SENSORY SATURDAYS

1. OVERVIEW DESCRIPTION

Our Museum opened an hour early on the first Saturday of each month (June – November 2019) solely for people with sensory differences such as autism, their families, and their caregivers. We aimed to provide a comfortable and judgement-free space that was welcoming to everyone. The entire Museum was open and a special planetarium show had lower sound levels and patrons came and went as they wished. A social story was written and made available to guests prior to arrival.

Universe of Learning Resources

Four 3-D models were provided to us by Universe of Learning. They were Eta Carinae, the Pillars of Creation, V745 Scorpii, and Chandra X-ray satellite model. The models were less-detailed and therefore less breakable when handled roughly. The three image models can be found at http://chandra.harvard.edu/tactile/3d_printing.html. The Chandra model might not be publicly available, but a model of the spacecraft exists at http://chandra.cfa.harvard.edu/deadstar/. Next to each object I printed an image from the NASA website that resembled the model.

The planetarium “show” was comprised of dome videos of nebulae, stars, and galaxies that lasted about twenty minutes and repeated. I went to sites below for materials to create the dome show. I grouped those with narration together. For those that had neither music nor narration, I placed copyright-free “tranquil music” underneath.


I also used the “Light Echoes” video available free from Mark Petersen of Loch Ness Productions as part of my planetarium presentation. The clip is available at http://www.lochnessproductions.com/shows/bonus_shows.html.

2. PROGRAM DETAILS

A. Goals

We aimed to have a judgement-free space for people with sensory differences, with not too many distractions. Lights and sounds were dim and families could explore and network with other families.

B. Target Audience
Our target audience was those on the autism spectrum (or other sensory disorders), their families, and their caregivers.

C. Timeline or Schedule of Events

Before the first Sensory Saturday, we wanted to have staff training, but that fell through.

We held our Sensory Saturdays on the first Saturday of each month, and hour before opening (i.e. 9-10 am for us.) We held the first one in June 2019. We plan to hold them monthly through November 2019. December 2019 there will be an internal assessment, and we plan on not offering a Sensory Saturday that month. Depending on our assessment results, we may offer Sensory Saturdays in the future, or retool them.

3. PROGRAM MODEL

A. Staffing

The two leads for Sensory Saturdays already work on Saturdays from 8:30 – 5 pm, so it was relatively easy to provide interpretative staff. We also included a third interpretative staff member. Visitor services provided two additional staff for the hour – one to help in the store and the second at admissions.

B. Recruitment

One of the staff has an autistic sibling and a second has a child with autism, so finding knowledgeable staff was relatively easy, even with no outside training.

For recruitment of visitors, we utilized Facebook, and our Facebook event became popular, with 52 post shares during one month. The two staff with autistic relatives let people in their networks know of our Sensory Saturdays. We feel that word of mouth is our biggest recruitment tool.

C. Activity outline

The entire museum was open. The planetarium doors were left open, the lights were left on and low, the music or narration was soft, and the show, with no loud or startling noises and no explosions in the visuals, played continuously.

D. All regular exhibits were open.

The Naturalist Center supplied 5 tables for guests to explore: tactile books, the NISE activity Chemistry Makes Sense, sturdy 3-D models supplied by Universe of Learning, and two tables with taxidermy animals and animal pelts to touch.

E. Facilitation guide

We turned off the air dryers in the restrooms and made sure that there were paper towels available.

We looked throughout the Museum for other sources of bright lighting or loud noises. Our intent was not to change them, but make our Sensory Saturday visitors aware of them (like our loud self-flushing toilets.)
We removed distractions and activities from our classroom, and repurposed it as our "quiet room," placing bean bag chairs from Tot Town, and a few squishables and fidget spinners in there in case needed.

Staff wore solid, non-bright colors, and did not wear dangling jewelry.

In the future, we hope to post a large map on a board in the lobby, so families can decide how to use their time and see what the museum has to offer.

F. Volunteer guide

We did not want untrained volunteers and have not yet undergone training, so we did not yet utilize volunteers. Angela plans to talk at a future Museum Guild meeting in early 2020. The Museum Guild tends to be a great source of volunteers.

G. Exhibit designs

No exhibits were removed or altered, although we warned visitors about our temporary “In the Dark” exhibit, in case someone was very noise sensitive.

H. Graphics or other needed imagery

I created graphics for our Naturalist Center table for each of the Universe of Learning 3-D models, showing an image of the actual object and a short explanation.

I. Materials

The toys for our Quiet Room were purchased by a guest with an autistic child from Amazon.com (fidget spinner, squishy toys, noise cancelling earphones).

Our 3D models were supplied by the Universe of Learning Team.

J. Additional resources

The two lead staff in our Sensory Saturday initiative have both agreed to talk to anyone who has questions. They are Planetarium Manager Carole Holmberg (CHolmberg@chmuseums.org) and Education Interpreter Angela Purcell (APurcell@chmuseums.org).

We read a book by Lisa Jo Rudy, who worked at the Franklin Institute and has an autistic child. Angela looked up what was available on Autistic Spectrum Disorder on the internet. Our Visitors Services staff travelled to nearby museums, some of which had programs for people on the Autistic Spectrum, and asked questions. We also spoke to visitors who brought their autistic children to the museum. Finally, we had a short evaluation for those who attended a Sensory Saturday.

I created a Social Story (words and pictures to show what to expect at the Museum).