

COVID-19 Sample Reopening Plan

Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM)

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May 2020

To help museums share thinking as they navigate the challenges and uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Alliance is compiling examples of reopening plans from individual institutions. These plans are specific to each museum's circumstances and are not meant to be definitive guidance for developing your own. Instead, they provide reference for what other museums are considering as they chart a course toward safely reopening. Check the Alliance's [reopening guide](#) frequently for updates, as we will be adding new examples as we receive them. If you have a plan or perspective on reopening you'd be interested in sharing with the broader museum field, please contact content@aam-us.org.

Disclaimer: This sample document serves as an example of how one museum addresses a particular issue. Museums should compose original materials based on their unique circumstances. Any document produced by the recipient should not substantially use the contents of this sample as the basis. Materials are provided "as is," without any guarantee or warranty of any kind, expressed or implied. Information shared here is not intended to supersede guidance from public health officials, medical experts, and federal/state/local governments. Museums are encouraged to seek legal and other expert advice on their specific circumstances.

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AAM maintains an online collection of more than 1,000 sample policies, plans, and forms from museums of all types and sizes through the Alliance's [sample document library](#). Access is a benefit to staff of [Tier 3 member museums](#). Given the current crisis, this and other resources have been taken out from behind our member paywall to make them free and accessible for all. The current crisis is taking a distressing financial toll on cultural organizations, and AAM is no different. In these challenging times, we ask that if you can, consider supporting our [advocacy work](#) and making extensive [COVID-19 resources](#) freely available for our field, by [making a donation](#) or [becoming a member](#) of AAM. Thank you for your much-needed support.

A Playbook for Re-Opening Children's Museums

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It's not about what it is, it's about what it can become.

- Dr. Seuss, The Lorax

As states across the country discuss when and how to safely lift COVID-19 restrictions, museum professionals in all sectors of the industry are planning and preparing for reopening operations and rethinking the visitor experience. Children's museums, and other museums serving families and youth audiences, are debating and ideating how to redesign their high-touch, experiential, play and learning environments and how to recalibrate their operating budgets given variable income and expense projections. How can these necessities galvanize the innovation that children's museums, and the museum industry, have been seeking since before the pandemic crisis?

Now more than ever, children's and family-friendly museums are needed as parents and caregivers are looking for "normal" activities to engage their children, within their family units, and without formal schooling this spring or many camp options this summer, then probable disruptions and staggered schedules when schools reopen. The plethora of digital offerings for children – video classes, livestream programs, DIY at-home projects, virtual tours, art recreation challenges and more – substantiates the "essential" value proposition of art, history, science and other museums. As the nation emerges from shelter-in-place, children's museums will be of paramount importance in the cultural landscape.

The value of shared experiences, driving the pre-pandemic cultural industry and Experience Economy, has grown both digitally and IRL (in real life) in the time of shelter-in-place. Now, museums of all types are offering an abundance of family friendly experiences. This inherently next gen engagement can be at the forefront of the revitalized museum model and contribute to sustainability at a time when all museums are challenged financially. While children's museums have the current disadvantage of being participatory and shared environments, they have a potential advantage in serving predominantly younger and local audience segments who will likely be the audiences venturing out as restrictions lift. How might children's museums lead the way: in finding synergies between digital engagement and IRL activities; in figuring out hybrid earned and contributed revenue models; in devising ways other than attendance numbers to measure, prioritize, and monetize outcomes; and exemplifying how to support the recovery of our youngest citizens and their communities?

Playbook:

Children’s museums of differing sizes, budgets, resources, locations, accessibility, communities, and COVID-19 guidance will have variations for re-opening based upon their distinctive and evolving working assumptions and cost-benefit analyses. Notwithstanding these circumstantial differences and relative timelines, children’s museums across the nation can capitalize on the strength of their collective numbers. Coordinating via the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM), they can and should: 1) adopt and promote approved common safety and wellness standards for re-opening; 2) share resources to re-imagine a participatory visitor experience, and 3) coordinate communications to jointly build audience confidence that museums are safe places for children to play, learn, create, connect, heal, and grow.¹

This industry position should be informed by: 1) complying with federal, state, and local regulations and recommendations, 2) convening a national council of public health officials, doctors, scientists, infectious disease experts, and others to inform the policies, and 3) confirming with legal counsel and insurance carriers that policies are sound and covered. In addition to institutional pre-opening press, ACM can publicize the industry approach to safety. Further, art, science, history and other museums can implement these standards and send a message that their facilities are embracing best practices for family audiences.

The following is a master Playbook, outlined as a template for the industry-leading Children’s Museum of Manhattan (<https://cmom.org/>), from which children’s museums and museums that serve families can select and adapt to their distinctive circumstances – formulating and operationalizing a game plan to become more innovative, relevant, and sustainable.

¹ Data shared by Colleen Dilenschneider, author of *Know Your Own Bone*, indicate that the top motivators that will induce people to feel safe visiting cultural attractions include: government easing of restrictions, organizations making the decision to re-open, and seeing others visit. While sciences centers and hands-on attractions rank lower on audience propensity to resume visitation, studies also indicate that millennials, who comprise the majority of parents, are eager to return to cultural attractions. <https://www.colleendilen.com/2020/04/15/performance-vs-exhibit-based-experiences-what-will-make-people-feel-safe-visiting-again-data> and <https://www.colleendilen.com/2020/04/22/data-update-which-cultural-entities-will-people-return-to-after-reopening-april-22-2020/>

Facility

1. Spatial Re-engineering and Readiness

- ✓ Control access points and try to designate specific entrances for members, public, staff and volunteers
- ✓ Post outdoor informational signage with revised hours and queuing policies
- ✓ Space out security and staff
- ✓ Identify queuing, welcome, and informational areas
- ✓ Indicate queuing distances and consider mobile queuing applications
- ✓ Use anti-bacterial commercial floor mats
- ✓ Require use of automatic sanitizer stations upon entering and exiting facilities
- ✓ Reduce staff/visitor contact points, and consider clear protective dividers for front-line work stations
- ✓ Implement cashless point-of-sale systems, e.g. Apple Pay or contactless credit cards
- ✓ Redesign coat and stroller self-serve storage areas
- ✓ Update informational and wayfinding signage inside the facilities
- ✓ Create a programmed “welcome center” with kid-friendly lessons on health safety and wellness
- ✓ Eliminate reusable collateral displays and use enlarged wall didactics for information sharing
- ✓ Reduce exposure along the visitor journey, e.g. designate one-way up and down stairs to control traffic patterns, remove door handles and devise foot contact points for entry, limit and/or monitor use of elevators
- ✓ Plan for partial building closures, break up larger galleries, and optimize use of outdoor areas
- ✓ Designate member-only activity and seating areas
- ✓ Ban use of water fountains
- ✓ Allocate a dining area for pre-packaged and recyclable beverages and snacks, either close or change floorplan of food services for social distancing
- ✓ Redesign staff offices and enable telework
- ✓ Remodel communal work spaces, conference rooms, and shared dining facilities

Integrate fun activities to foster healthy habits into the entrance and queuing sequence

Sell branded Purell bottles as ticket add-on

Create a Clean Team cartoon cast, whose super powers animate health safety guidelines, to provide upbeat, fun, and replicable teachable moments throughout the museum experience

2. Hygiene

- ✓ Mandate industry-regulated protocols for staff, volunteer, trustee, and visitor safety, and behavior²
- ✓ Publicize cancellation policies and policies to turn visitors away and/or request departures
- ✓ Require visitors to digitally pre-sign waivers assuming risk
- ✓ Ensure employee and volunteer work protection safety, including health checks, sick leave policies, and training (e.g. use this free course from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences <https://niehstraining.vividlms.com/>)
- ✓ Consider rotating work schedules and Work From Home policies
- ✓ Enforce consistent PPE, with face coverings required and given daily to visitor-facing staff
- ✓ Require face coverings for visitors 12+, optional for youth ages 3-12, and not allowed on children under 2
- ✓ Mandate social distancing of 6 feet and monitor visiting units accordingly
- ✓ Stockpile CDC/WHO EPC-approved hospital grade and child-safe cleaning supplies (e.g. saniT10, Clorox and Lysol wipes, Victory electrostatic sprays, UV light sterilizers)
- ✓ Publicize deep and ongoing building-wide cleaning and disinfecting schedules, e.g. hourly, between sessions, midday closure, daily
- ✓ Monitor indoor air quality and consider filter retrofits
- ✓ Clean high-use touch and soft surfaces, including exhibits, touch screens, props, amenities, and retail spaces
- ✓ Circulate clean teams and track cleaning team completion records
- ✓ Position ample sanitizer stations, preferably automatic
- ✓ Post restroom and changing table policies, e.g. capacity limits and required hand-washing and flushing protocols
- ✓ Install automatic paper towel dispensers
- ✓ Use touchless trash cans
- ✓ Prohibit food or beverages in public areas, and set policies on bringing in and consuming snacks

Create a Visitor Safety Manager role to oversee implementation and respond to questions and feedback, as part of a Reopening Task Force

For staff, use clearmask.com or a badge with a photo of the employee smiling

Sell artist-designed masks to visitors

Identify clean team members with visible t-shirts or costumes

² Consider COVID-19 contact tracing, when readily available via smart phones; unlike Asia, QR tracking codes or handheld infrared spot thermometers or radiometric thermal imaging cameras probably will not become the norm for museums in the USA. Also consider apps and RFID technologies to speed access while tracking wellness or immunity. Additionally consider social distancing apps like Crowd Solo, which is being offered to attractions at no charge by Holovis (<http://www.holovis.com/entertainment/>).

Audience

3. Attendance

- ✓ Implement timed sessions based on typical dwell times and set session/daily capacity limits based on social distancing, administered via ticketing systems and monitored by hand-held clickers or automated footfall counters³
- ✓ Require advance mobile tickets, waive service fees for members
- ✓ Consider incentive and/or dynamic pricing
- ✓ Prioritize member, corporate member, and donor-only hours
- ✓ Offer hours for visitors with potential health vulnerabilities, e.g. grandparents
- ✓ Subsidize access days for families
- ✓ Start with reduced hours and/or days, then ramp up to extended hours based on capacity needed disperse visitors throughout the day
- ✓ Set group size maximums
- ✓ Limit organized school or other group visits and tours

4. Onsite Experience

- ✓ Determine what exhibitions and events to have or postpone based on space and group capacity management and scale in phases, e.g. start with secure classes for 10 participants, then open limited gallery space, then add more
- ✓ Assume no festivals or other mass gatherings for the foreseeable future
- ✓ Redesign and restrict exhibition and playspace floorplans to comply with social distancing
- ✓ Use floor decals to help visitors differentiate spaces and signage to regulate capacity per area
- ✓ Facilitate deeper engagement for smaller groups onsite, as well as safe interactions among groups
- ✓ Make explicit connections between onsite and at-home digital and DIY activities
- ✓ Reduce hands-on activities and explore BYOD (bring your own device) interfaces, as well as touchless technology like voice, motion, or foot control digital activations
- ✓ Rotate pop-up mini-exhibits, with activations intentionally designed to engage small groups

Link and monetize digital and onsite activities, e.g. video yoga and IRL “Let’s Move” programs

Partner with corporate sponsors whose products appeal to children, or sub-lease to a children’s store or company that needs physical retail space

³ Thus far, there is no standard on how to calculate maximum venue capacity. As attractions opened in Asia, guidance was given to allow 30-50% percent of normal capacity. Some museums in Europe are applying formulas of visitor per square foot. Children’s museums should plan to follow state and local guidelines, as well as recommendations from industry associations.

- ✓ Invest in more outreach programs, to bring museum activities to kids and families who are less likely to visit
- ✓ Define and track updated audience-focused KPIs
- ✓ Convert to COVID-19 resistant building materials, in particular reducing use of plastic and stainless steel
- ✓ Eliminate moveable elements that may transmit germs, e.g. manipulatives and props, sensory materials, sand and water tables (refer to the Institute of Museum and Library Services Reopening Libraries and Museums Project for guidelines)
- ✓ Complete a return-on-investment analysis on maintaining a physical retail store versus converting to an e-commerce platform, factoring in a probable recession impact on discretionary consumer spending
- ✓ Close food services for initial opening phase, then open with spaced seating, mobile ordering, pre-packaged food, and disposable menus and utensils
- ✓ Restrict facility rentals, with priority given to members and donors

Give each child a Discovery Bag filled with props for their museum experience

Rethink a retail product mix based on what parents need, e.g. activity kits, or even child-rearing staples

Consider designating a fee-based workspace for parents who need child care, and offering by the hour usage in conjunction with a drop-off program series

Marketing and Communications

5. Messaging

- ✓ Conduct a pre-opening audience survey to identify visitor needs and comfort level, e.g.: “This would make me feel comfortable about visiting with my family. This is a prerequisite for my family to visit. This would prevent me from coming with my family.”
- ✓ Craft pre- and post-visit visitor messaging, including materials to download in advance for onsite use
- ✓ Station trained educators at entrances to remind visitors of safety measures and review required behavior
- ✓ Continue digital engagement across all platforms, synergistically complementing and extending the onsite experience
- ✓ Integrate Instagram moments that show the museum as orderly and fun
- ✓ Implement ongoing audience feedback loops and daily reports
- ✓ Prepare communications plan to deploy quickly in case of rolling closures

6. Targeted Campaigns

- ✓ Mount a multi-channel reopening digital and print marketing campaign for press, constituents, donors, and partners, positioning the museum as a safe, stimulating, and social “third” space that families should visit regularly for entertaining and educational experiences
- ✓ Incent membership retention and acquisition, framing the museum as quasi membership clubs, and reserving the first week after re-opening and admission times daily exclusively for members
- ✓ Offer free days for first responders and their children
- ✓ Promote a stay-caytion campaign for local markets, leveraging the fact that families will be traveling less and compensating for declining domestic and international tourism
- ✓ Package take-over days for corporate members

Count down to re-opening with online challenges to win memberships

Sell 5 and 10 ticket day-packs, to enable potential members try out the museum

Pitch corporate sponsors to underwrite exclusive wellness days for their employees and their families

For each children’s museum, determining an optimal plan will be a phased and iterative process with correlated performance metrics. Given the fluid situation, ongoing and shared visitor feedback and professional assessment loops will strengthen children’s museums, both individually and as an industry. Coming out of this crisis, re-imagined operations, visitor experiences, and business models present an opportunity to actualize what children’s museums *can become*.

Lisa Podos, founder and principal of Arts Impact Consulting, works with museums and cultural organizations to develop innovative solutions for relevance and sustainability, with a focus on engaging next gen audiences. She developed this plan in her capacity as strategic advisor to the Children’s Museum of Manhattan. Thanks to Richard Benefield, Peggy Loar, David Roche, and Adam Weinberg for their input; and appreciation to Andras Szanto, Adrian Ellis, and others who have sparked the industry conversation on why and how to reopen museums.