJECT OF TEACHING FOR CHANGE'. Below are navigation links: ABOUT, BOOKLISTS, REVIEWS, ARTICLES, SEARCH, DONATE, SIGN UP. A main heading reads 'Critically reviewed selection of multicultural and social justice books for children, young adults, and educators.' Below that is a red button: 'View More Than 100 Booklists'. The featured book is 'A Child's View of Gaza: Palestinian Children's Art and the Fight Against Censorship'. It includes a review by Katharine Davies Samway, the review source 'Rethinking Schools', and the book author 'Middle East Children's Alliance'. A small image of the book cover is shown, featuring a drawing of a child behind bars with a red 'CENSORED' stamp. At the bottom is a pink button that says 'CLICK TO READ'.

For more information about the canceled exhibition referenced in the previous example, see this article, which takes the form of an interview. While the voices interviewed deemed the show to be one-sided and overly violent for children, the article also notes that a similar exhibition of work by Iraqi children did not garner the same complaints and went on as planned.

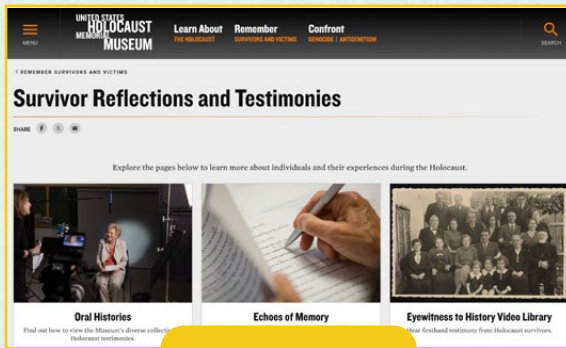
Palestinian Kids' Art Deemed Unsuitable for Children



The screenshot shows an NPR article. At the top is the NPR logo and navigation links: NEWSLETTERS, SIGN IN, NPR SHOP, DONATE. Below are category links: NEWS, CULTURE, MUSIC, PODCASTS & SHOWS, SEARCH. The article title is 'Palestinian Kids' Art Deemed Unsuitable For Children'. Below the title is the date 'SEPTEMBER 24, 2011 · 8:00 AM ET' and 'HEARD ON WEEKEND EDITION SATURDAY'. The author is 'By Richard Gonzales'. At the bottom is a blue button that says 'CLICK TO READ'.

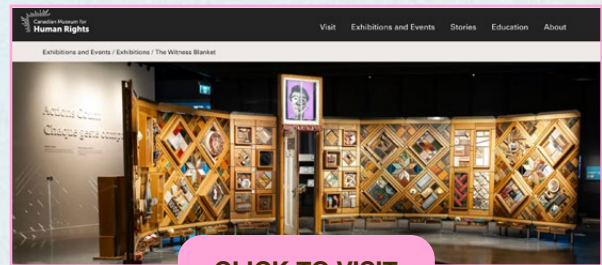
The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum holds collections of oral histories as well as written testimonies narrated by Holocaust survivors that represent multiple experiences including Jews, Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the LGBTQ+ community, political prisoners, and others targeted by the Nazis.

Survivor Reflections and Testimonies



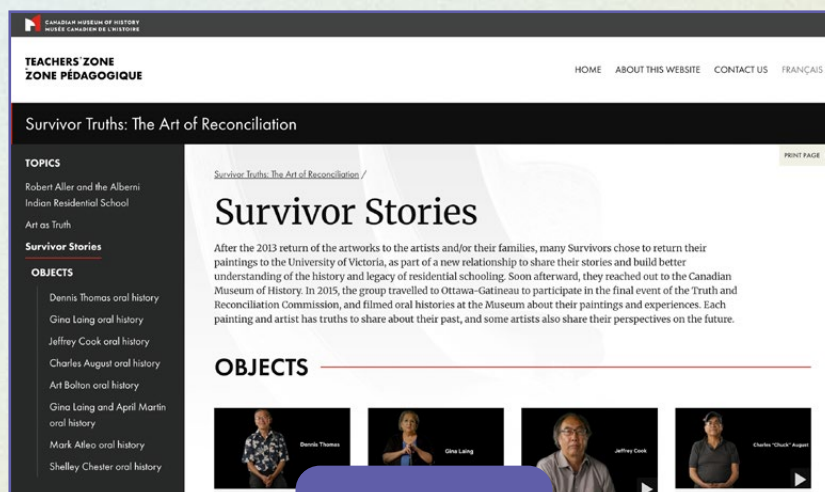
Between 2024 and 2027, the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (CMHR) hosted an exhibition that “highlights the truth about residential schools through the Stories and experiences of Survivors.” Part of this exhibition features the “Witness Blanket” which is a large-scale installation of more than 800 items from 77 communities that bear witness to Stories and experiences of residential school Survivors. Items include letters, photos, stories, books, clothing, art, and fragments of buildings. The “Witness Blanket” will become a permanent exhibit at the CMHR exhibit after 2027.

The Witness Blanket



The [Canadian Museum of History](#) compiles oral histories told by survivors of the Alberni Indian Residential School, located on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The testimonies reflect on artworks they created in the late 1950s and early 1960s and that were kept by Robert Aller who ran an “extracurricular art class” at the Residential School and that were then “donated” to the University of Victoria. In 2013, the artworks were returned to their creators and/or families. In 2015, a group of survivors and families traveled to Ottawa-Gatineau for the final events of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where they filmed oral histories at the Canadian Museum of History and told truths about their paintings and their experiences at the Residential School.

Survivor Stories



Section 3 Reflection Questions

Cross-Institution and Cross-Border Examples, Exhibits, and Stories

- 1** Exhibitions for children include shows designed intentionally for a younger audience as well as those designed for a multigenerational audience with different entry points and materials.
 - a** How has your museum engaged the balance between child-focused and multigenerational audiences? What successes and challenges have you encountered and how has or might your museum address those challenges?
 - b** Can you think of exhibitions you have visited that fall into either or both of these categories? What design elements were most engaging and which ones fell short?
- 2** Oftentimes exhibition designers rely on technology to engage their audiences. Thinking about the exhibitions described in this section, how has digital media been used to expand brick-and-mortar exhibition parameters and with what successes and challenges?
- 3** What knowledge does testimony represent? What possibilities and obstacles might testimony introduce in efforts to represent difficult knowledge with children?

Section 4: Kids' Corner: Resources and Curriculum for and with Children

Overview

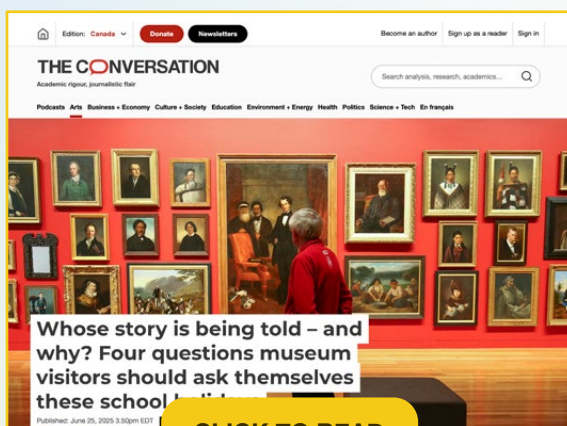
This section circles back to the question of age-appropriateness, with a focus on resources that can be used with children. Together, they demonstrate how museums can build multigenerational spaces of dialogue and care, where children and caregivers learn alongside one another and where exhibitions nurture curiosity, empathy, and imagination. They also provide examples of initiatives within museums that include children in programming and curation.

Resources

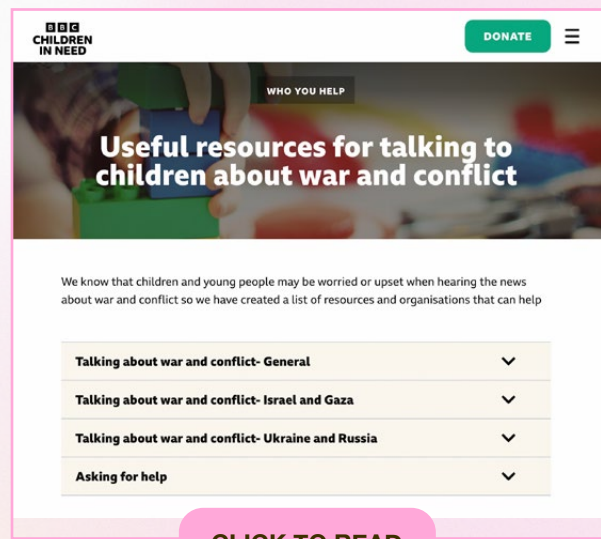
Published by [The Conversation](#), this article provides four concrete questions to support children, families, and educators in thinking critically about the politics and exclusions of representation, and to consider how asking questions such as these can generate allyships that productively challenge the notion of museum neutrality.

In this resource you will find a curated list of guides, articles, and organizations that are helping adults to support children's understanding around war and/or conflict. It aims to offer age-appropriate explanations for children, while suggesting how to help children talk through these subjects in an emotionally safe way. This resource also offers links to mental health supports for children and adults.

Whose Story is Being Told, and Why? Four Questions Museum Visitors Should Ask Themselves these School Holidays



Useful Resources for Talking to Children about War and Conflict



This resource offers a list of curated resources and reviews on social-justice oriented books for children and young adults. It offers themed booklists, critical reviews, and resources for museums wanting to build reading corners or exhibit related libraries.

Social Justice Booklist

This parent and caregiver directed resource offers language around Islamophobia – including what it is, what its impacts are, and how it relates to other forms of discrimination. This guide also includes discussion prompts, a glossary of key terms, a timeline of key events in Muslim history, as well as an age-appropriate reading list to learn more about Islam and Muslims.

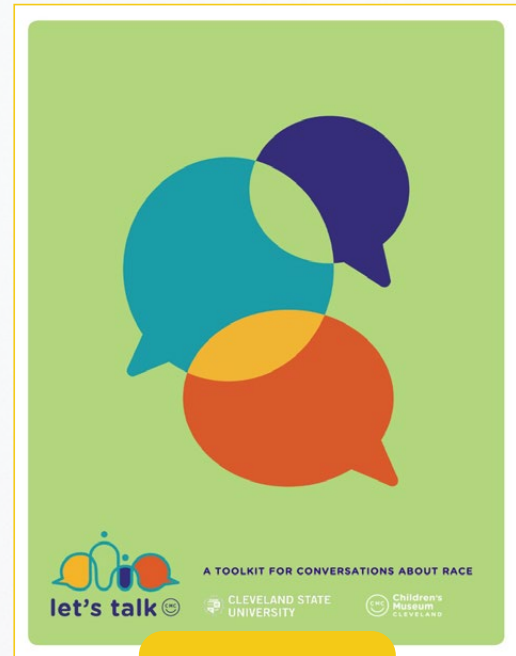
Talk and Take Action: Countering Islamophobia Guide

This resource can be used by both parents and museum educators to introduce children to key figures and milestones across Black history in an alphabet-based format. This video helps to present complex topics in Black history in an accessible and engaging way.

The ABCs of Black History Month

In partnership with the Diversity Institute at the State University of Cleveland, the [Children's Museum Cleveland](#) created this comprehensive toolkit to help parents, caregivers, and educators talk to children (0-8 years) about race and racism. With an aim to dismantle systems of oppression and racism specifically, the toolkit includes: 1) Developmental narratives to support developmentally-appropriate conversations; 2) Anti-racist learning objectives to provide you and your child tangible learning goals around knowledge, skills and attitudes; 3) Children's literature highlighting selected book(s) that can be used as prompts for conversation and supports for inquiry, comprehension, discussion and social action; 4) Conversational guides that provide language to support discussions about race with children in ways that are simple and age-appropriate; 5) Extension activities and recommended reading that can create opportunities; and 6) A glossary of terms that deepens personal knowledge and widens the conversational base for talking with children about race and thinking, conversing and acting strategically about anti-racist social action.

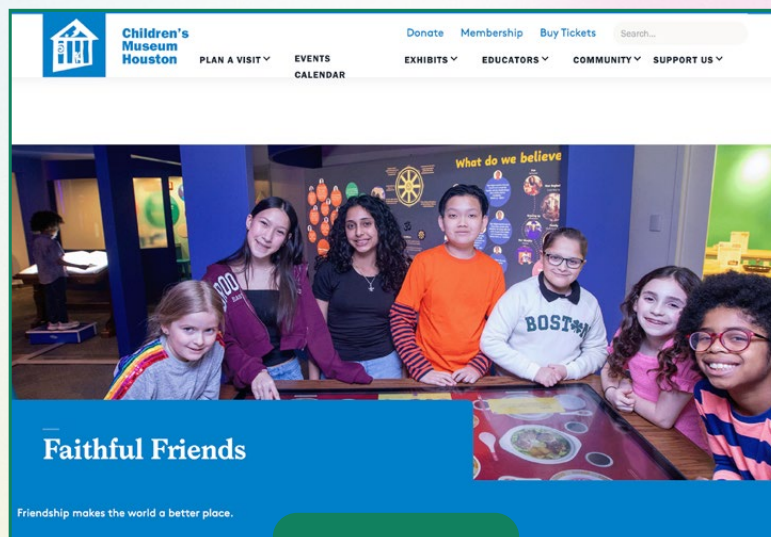
Let's Talk: A Toolkit for Conversations About Race



[CLICK TO READ](#)

Based on a [Faithful Friends](#) exhibit, the [Children's Museum Houston](#) offers the following compilation of helpful resources, practices, and programming that focus on supporting appreciation and understanding of religious diversity, while forging connection and collaboration.

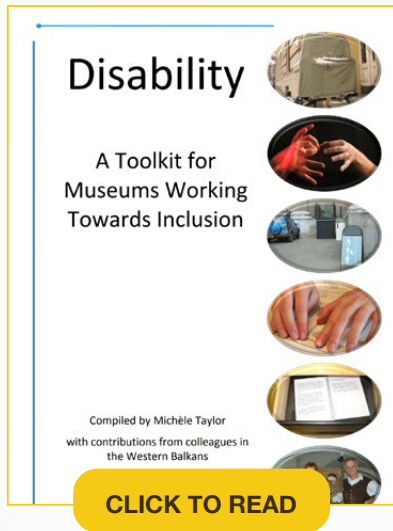
Faithful Friends Resources, Practices, and Programming



[CLICK TO READ](#)

This resource details practical strategies around inclusiveness in museum programming. It offers language around various topics, from accessibility to exhibit design to help museums become more welcoming of people of all abilities.

Disability: A Toolkit for Museums Working Toward Inclusion



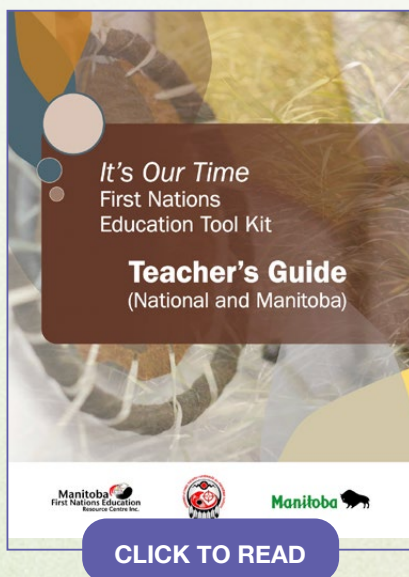
This toolkit offers information, strategies, and supports about gender identity, trans affirming practices, and inclusive language, with the aim of creating safe spaces for transgender and nonbinary youth in education. While focusing on the Ontario context, this resource provides concrete tools and best practices that can be adapted to inform how museums approach gender diversity in affirming ways for children.

Trans-Affirming Education in Schools: An Educator Toolkit



This is a comprehensive toolkit that includes 22 learning modules on First Nations history, culture, treaties, and holistic learning models. As a pedagogical tool first and foremost, it offers lesson plans rooted in Indigenous knowledges that will help young children engage more deeply with these topics.

It's Our Time: First Nations Education Tool Kit



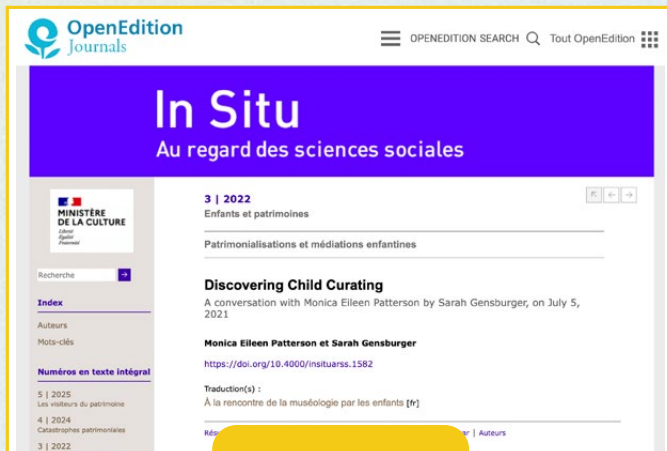
This resource is a website of the Orange Shirt Society that is aimed at commemorating the history and legacy of residential schools. It also aims to raise attention to the enduring effects of residential schools in Canada today. This website provides important educational resources that actively promote reconciliation, while also witnessing and honouring the healing journey of survivors and their families.

Orange Shirt Society



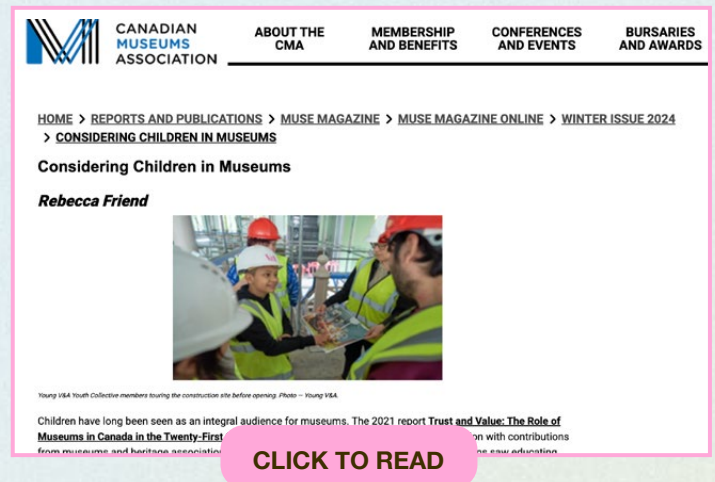
This open access article takes the form of an interview with Monica Eileen Patterson and Sarah Gensburger, both Associate Professors at Carleton University. Throughout, the interview outlines the vision for a [“new, critical children’s museology.”](#) and offers examples of “the contributions child curators can make to museological practice” as “experts of innovation, creativity, and interactivity.”

Discovering Child Curating



This article elaborates on critical children’s museology and offers still more examples of museums engaging children and youth as “consultants,” “curators” and “council members” who are partners and co-producers of knowledge within museums.

Considering Children in Museums



[Thinking Through the Museum](#) is a network that brings together university researchers, diverse communities, and museum professionals to mobilize heritage sites featuring alternative and community-driven exhibits and programs. One of their projects focuses on critical children’s museologies and at this link, you can find more information about a workshop series - some sessions open to the public - hosted by Professor Monica Patterson.

Children’s Museology Workshop Series



Section 4 Reflection Questions

Kids' Corner: Resources and Curriculum for and with Children

- 1** How can museums develop programming that represents sensitive or controversial social/political topics in ways that are simultaneously age-appropriate and socially responsible?
- 2** In what ways can exhibits encourage intergenerational dialogue on socially sensitive topics?
- 3** What practices and strategies can welcome children into museums as co-constructors of knowledge? What are the possibilities and challenges of including children as co-constructors and co-curators?