

Learning Application: Have Conversations Here

Talking in museums is one of the things that makes them matter.
~Adam Gopnik

Why Dialogue?

Dialogue is a powerful mode of conversation that genuinely seeks mutual understanding. It can occur between friends, students, co-workers, family members, and even among strangers. And it can certainly occur between people who do not share the same experiences, perspectives, or ideas. Learning to listen carefully and disagree respectfully are essential skills in today's world.

- Share your views.
- Ask questions.
- Listen with care.

What can museums do to encourage dialogue?

The Portland Art Museum starts with an invitation:

You are welcome to talk and have conversations here at the museum. We encourage you to use the galleries throughout the museum as spaces for dialogue, while always remaining respectful of all visitors. Explore together, look closely, and find a place within the museum to sit and talk about what you see and experience.

The museum identifies specific galleries for people to visit that have the potential for rich dialogue. It asks visitors to consider visiting artworks on view that more directly explore some of the politically- and socially-charged issues seen in the news today, including policing, racial violence, stereotypes, and social justice activism.

After the participant takes some time to experience these artworks, think about their responses, and have a conversation with someone else in which perspectives are shared and heard, the Portland Art Museum asks visitors to consider these questions:

- *How have events related to these issues affected you personally?*
- *What life experiences of your own might connect with the work by these artists?*
- *How are these artists challenging you?*

Reflection

Use this guide to spark conversations with others—whether during or after a visit to the museum. Encourage your students and visitors to think about any insights you've gained and how you might extend this experience.

- *Have you noticed anything new about yourself and how you view the world?*
- *How might these conversations help you better understand someone else's perspective?*
- *How might you create more opportunities for reflection and dialogue?*

Talking and Listening Strategies for Families and Younger Students

Talking about issues of social justice and violence with kids can be challenging. Children are curious and constantly ask questions about the world around them. In one breath, they might ask about a range of topics — from the weather to something they heard on the news. Whether at home, in the classroom, or at the museum, it can be difficult to know how respond when difficult questions arise.

To help support these types of conversations at a museum for all ages, here are a few flexible suggestions. These strategies might help a classroom or family talk together about some of the socially- or politically-charged artworks one might encounter during a visit to the museum.

Start by finding out what your child knows.

When a difficult issue comes up, ask an open-ended question like "What have you heard about it?" This encourages your child to let you know what they are thinking.

Ask a follow up question.

Depending on your child's comments, ask another question to get them thinking, such as "Why do you think that happened?" or "What do you think people should do to help?"

Explain simply.

Give children the information they need to know in a way that makes sense to them. At times, a few sentences are enough.

Listen and acknowledge.

If a child sees or hears something that might worry and upset them, recognize their feelings and comfort them. This acknowledges your child's feelings, helps them feel secure, and encourages them to tell you more.

To Learn More...

Learn how the Portland Art Museum is encouraging more dialog about art and its larger social and cultural context at <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2016/08/31/have-conversations-here>.

Acknowledgements

Guide adapted from Portland Art Museum's *Have Conversations Here*.

<http://portlandartmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/PAM-Have-Conversations-Here.pdf>

"Talking and Listening Strategies for Families and Younger Students" adapted from "Talking with Kids about the News," a resource for parents available online at

<http://pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This guide draws from the following projects and resources to develop these strategies to promote active, productive dialogue and reflection. Learn more by visiting the websites listed here:

PBS – *Talking with Kids* <http://pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids>

Ask Big Questions <http://askbigquestions.org>

Teaching Tolerance <http://tolerance.org>

The Public Conversation Project <http://publicconversations.org>

Teaching for Change <http://teachingforchange.org>