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Child scientists

By JOANNA SHEBSON
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The Living Lab at the Bloomfield Science Museum engages kids in research.

Located in the inner lobby of the Bloomfield Science Museum, the Living Lab is a working experimental lab of the Hebrew University. Run by Dr. Inbal Arnon, Prof. Ram Frost and Prof. Ariel Knafo, it is the first Living Lab in Israel. Local children visiting the museum are encouraged, with their parents' permission, to take part in experiments researching cognitive and social development.

According to Arnon, one of the main impetuses for starting the Living Lab was "to expose the community to how science is studied and to make science and its findings accessible to parents and children." The researchers at the museum engage with parents while the tasks are being done and share their knowledge on topics that many parents enjoy talking about, such as language development, imaginary friends and the importance of play.

Children who visit the museum with their parents are encouraged to participate. The experiments take under five minutes, and each parent is asked to sign a form with the child's name and ID number for the purpose of numbering the results.

In one of the experiments that I tried, participants were asked to watch and listen to an alien on a computer screen. Following the short video clip, we were asked questions about the clip.

"The Bloomfield Science Museum and Hebrew U have created a win-win situation," says Arnon. "The lab enables the researchers to increase the diversity of the sample of children, including the languages they speak, their socioeconomic situation and mix of religions."

The children, ages four and up, are happy to take part in the short experiment, and they enjoy the prizes they receive as a reward.

The Living Lab has been open since November and averages 20 to 30 test samples a day. It has become an essential part of the experimental process, and Arnon plans to expand the project with new funding and more research projects.

So how does this bridge the gap between the local community and university researchers? The research students who ran the experiments were happy to share their studies and research questions with us once we completed the study. We heard firsthand what they were looking for, and they shared with us how language and social skills are learned. I also had the opportunity to sign up for their newsletter to follow their research project. With the Hebrew University campus just across the street from the museum, this was a great way for me to feel part of it.

Visiting the Bloomfield Science Museum is one of my favorite things to do in Jerusalem with kids. The museum staff is forward thinking and always looking for new ways to share science and fun with the local community. The museum is proud that the Living Lab has created an environment that increases the collaboration among researchers, educators and the community.

Living Lab hours: Wednesdays 3:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Fridays 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.

For more details, visit www.mada.org.il/fun/open-lab or contact the lab at arnon.language.lab@gmail.com.

The writer is the founder and FUN expert at Fun in Jerusalem (www.funinjerusalem.com). She lives in Jerusalem with her husband and three children and loves to inspire family fun. joanna@funinjerusalem.com.



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