# Playing it ‘safe’ and culturally contouring museum habits of mind in Paraguay

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## Abstract

This article explores pre-conditions for children’s ‘museum habits of mind’ – defined here as the expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes an individual brings to their museum experiences – in a context with limited museum-going traditions. With foundations in child development, psychology, and museum studies, this research focuses on adults’ role in shaping children’s emergent museum habits of mind. Pulling from ethnographic case study data collected between February and December 2025 in Asunción, Paraguay, this article identifies throughlines in how adults are currently positioning museum-going with and for children: as a ‘safe’ activity with instruction and novelty. These findings fit within a larger research project, aimed at documenting what it means to build an interactive science museum in Paraguay for children and community members, as interpreted through five key metaphors and conceptual drawings. This particular subset has applications for early childhood arts practitioners and researchers interested in leveraging museums to support children’s learning and development. Given limited extant research documenting how children develop museum habits of mind, this article motivates greater attention to the nuances involved.

## Statement

This article is based on the following conference paper: Murray, C. (2025). Leveraging museums to embed the arts and empower children's connections with culture, community, and place. Paper represented at the 10th International Art in Early Childhood Conference, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia.

## Introduction

“A museum for them is an amusement park… visiting [is] positive and safe… It doesn’t include screens or video games. It is not about buying things. It helps them learn and opens their curiosity. It is meant for them”. (Field Notes, May 28, 2025)

Statement from a parent of three children aged five, seven, and nine and frequent visitor to TatakuaLab, a laboratory museum space by the team developing the new Museo de Ciencias (MuCi) project in Asunción, Paraguay.

The narratives that adults like the parent quoted above use to describe children’s museum experiences in their cultural context should not be overlooked. Indeed, this article proposes that children’s emergent ‘museum habits of mind,’ which are defined as the expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes that children bring to their museum experiences, are pre-conditioned by the narratives that their adults and culture construct. Just as adults inevitably bring certain understandings, expectations, and theories to museum experiences with their children, the cultural context in which these adults and their children grow up also contours their engagements in and with museums. Ideas about what learning is supposed to look like, how children are supposed to occupy public space, and what cultural institutions are supposed to offer inform children’s experiences.

In addition to bringing together research in child development and psychology that demonstrates how adults play an indirect, tutor-like role in their children’s museum learning experiences, this article spotlights a subset of a larger multimodal ethnographic case study in Asunción, Paraguay that is focused on how adults and Paraguayan culture are uniquely contouring children’s emergent museum habits of mind there. While the larger ethnographic case study describes and analyzes what it means to build a new museum-going culture in Paraguay for children and community members based on observations, drawings, interviews, and informal conversations collected between February and December 2025, this subset looks critically at the museum habits of mind being modeled and shaped with and for children in Asunción by three of the new museum’s most frequent family visitors.

These findings are meaningful, particularly given the dearth of precedent for frequent museum-going in Paraguay; in fact, for most of Paraguay’s history, children have not been widely embraced in museum spaces, nor has museum-going been a popular past-time. Consequently, narratives about what museums stand for have historically emphasized a “no touch, no talking” policy (Field Notes, March 30, 2025).

The new museum project, the Museo de Ciencias (MuCi), is aiming to shift narratives and ensure children enjoy museum experiences from a young age. As MuCi works to cultivate new ‘museum habits of mind’ that allow for more engagement and interactivity, it is interesting to study how adults are shaping the pre-conditions for children’s museum habits of mind. Ultimately, as encapsulated by the opening quote, children’s emergent museum habits of mind in Asunción associate museums with amusement parks that offers screen-free time and position museums as safe, novel, and educational spaces that reflect parents’ desire to protect children while providing meaningful, non-commercial entertainment.

## Rationale in Extant Literature

In the absence of research looking at how children develop museum habits of mind, research examining adults’ gatekeeping behaviours in children’s active play and overall influence in modelling behaviours is important to consider. Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, for

example, postulates that children learn expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes by imitating others, and indeed, researchers find that Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning theory holds from infancy onward. Mills, Legare, Grant, and Landrum (2011) and Seehagen and Herbert (2011) further demonstrate that children tend to emulate those whom they perceive to be reliable and knowledgeable. Not only do scholars find that young children prefer to learn from adult role models (Mills et al., 2011; Seehagen & Herbert, 2011), but they also find that children presume adult behaviors set the tone and rules for which everyone else is supposed to follow (Rakoczy et al., 2010).

Relatedly, in play research, adults are often considered "gatekeepers" (Jerebine et al., 2022 p.2). Their decisions about what kinds of active play children are exposed to and allowed to participate in inevitably shape children's experiences and perceptions of play. In their systematic review of adult perspectives on risk and safety in children's active play during school hours, Jerebine, Fitton-Davies, Lander, Eyre, Duncan, and Barnett (2022) identify four affording factors and ten constraining factors in shaping children's active play, as mediated by adults. According to their resultant socio-ecological model, all these factors exist beyond the child as a result of society, institutions and policy, the physical environment, and interpersonal relationships.

Related psychology research also emphasizes adults' exaggerated influence on children's behavior. Cummings, Iannotti, and Zahn-Waxler (1985), for instance, find that children are sensitive to adults' conflicts and other interpersonal problems; importantly, they find that when children observe aggression, they tend to mirror that aggression with some form of distress. In a more positive light, Blake, Corbit, Callaghan, and Warneken (2016) find that children pick up on their adults' generosity and tend to mirror generosity when they observe their adults doing the same; conversely, when children notice their adults acting in more selfish ways, they tend to give less as well.

Within museum studies, much attention has been paid to adult-child interactions, and in fact, many scholars demonstrate that children are just as likely to lead museum interactions as their adults. This, of course, is dependent on the culture and context in which a museum operates. For Dooley and Welch (2013), in a North American children's museum context, children call for more show-and-tell experiences in their museum experiences, while adults prefer an opportunity to tell, prompt, and report. For Briseño-Garzón (2010), in a Mexican science museum context, children pick up habits and engage in culturally mediated learning experiences not just with their direct adults, but with a wider network of adults and community members that reflect a Mexican conception of 'family.' Given that cultural identity plays such an important role in families' experiences in museums (Falk, 2008), the messages sent by adults all around children must be considered in exploratory research of how children's museum habits of mind come to be.

## Museum Habits of Mind

Museum habits of mind, defined here as the expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes an individual brings to their museum experiences, are varied. While museums were traditionally considered repositories of knowledge, implying a top-down instructional approach and epigraphic habit of mind (Stevenson et al., 2017), many scholars have advocated for more meaningful visitor-directed learning educational experiences in museums (Falk & Dierking, 1995). Falk and Dierking (1995), for example, propose that museum experiences be grounded in understandings of: how humans learn; how museums stimulate learning; how people can be motivated to observe and inquire; how materials should be presented to different age groups; and so on. More specifically, in studying how children can benefit most from early museum experiences, Murray (2023) and Ruscoe (2022) provide rationale for leveraging the visual arts as necessary languages for engaging children with and in museums.

With all of this momentum, a range of different habits of mind have emerged, departing from the traditional epigraphic habit, including, though not limited to: a laboratory habit (Isaac, 2024); an object habit (Stevenson et al., 2017); a sharing habit (Kostoska et al., 2013); a research habit (Bresler, 2010); and a curatorial habit (Marsh and Showalter, 2017). Although not exhaustive, Table 1 provides a sample of the diversity of different museum habits of mind documented in extant literature.

Table 1: Range of Museum Habits of Mind in Extant Literature

| Habit of Mind | Description | Literature |
|---|---|---|
| Epigraphic Habit | Classical approach to looking at museum objects as 'inscribed things' with top-down knowledge. | Stevenson et al., 2017 |
| Laboratory Habit | Developed by anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who leveraged museum exhibits as ways of materializing ideas then critiquing as a collaborative community of practice. | Isaac, 2024 |
| Object Habit | Evolved approach (out of the epigraphic habit) to exploring a multiplicity of meaning behind museum objects, with different interpretations over time and by different audiences. | Stevenson et al., 2017 |
| Sharing Habit | Exploratory approach to prolonging exchanges with museums, promoting verbal sharing of museum experiences, with opportunities for more emotional connection as well. | Kostoska et al., 2013 |
| Research Habit | The practice of lingering with works of art and continuously finding fresh perception, as documented as a solution for doctoral dissertation researchers. | Bresler, 2010 |
| Curatorial Habit | Developed with secondary school students as a way of inspiring lines of questioning that students could later apply in their own exhibition planning experiences. | Marsh & Showalter, 2017 |
| Early Childhood STEM Habit | Practices that support children as 'little scientists' through observation, testing, inquiry, description, prediction, measurement, experimentation, and immersion in STEM language. | Simoncini & Anyos, 2025 |

It bears emphasizing that the habits of mind listed in Table 1 were developed and identified within specific contexts. Indeed, no two cultural contexts breed the exact same museum habits of mind. Socially constructed and culturally contoured, museum habits of mind may include tendencies like close looking, critical thinking, and creative self-reflection, or they may also include tendencies like listening to lectures and absorbing information simply by reading wall-tags and other descriptions. For some individuals, in certain cultural contexts, museum habits of mind may be an individual endeavor, while for others they may be more group-oriented or social. There is no simple formula or overarching ideal when it comes to museum habits of mind. Indeed, cultural norms justify a range of museum habits of mind. Gaskins (2008), for instance, finds that European American, African American, and Hispanic American caregivers have vastly different perceptions of museums' capacity for teaching and learning. In her study of cultural groups' folk theories of children's learning in the Chicago Children's Museum, Gaskins (2008) finds that while European American caregivers expect learning to happen in the museum through playful activities, African American caregivers are only somewhat predisposed to

believe learning takes place there, and Hispanic American caregivers do not at all believe learning takes place there but are still happy for their child(ren) to have fun and socialize. For children, museum habits of mind are constructed from their first museum experiences onward. Early experiences in museums influence later-in-life museum associations, just as other early childhood experiences influence later-in-life behaviors. Surely, children bring their own ways of being to bear as they make sense of how to behave, what to do, and what to think about museums. At the same time, they are influenced by the adults in their lives, which is to say that children come to museums with their own expectations and interests, but are also affected by the constraints that museums and their adults impose. Therefore, how a child's early museum experience is presented to them matters. For example, whether a child is told they can touch objects, or they must stand far away, sets the stage for their long-term museum behaviors. Moreover, the grownups that children engage with in museum spaces model actions and behaviors for children to emulate. When a child notices adults around them lingering in front of master works of art, filled with wonder and awe, that child may be more likely to associate close looking with their museum habits of mind. Conversely, when a child notices others expressing disinterest in visiting a museum, that child may be more likely to adopt a similar attitude. Given the theoretical foundations undergirding this research, acknowledging adults' consequential role in shaping children's expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes, one way to begin to understand how children develop their museum habits of mind is to look at how adults shape the pre-conditions to children's museum habits of mind.

## Context

In Paraguay, museum-going is not a popular pastime and museum habits of mind continue to evolve. For the past four years, a team of new museum professionals has been working to develop the country's first interactive science museum called the Museo de Ciencias (MuCi). Currently, MuCi boasts two laboratory science museum spaces while continuing construction on its future, large Museum. Bringing together state-of-the-art technology and expert opinions about museology in Latin America, MuCi seeks to offer a new platform for learning and discovery in Paraguay, not to mention become a benchmark for all museums in the region. The two laboratory spaces MuCi operates are located in Asunción's Textilia Complex, and they include: TatakuaLab and San Cosmos. What once was a thriving, large cotton factory, the Textilia Complex has become a hub for culture, technology, and gastronomy, home to a range of businesses like MuCi. TatakuaLab has been open to the public since November 2022 as a space for prototyping interactive museum exhibitions and introducing new ways of visiting and experiencing a museum in Paraguay. San Cosmos has been open to the public since June 2023 as a digital dome with audiovisual shows about the universe. The large Museum is scheduled to open to the public in 2028, pending construction and other challenges. It is being built within one of Asunción's most vulnerable neighborhoods, the Chacarita. While the large Museum continues to be built, TatakuaLab and San Cosmos demonstrate MuCi's commitment to inviting children and other community members to not just see and contemplate exhibitions, but to also touch, play, and experience resonant scientific phenomena in action.

To date, MuCi has welcomed over 60,000 visitors across its laboratory spaces. Visitors have been predominantly young families and school groups. The majority have come from Asunción, though the team hopes the Museum will eventually serve the whole country and even attract tourists. The team acknowledges that children are a critical audience group, and through their programming, they are offering children opportunities to develop new expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes to bring to their museum experiences.

## The Case

This article reports on a subsection of a larger, multimodal ethnographic case study drawing on extant and emerging ethnographic techniques that access sources of information not obvious at first sight – and sometimes totally unanticipated – that are key to deep personal meaning. The primary sources of data come from observation, drawings, informal conversations, and formal interviews, iteratively and interactively classified, analyzed, validated, and described. All observations are directed toward human components, primarily: interactions of staff, children, and community members with the laboratory spaces and programming. Complementing these observations, informal conversations with children, community members, and the MuCi team reveal more of the human and contextual components involved in building a science museum in Paraguay.

This article focuses on the description of MuCi by the project's top three family visitors, as revealed through informal conversations and observations. These individuals were identified as willing to be involved in research about MuCi, given their repeat visitation and investment in the project. They all have children under the age of ten and have visited both of MuCi's laboratory spaces at least twelve times. In this article, parental and caregiver reflections are considered key to beginning to understand how children's museum habits of mind are being pre-conditioned in Paraguay. These reflections, of course, cannot and do not fully capture children's emerging museum habits of mind, nor should findings from this research be extrapolated to other contexts. More research, over time and across a range of cultural contexts, will help refine and deepen understanding of children's museum habits of mind.

## Findings

MuCi is a project that family visitors "can count on" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025). MuCi is also a project that top family visitors are quick to say they love and feel compelled to support. In what follows, descriptions from each are presented.

**Family A**

Family A first learned about MuCi through Instagram, when their eldest child was six years old. Family A's main point-of-contact recalls being interested in the social media content and thinking it might be valuable; there was something "new and novel" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025) about it. Family A was pleasantly surprised to find their eldest child seemed to enjoy the activity that MuCi had setup inside TatakuaLab with cables and circuits. Family A also remembers their child loved the library section, too. About a month after that first visit, Family A returned with their nieces and nephews. From that point onward, Family A says they have "repeated a similar pattern" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025): one day they bring one child and their friends, the next, another child and their cousins, and so on. Even though they visit MuCi's laboratory spaces "rather frequently" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025), their children apparently do not tire of going. When asked to elaborate how they know their children do not tire of visiting MuCi, Family A responded: "A museum for them is an amusement park" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025).

While inside TatakuaLab, Family A expresses appreciation that their children can run around in any direction when they visit. Family A also likes that they feel their children learn something every time they visit, "which makes visiting a positive and safe" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025) alternative to going to the shopping mall. When asked what "safe" meant to them, Family A elaborated: "It doesn't include screens or videogames. It is not about buying things. It helps them learn and opens their curiosity. It is meant for them" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025). Moreover, Family A said what makes it great is that their children seem to love the activities, and simply visiting Textilia feels like an adventure. While their youngest child (aged five) "only runs

around" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025) when they visit MuCi, their older children (aged seven and nine) "are learning because they listen to the mediators and ask questions" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025). Though Family A does not know how MuCi got started, they take it as their duty to keep showing support because it is teaching their children how to be in a museum.

**Family B**

Family B has been to "almost all of the activities that MuCi proposes" (Field Notes, April 29, 2025). For Family B, MuCi is a "favorite place" (Field Notes, April 29, 2025) because of all the new kinds of activities. Family B's child has autism and is grateful to MuCi for making space and time for their child. When asked how it feels to visit MuCi, Family B is quick to explain that inside MuCi's laboratory spaces, they feel "comfortable and safe" (Field Notes, April 29, 2025). Elaborating, Family B added: "MuCi puts in a lot of effort, and we appreciate that" (Field Notes, April 29, 2025).

Since their first visit to TatakuaLab, Family B has been able to prepare their child for a museum visit by referring back to their prior visits. Being able to prepare and set expectations is important for their child. When describing their expectations of MuCi, Family B named: "interactives… things to touch… and the mediators" (Field Notes, April 29, 2025).

**Family C**

Family C first visited MuCi in 2024 and has since brought extended family members with them for workshops and other activities. Family C is quick to share that their experiences with MuCi have been "really great" (Field Notes, August 27, 2025) because inside MuCi's laboratory spaces, their children can explore "safely" (Field Notes, August 27, 2025). They have three children between the ages of six and ten with a lot of energy, so it is "nice to find a place for them to move… [that's also] really aesthetically pleasing" (Field Notes, August 27, 2025). Family C's oldest child, aged ten, "really likes to learn from experts" (Field Notes, August 27, 2025), which is something they can find at MuCi. During their visits, the mediators tell Family C interesting facts about birds and other subjects. This is something "special" (Field Notes, August 27, 2025) for Paraguay, they emphasize. It is also "new" and "nice" (Field Notes, August 27, 2025), which Family C explains makes MuCi spaces of interest to children and adults.

## Analysis and Relation to Larger Dissertation Interpretation

Families A, B, and C use overarchingly positive language to describe MuCi. They are appreciative of the project and what it offers their children. Without prompting, similar sentiments around 'safety,' 'novelty,' and an opportunity to learn from experts inside MuCi's laboratory spaces emerged in their reflections. While they may have self-censored themselves knowing this research was associated with MuCi itself, it is interesting to consider what message they send to their children regarding expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes about museum experiences.

Whereas museum projects in other cultures may be more focused on learning through exploration, integrating arts-based engagements, and engaging in open-ended discussions with trained educators, the image of a museum experience in Paraguay is being compared to an "amusement park" (Field Notes, May 28, 2025) with novel flair. Adults believe children learn by listening to mediators who impart their expertise inside a museum space. For this reason, museums are different than other entertainment spaces in Paraguay, like shopping malls, which are seen as less 'safe.'

The descriptions of MuCi that these families provide fit within interpretation of the larger dissertation study. In fact, looking across and within data pooled from observation, drawn

observation and thinking, informal conversations, and formal interviews, iteratively and interactively classified, analyzed, validated, and described, impressions about MuCi suggest five overarching, interpretive metaphors: (1) the museum as trampoline; (2) museum work as service; (3) the museum as a growing repository of learning; (4) the museum as running parallel to education; and (5) the museum as navigating waves of uncertainty. These metaphors pick up on characteristics that families A, B, and C share (while capturing more, beyond the scope of this article). Firstly, there is something playful about MuCi, as demonstrated in the metaphor of the museum as trampoline. This something playful is also wrapped up in a beautiful, novel space, which is reflective of the metaphor of museum work as service and trying to provide the best possible experience and space. Finally, the kind of learning that goes on inside of MuCi is dependent on expert voices; this reinforces the idea undergirding the metaphor of the museum as running parallel to education, or as separate but not entirely dissimilar from other forms of top-down education in Paraguay.

## Limitations and Future Research

Given theoretical foundations in child development research and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, it cannot be discounted that the presentation of museum-going as a 'safe,' 'novel,' and expert-driven experience by MuCi's top family visitors pre-condition children's emerging museum habits of mind in Asunción. That said, this research still only offers a limited glimpse into museum-going practices and beliefs in Paraguay. Without studying how infrequent or less frequent family visitors perceive MuCi, this research remains skewed. While MuCi continues to evolve and socialize its own version of an interactive science museum in Asunción, museum habits of mind may continue to shift. Ongoing research will help study how children continue to evolve and adapt their museum habits of mind over time.

For now, even with these limitations in mind, this article prompts adults and educators to pause and reflect on how they position museum-going for their children. Though perfect museum habits of mind do not exist, there may be ways to always continue better supporting children during their early museum experiences. For early childhood arts practitioners and researchers, this will be especially valuable for continued exploration. To begin, given extant literature about the arts in early childhood education (Murray, 2023; Ruscoe, 2022), there may be value in integrating arts-based extensions in children's early museum experiences. Indeed, many scholars (Oviedo & Yu, 2023; Kind, 2010; Crafton et al., 2009; Christensen & Kirkland, 2009) support offering children multiple entry points and ways of making sense of their experiences by honoring children's "hundred languages" (Malaguzzi, 1987 p.16).

## Conclusion

As substantiated by extant literature in child development and psychology, this article makes the case that adults and cultural context play a consequential role in pre-conditioning children's expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes in museum experiences. In so doing, this article aims to motivate early childhood arts practitioners and researchers to think more critically about how they are positioning museum-going to children. While there is limited research into the development of children's museum habits of mind, this research offers important insights and ideas for future study. Findings suggest that adults in Paraguay are currently preparing their children to consider museum-going a 'safe' activity with instruction and novelty. Museum practitioners, caregivers, and early childhood scholars and practitioners will benefit from reflecting on how they influence children's pre-conditions for museum habits of mind in their own contexts. It will be interesting to study how children's museum habits of mind continue to evolve in the decades to come, and to what degree arts-based extensions are possible.

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