

# Learners at Hillwood

2026 Mansion Docent Training  
Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

To better understand the visitors or “learners” who visit Hillwood, this document compiles information regarding the below content.

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## The Learners and Learning List

1. Learning is personal meaning making. It is an active, participatory event in which minds are "doing."  
**Learners construct knowledge.**
2. We learn by linking new information to what we already know (prior knowledge and experience). "Naive notions," misinformation, and/or misconceptions persist and may impede progress.  
Learning is a process.
3. Frameworks or structures assist in the learning process by tapping into our biological need to organize information, to categorize. (This list is an example of one.)
4. Learners' intellectual, emotional, physical, and social development are incremental and determined by biological and environmental factors. Educators must consider the learner's *stage of development* when designing learning experiences.
5. Experiences that are relevant to the learner foster motivation to learn. **The learner controls the learning.**
6. Learning from models is an essential part of the learning experience.
7. Learning is a social event. We learn with others. The more diverse the group, the richer the learning possibilities. Adults and more knowledgeable peers can guide the learning activities of those with less experience, promoting higher levels of achievement.
8. Learning involves activities in the cognitive, affective (emotional), and physical domains; they work together.
9. Based on internal and external factors, people prefer one kind of learning activity to others. Student diversity, learning styles, multiple intelligences, and individual differences are terms associated with this idea.
10. The physical setting is important to learners. Comfort and stimulation are partners in a successful learning experience.
11. Assessment of learning must be built into the learning experience.

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## Basic Concepts and Assumptions about Adult Learners

Taken from an article by Lawrence A. Allen in *Museums, Adults and the Humanities: A Guide for Educational Programming*

### Five basic concepts about adult learning:

1. Adults are self-directing, interested in setting up their own kinds of learning. They want autonomy in what they are taught, rather than a prescribed curriculum.
2. Adults are interested in immediate applications of learning to their own lives. Adult learning is problem-oriented, not subject-oriented. That doesn't mean that we should eliminate content, but rather that we must relate the content to issues that our visitors are interested in.
3. Adults come to the museum voluntarily. The built-in rules of forced learning situations are changed in the museum.
4. Adults have experiences that form a pool of resources we can use in the learning process. Adults understand a new idea or concept better when we can relate it to their past experiences.
5. There are certain times in their life cycles when adults exhibit a readiness to learn about a specific topic, when it is more effective for a person to learn something specific than at other times.

### Assumptions that emerge from these five basic concepts:

1. Adults continually learn.
2. In order to learn, they must want to. Learning is internal – it comes more from people's needs than from the program imposed on them.
3. Adults can diagnose their own needs.
4. Adults learn best by doing. Looking at a painting is a visual learning experience, but most people still have to learn how to learn visually. Docents can help visitors learn this process by involving them in the process of seeing and inquiring. This will help the visitor learn more effectively and internalize the learning.
5. Adults learn experientially. They need to be involved in a discussion, a simulation, a case study, etc.
6. Adults evaluate themselves. They will engage in a functional self-evaluation or assessment. "How well am I doing; how far have I progressed?"

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## Families at Hillwood – A Cheat Sheet

Compiled by Rebecca Singer, Head of Youth Audiences

Not many families with young children visit Hillwood (research indicates about 14%), and fewer opt to go on docent-led tours. Hillwood has an active School and Girl Scout program, and those groups are booked through the Interpretation department, and their field trips and tours are led by Museum Teachers, who are managed and trained by Interpretation. This is separate from the volunteer program which oversees the mansion and garden docent tours.

If you do find yourself touring families, here are some helpful hints to have at the ready.

Families at museums are visiting for recreation and leisure time. Their purpose in visiting the museum as a family group is to be with each other and to discuss together what they see and experience.

### Tips for engaging families on tours at Hillwood:

- Encourage dialogue among family members by prompting them with open-ended questions that allow for multiple perspectives and can be answered at a variety of levels, depending on age and experience. Ask both children and adults to share their opinions, thoughts, and reactions.
- A great way to start a conversation about a piece of artwork with families is to first simply ask: *What do you see?* Then you can build on their answers. Encourage children to look closely, use descriptive words, and explain their responses. Ask follow up questions and draw attention to other details.
- Find out their interests, so you can relate information in the tour to things that are meaningful to them. *When you aren't at a museum what do you enjoy doing?*
- Give them problems to solve or things to do, to find, or to discover together. *Who can find for me the largest thing in this room? How many pink things can you find here?*
- Have them search for and identify familiar items they may recognize, such as: chairs, tables, cups, or pictures of animals. Give them a game to play, an activity to do, or a puzzle to solve. Ask them to look for clues to figure out how an object may have been used, or who might have used it.
- Relate to things they already know. Ask them to draw comparisons between the things they see at Hillwood and their life at home. *What do you eat your food on?*
- Use language everyone can understand.
- Be aware of what is at children's eye level—which objects they can see, and which are out of their view.
- Encourage the use of imagination. Ask children to make up a story what's happening in the scene on a painting; to pretend that they are the tsar and imagine how they would act; or to imagine what life would be like living at Hillwood.

### Youth Audience Characteristics

#### Ages 3-5

- Learn by making observations using their senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste

- Can recognize and identify familiar items, like things they might have at home (chairs, bed, cups, plates) and pictures of familiar things, like animals.
- Can describe shapes, colors, and size. Can do simple counting activities.
- Short attention spans
- No sense of history or the past

### **Ages 5-8**

- Like younger children, still learn through concrete observations using the senses. Still enjoy recognizing and identifying familiar objects.
- Have active imaginations
- No sense of history or the past

### **Ages 8-11**

- Able to make comparisons, begin to draw connections, compare/ contrast things that have similarities and differences
- Can answer open-ended questions and share their opinions
- Are very industrious; like to solve puzzles, play games, figure things out, demonstrate knowledge, achievement, and accomplishments
- Starting to have a sense of the past

### **Ages 11-14**

- Very self-conscious (especially concerned about reaction of peers, but may open up a bit more when not with peer group)
- Can begin to think more abstractly, start to analyze
- Like to be treated as adults (though they still need a lot of guidance)
- Can answer open-ended questions, engage in conversation/dialogue, and share their opinions

### **Ages 14-18**

- Tend to be more interested in their peers than in adults, but respond best when they feel they are being respected and treated as adults
- May tend to be overly theoretical and idealistic
- Can be engaged in conversation/ discussion/ debate
- Should be encouraged to present and explain their points of view and to share their interests

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