

Case Study: The Museum of Modern Art's Create Ability program

Visit MoMA's Create Ability webpage [here](#).

Visit MoMA's Accessibility webpage [here](#).

Program Summary

- MoMA's Create Ability program features a one-hour gallery tour and a one-hour art-making workshop, designed for visitors with learning and developmental disabilities and their families.
- MoMA offers their Create Ability program one Sunday each month, for two different age groups: 5-17 and 18+.
- Create Ability is designed to engage families and caregivers as participants alongside the participants with learning or developmental disabilities, rather than as chaperones or aides.
- Each month, the program's theme is different, and the art-making workshop explores different styles and materials, to give participants a wide range of experiences.
- Every spring, artwork made by Create Ability participants is curated for a public exhibition in MoMA's education galleries.
- To watch a video about the Create Ability program, click [here](#).



Program Profile

MoMA's Create Ability program began in 2005, and is offered one Sunday each month. The program is designed for individuals with learning and developmental disabilities and

their families. The program is tailored to two different age groups: MoMA offers Create Ability for individuals ages 5-17 and their families from 11:00am - 1:00pm and there is a separate session for individuals ages 18+ and their families from 2:00pm - 4:00pm. MoMA has offered Create Ability for both age groups since the program's inception in 2005; whereas many programs for adults grow out of programs for children as their participants age, Create Ability is unique in having worked with both age groups from the start. When Create Ability began in 2005 MoMA Access Programs noted that there was a lack of programming for adults with developmental and learning disabilities, which is why the team developed the program for multiple age groups from its onset. In 2015, MoMA Access Programs developed a program just for teens: during the 11:00 - 1:00 monthly Create Ability session, teens, their parents, caregivers, and companions have a separate tour and art-making session with an educator.



The two-hour program begins with a tour of MoMA's galleries, focusing on a selection of three or four pieces that have a similar theme. The educator leads a discussion of each piece on the tour, starting with specific questions, such as, "What colors do you see?" and then branching out to more experience-based questions, like, "How do the colors make you feel?" or "Do the colors remind you of anything?" Educators focus on themes in each piece that relate to the

art-making activity that occurs in MoMA's classrooms during the second hour of Create Ability. Towards the end of the art-making hour, participants are invited to share their creations with one another and reflect on the program. During the workshop and sharing, educators offer feedback or suggestions to participants about their artwork, focusing on elements like composition and color.

The theme of Create Ability changes each month, so repeat participants see a variety of artwork in MoMA's galleries and have the opportunity to explore a wide array of art-making media and styles. For example, a Create Ability session entitled, "The Art of Music" focused on several pieces in the galleries inspired by music artists in the 1960s and 1970s. The art-making activity that followed prompted participants to use stencils and brightly colored markers to make a poster advertising their favorite or an imaginary band.

Create Ability participants are split into three groups who take different routes during the gallery tour portion, and use separate classrooms for the art-making activity. Each group is staffed with one access educator and one volunteer, and is capped at twelve participants. MoMA's Community and Access programming staff and interns are also present during each program, helping with setup, check-in, and clean up.

The program is free of charge, but requires advance registration. According to Lara Schweller, Coordinator of Community and Access Programs at MoMA, about two thirds of participants in the Create Ability adult group are regularly returning participants, with a few new participants each month. Most participants attend with at least one neurotypical adult, usually a parent or aide. Some participants attend on their own if they are comfortable doing so, or with a companion.

A particular emphasis of the adult program is on parents and caregivers as participants alongside the participants with learning or developmental disabilities, rather than as chaperones or aides. Many parents or caregivers enjoy the program as much as the individual they accompany; they create their own artwork during the workshop and participate actively in the gallery tour. Educators make a point to engage parents and caregivers, so that the program offers an opportunity for peer-to-peer socialization and mutual respect. Everyone is invited to engage in conversation on the gallery tour, although most parents or caregivers choose not to answer questions, but rather to help clarify questions or discussion points with their participant.

Additionally, several parents and caregivers who had experienced both the younger program and the adult program as their participant aged mentioned that the adult group was more participant-directed, as opposed to the younger group being more heavily led by the educator. Educators are encouraged to interact with participants as peers and emphasize independence and individual creativity in the art-making projects.

Highlighting Best Practices

Establish a routine, then build on it.

Every month, Create Ability follows the same routine: they meet in a classroom in the MoMA education building, begin with a one-hour gallery tour, and then return to the classroom for an hour-long art-making workshop. Though the schedule remains

consistent from program to program, educators vary the theme and content of both the tours and the art-making workshop. The routine schedule creates a sense of comfort within the group, particularly those who have attended the program in the past, but the varied content allows for new artistic discoveries and for educators to innovate within a set structure.

Use strong visual aids to help participants process new information.

During the Create Ability gallery tour, educators use visual aids to guide participants' viewing of the artwork they discuss. In one instance, when discussing James Rosenquist's *F-111*, a very large-scale painting, educators gave each participant a clipboard with a "scavenger hunt" comprised of details of the painting. This helped participants focus in on smaller, less overwhelming elements of the piece, and helped guide the discussion.

Create structured ways for participants to provide feedback and guide the program's growth.

MoMA began an advisory council for Create Ability in 2015 to give participants a chance to provide constructive feedback about the program. The council meets two or three times throughout the year to discuss Create Ability and give input around anything related to the program.

"We have an advisory council... made up of parents, and this year we're having adult participants join the advisory committee. So our goal is to consistently grow the program based upon feedback from the community, and grow in new and exciting ways that are prompted by the community. We met twice last year; this year we will meet three times. Last year was the first year we did it, and we had just five participants who came both to the morning program and the afternoon program. This year we'll do the same but we also have adult participants [with learning or developmental disabilities] joining us. And we'll meet all together at least once, and then we'll meet in smaller subgroups during the year as well. So we'll have a subgroup to help advise about the morning programming, and a subgroup to advise about the afternoon programming. Feedback could be about anything from Create Ability itself to resources that we're working on, like the sensory materials, or to our educators and different techniques that we're trying within the program."

-Lara Schweller, Coordinator of Community and Access Programs at MoMA

Adapt programs to individual participants' needs and goals, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model.

Create Ability is a very public-facing program, with gallery tours often occurring during some of the busiest times in the museum. This is a wonderful opportunity for visibility of visitors with disabilities within the museum community that many participants enjoy. Some, however, prefer a quieter experience. MoMA's accessibility department offers options for both preferences.

"Our community is highly visible within the education department and within the entire museum, which I think is always a positive... When we have diverse audiences within the museum, I think the entire museum becomes more accepting of diversity and more inclusive of different types of people, different types of learners, the different types of art experiences that the museum can successfully offer and maintain... But to that point, we want our programs to be visible and we do have them during public hours, and when we talk to our participants, a lot of [them] like that and a lot of them don't: they want that special access to galleries that are closed to the public, so we try to offer a balance. With each access program, we have it during public hours, but in many ways we try to offer other programs, either before public hours or during special exhibitions that haven't opened to the public yet, so that we can just have choices for people."

-Lara Schweller, Coordinator of Community and Access Programs at MoMA

Offer regular and varied professional development for program staff.

Allow program staff to receive training from a variety of outside professionals who can build on educators' existing experience with the population with whom they are working. Especially when a group of educators has been with a program for several years, as is the case with Create Ability, find professionals within accessibility or education fields who can provide new perspectives.

"In terms of professional development for our educators, we are planning on bringing in some communication specialists this year, just to do some additional training. We lead professional development for our freelance educators every other month, so a lot of that does involve bringing in people from various accessibility fields to offer some guidance or some new perspectives."

-Lara Schweller, Coordinator of Community and Access Programs at MoMA

Offer staff trainings and opportunities for other departments to get involved.

The community and access programs staff trains all front-line staff at MoMA about working with visitors with disabilities. Having this staff-wide training allows Create Ability participants to feel comfortable with all museum staff, not just the program-specific staff. This also allows program staff to spread responsibilities among educators, volunteers, and interns confidently, and to know that frontline staff throughout the museum will be welcoming of all participants.

“In addition to full-time staff on the day of [Create Ability], we also have the three freelance educators. They are in charge of planning a tour and a gallery activity, and they also collaborate with us to plan the art-making activity. And they’re in charge on the day-of of making sure instructions are available, going through instructions for the day with families, leading families on the tour, and then leading the art-making activity. Volunteers are in charge of assisting educators with the tour and the gallery activity and assisting families with the art-making and then helping a little bit with setup and cleanup. And then as far as working with other staff, I and my colleagues do a significant amount of staff training across the entire museum, especially with front-line staff: so security, visitor services, and whatnot - to ensure that they’re empowered to be as welcoming as possible to all visitors. And that’s just kind of standard built in throughout the year.”

-Lara Schweller, Coordinator of Community and Access Programs at MoMA

Additional Resources

- [Link to pre-visit resource with descriptions of paintings visited on gallery tour](#)
- [Link to scanned scavenger hunt from Create Ability](#)