PROGRAMMING FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

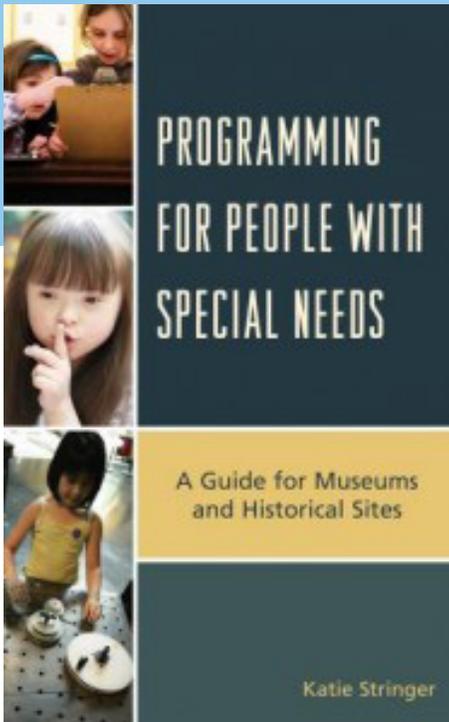A Guide for Museums and Historical Sites

Katie Stringer

Book Review

Programming for People with Special Needs
by Katie Stringer

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With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, museums of all sizes were required to be accessible for visitors with physical disabilities. This was a hugely important step in museums becoming more inclusive for everyone, but not much attention was paid to accessibility issues for those with intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities. Now, with an aging population and more attention than ever focused on children with intellectual disabilities like autism, many museums and historic sites are working to become accessible for visitors of all types. The new book from the American Association for State and Local History, *Programming for People with Special Needs: A Guide for Museums and Historic Sites* is an invaluable resource for history organizations who want to become more inclusive.

The book starts off with a brief historical overview of museum education, disability awareness, and accessibility in the United States. While museums have a long history of serving an educational mission that has only expanded in the past hundred years, they also have a problematic history with the disabled. During the nineteenth century, disabled people often served as exhibits in freak shows and dime museums that were promoted as educational opportunities. History museums, especially, are often housed in buildings that were inaccessible to the physically disabled because of stairs and other barriers. With this context, Stringer argues that museums should be equally accessible to all people, and spends the rest of the book explaining how they can do just that.

The next section of the book talks about some of the ideas behind making museums inclusive places, regardless of a visitor's disability. Stringer illustrates the kinds of training staff need to be sensitive and aware of visitors' disabilities and the etiquette for interacting with those with disabilities. She includes suggested topics that would be helpful and resources of where and how to find this information. She also spends a chapter on the concept of universal design – the idea that buildings and programs should be easily accessible for everyone, whether or not they have a disability of any kind. (An example of universal design is curb cuts in sidewalks. The cuts make using the sidewalk easier for those in wheel chairs, but also those for those with strollers, on bikes, etc.)

After explaining the theory, Stringer includes an entire chapter of brief descriptions of museums' programs just for visitors with special needs. These show the variety of programs that can be offered as well as the wide range of intellectual and learning disabilities there are. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Meet Me program lets adults with dementia and their caregivers spend time having meaningful discussion about art. The Brooklyn Transit Museum uses its collection to teach children with autism and other disorders about the proper way to ride a subway and other life skills. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum has created documents for their docents outlining ways to lead tours for groups with special needs. All these programs are presented as adaptable to museums of any size and budget.

Pulling together all of the above, Stringer puts forth seven key elements of effective programs for those with special needs. They are: sensitivity and awareness training, planning and communication, timing, engagement, object centered and inquiry based, structure, and flexibility. Then, she gives an in-depth case study of how a small house museum in Tennessee, the Sam Davis Home, used these principles to create a program for special needs students based on an existing field trip already offered. The case study walks you through the entire process from surveying teachers to find out what they want from a field trip (results included in the book) to the first offering of the trip and adapting for a second trip based on how the first one went.

It's this focus on the real world of most history organizations that makes this book most valuable. Stringer shows that accessible programming is not out of reach for small institutions and that it can be done by adapting resources that already exist. The other case studies and the resources provided within the book provide an excellent jumping-off point for any museum that would like to be more welcoming to those with special needs.

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