

The Horniman Museum & Gardens is located in south-east London. It was founded by a Victorian tea trader called Frederick Horniman. Our main collections are comprised of internationally important collections of anthropology and musical instruments, as well as an acclaimed natural history collection. In addition we have over 16.5 acres of gardens and the oldest nature trail in London.

SUMMARY

The Horniman is lucky to have amazing gardens but these were being under utilised in facilitated sessions with under 5s. We decided to trial a new strand of the under 5s programme called Muddy Bees, and more specifically a drop-in mud kitchen session. It focused on outdoor play, which gave us an opportunity to find out if this type of session would appeal to our regular families and to explore how we could run more open-ended play sessions.

A mud kitchen is a play space created outdoors where children can use their senses to explore natural materials. We created a temporary space for one morning a month during spring 2015 using old wooden pallets as mixing stations, old pots and pans for children to create mud pies in and lots of soil, sand and water. Then we let the families experiment and play with all the different materials.

The children not only had fun pretending to cook their mud pies but they experimented with measuring, mixing and pouring. The adults had an important part to play too. Adults became much more actively involved, as they helped the children fill their containers with soil and sand, helped turn the water on and off as well as searched for decorative flourishes, eg fallen leaves, dandelion flowers, twig candles.

The mud kitchen was spread out under a large oak tree to give a little protection from both sun and light rain, and where there was no seating. This meant that adults didn't have the option of sitting down and just watching the children play. We greeted every family, explaining how the session would run and that adults would need to get their hands dirty too.

Families were able to drop into the mud kitchen anytime between 11am and 12.30pm. Some stayed for a short time, between 20–30 minutes, whilst others became so engrossed in their mud play that they stayed for the whole session.

Initially we cordoned off an area in the gardens for the mud kitchen with some bunting and only allowed 30 children plus adults in at one time. However it became clear after a number of sessions that this wasn't necessary, as the sessions were largely self-regulating. If there wasn't a space at one of the mixing stations, we asked newly arrived families to watch and wait or come back in 20 minutes.

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

We have been running an extremely popular under 5s programme, Busy Bees, since 2004 and have become well-known for it amongst our local communities. However, this has brought its own challenges, particularly with regards to managing demand from families as well as competing demands for space from other departments within the museum. We needed to find a solution to how to accommodate the demand and resolve the issue of lack of space.

Questions we wanted to explore

- Could we reduce the amount of staff time required to support sessions, both in terms of delivery and ticketing?
- How might we utilise one of our most under-used spaces and collections, our gardens, to best meet the needs of this age group?

For our audience

Whilst we programme a variety of family activities and events in our gardens during school holidays, we weren't specifically targeting our under 5s audience to see or use the gardens as a resource. We wanted to encourage and support families' interest and empathy for the natural world.

We wanted to find out

- Would largely unstructured sessions encourage adult and child interaction and active participation?
- Could more open-ended under 5s play sessions meet demand and accommodate larger numbers of children and adults than traditional storytelling sessions?
- Would drop-in sessions make the under 5s programme more accessible and attractive to a diverse family audience?



OUTCOMES

For our organisation

We wanted our family programme to be as accessible as possible and attract a diverse family audience. Our non-traditional museum visitors are less confident in accessing our regular under 5s programme but running sessions outdoors make them highly visible. Families don't need to get a ticket or queue for entry and they decide how they choose to engage by watching other families play first and then gradually getting involved themselves.

In terms of staff support for the sessions, we've found that running sessions outdoors without the need to book has reduced the need for additional staff support. The emphasis is on the families interacting with each other and self-directed play, rather than a facilitator leading a session.

For our audience

Feedback from families has confirmed that they highly value the drop-in nature of the sessions and that they would like more outdoor play. Whilst we haven't collected demographic data on participants, the sessions seem to attract a diverse range of families, including non-traditional museum visitors and families for whom English is not their first language.

The mud kitchen has proved extremely popular with families and Muddy Bees has now been integrated into the main Busy Bees under 5s programme. Numbers attending are comparable with our regular storytelling sessions with an average of 55-60 children plus adults attending over the course of the morning. Sessions continue to run one morning a month between May-July and in September.

One of the principal outcomes for these sessions was that adults gained insight into how to support their child's learning in a natural environment. We've had lots of positive feedback from parents and carers stating they've been inspired to create their own messy play area at home. However, some families needed more encouragement to participate in outdoor play than others and were put off by the mud play element, seeing it as too messy. We've now introduced a sand only area so those families can still participate and stay relatively clean.



LESSONS LEARNT

We try to run the sessions in all types of weather, and unless it is raining extremely heavily, we won't cancel them. We want families to see the outdoors as a learning environment in all weathers and seasons, not just during the summer. However, we have to be realistic and especially as a member of staff has to support the session for the whole two hours, we only programme it in spring, summer and early autumn.

We've found that due to the structure of the outdoor sessions, largely open-ended play with emphasis on communication between the child and their accompanying adult, instead of a facilitator and an audience, has meant that these outdoor sessions are much more accessible to families whose adults don't speak English as their first language.

Whilst storytelling sessions can be hugely valuable in terms of language acquisition, they can also present a barrier to participation for some adults. Adults who don't speak English as their first language may sometimes feel they cannot fully share and enjoy the learning experience with their child. During Muddy Bees, adults don't have to concentrate on listening to a story or try to keep their children engaged throughout; instead the emphasis is on choice – soil or sand, daisy or dandelion, lots of water or just a little. Language isn't a barrier because it's largely incidental, the emphasis is much more on sensory exploration, social interaction and motor skills development.

The sessions have also encouraged much more active adult participation. Whilst we were expecting children to enjoy the sessions we've been surprised by how engaged the adults have also been. Many of the adults have said they feel that the sessions give them permission to play alongside their children. Parents' and carers' involvement is crucial to making sure children's early experiences of outdoor play and nature are positive.

TOP TIP

You don't need lots of expensive resources (including staff/freelancers), a mud kitchen is one of the cheapest and simplest ways to run an under 5s session that will be hugely popular.

FUNDING

Busy Bees and its sub-strand Muddy Bees are funded from the museum's core family programme budget. The Horniman is very fortunate to receive funding from the Arts Council England as a National Portfolio Organisation.

BUDGET

The sessions are free to families and costs are low. Most equipment can be sourced from charity shops and there is a minimal cost of one bag of sterilised top soil and play sand per session. The biggest cost is staff time to set up and facilitate, but drop-in sessions only require one member of staff supported by one volunteer, if available.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Download a guide to creating a mud kitchen:

[muddyfaces.co.uk/download/
Making%20a%20mud%20kitchen.pdf](https://muddyfaces.co.uk/download/Making%20a%20mud%20kitchen.pdf)

This case study was written by Rose Mitchell, Community Learning Officer at the Horniman Museum and Gardens.

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