

Orleans House Gallery is a free public art gallery in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. As well as the Grade I listed Octagon Room, two galleries offer a varied programme of historic and contemporary art exhibitions. The gallery's learning and engagement team facilitates a wide range of accessible arts provision including a variety of activities for early years audiences.

SUMMARY

Teaming up with an experienced mindfulness practitioner we started by trialling free monthly mindfulness sessions from 10.15–11.15am on Monday mornings, in our education space. The sessions were funded by Achieving for Children through their Community Learning scheme. The sessions were especially tailored to new and expectant parents with the premise being that the sessions were predominantly for the benefit of the parents, although the babies also enjoyed the calming environment. We purposefully focused on this audience so that participants could share similar experiences, and so that they would feel comfortable in the knowledge that no one would mind the babies making noise! These sessions were fully booked with a maximum of 15 adults at each session.

During these trial sessions we designed paper evaluation forms to collect evaluation data from participants on their preference of: timings, content, price and whether they would like one-off sessions or a longer mindfulness course. As a result of our findings we collaborated with the same mindfulness practitioner to put together a course of eight paid for sessions, running on Monday mornings on consecutive weeks instead of months. Sessions could be booked individually at £10 per session, or as a block of four at a discounted rate of £30. The course was suited to all levels of experience but built on the participants' learning from week to week. Some participants attended a mix of individual sessions but most booked onto a block.

This time the course took place in our baroque Octagon Room and we were very keen that the sessions drew upon the gallery's heritage, setting and art collection to inspire mindful practices. One session took inspiration from the Octagon Room's ornate ceiling using photographs of it as a mandala for mindful colouring. In another, we practised mindful eating inspired by Queen Caroline's banquet in the room in the 18th century. Other sessions engaged with the gallery's portraiture, looking at the relationship between parent and child, and explored mindful movement in the gallery grounds.



AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

We wanted to utilise our gallery space for engagement sessions on Mondays when it is closed to the public, and since our HLF-funded refurbishment we have also been able to make use of our beautiful baroque Octagon Room for non-messy sessions. We felt that the mindfulness practices really lent themselves to encouraging our audiences to engage with the intricacies of its beautiful interior decor.

For our audience

The aim was to provide a programme to support positive mental health for new parents as they go through the transition of having a new-born. We found that this wasn't something readily on offer in the London Borough of Richmond and we knew from looking at statistics on post-natal depression in the borough that there was a demand for activities to support new parents' mental health. We were already running a popular weekly art, music and storytelling provision for under 5s, but those sessions are child-centred and more suitable for over 1s. We wanted to offer a session which would support local parents with younger babies.

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

It has been positive to be able to utilise the Octagon Room and the main gallery on Mondays when it is closed to the public. We have effectively engaged with a new audience and we have also noticed an increase in audience awareness of the other activities we offer as a result of engaging with these new families. For instance, parents who attended Baby Mindful have since come to our weekly art, music and storytelling provision for under 5s, our holiday activities, and have booked children's parties with us.

For our audience

Sessions were popular, and feedback was positive. Participants told us that they enjoyed the 'space to relax', 'time for themselves' and the 'useful takeaway exercises' they could practice at home, which made them 'better equipped to deal with everyday family stresses'. They noticed a calming effect not only on themselves but also on their babies. A really nice tangible outcome was that participants made friends during the sessions and arranged to meet up afterwards.



LESSONS LEARNT

We discovered that in order to make the sessions more accessible to dads as well as mums, it's helpful to provide equipment for warming milk, as well as baby changing facilities which are accessible to dads or male carers.

It was important for us to recognise that these sessions were never going to be comparable to a typical adult mindfulness course because no matter how engaged and relaxed the adults and babies are, the room was unlikely to ever be completely silent! Adults often liked to take their babies out for a few minutes if they were grumbling for an extended period, so it was important to have a side room or quiet space nearby for this, as well as to offer breastfeeding privacy should anyone wish to use it.

We also discovered that a cheap silver foil camping mat, or something similar, is ideal to have in the centre of the room for babies to lay on when they are not being held.

TOP TIP

We quickly found that these sessions work best with babies who are not yet crawling. They become an entirely different type of session once babies can crawl because as the babies require more stimulation, the space and any obstacles need to be considered.

FUNDING

The sessions are paid for by participants. Income came to £620 in total over the eight weeks. 40% of this was retained by the gallery, which covered a third of the staff coordination time required for the programme. The programme was also supported by a volunteer each week.



BUDGET

The only direct cost associated with the programme was the fee for the mindfulness practitioner, and tea and coffee. To mitigate the risk of income loss if the course didn't book we arranged an income split between the gallery (40%) and the mindfulness practitioner (60%). Tea and coffee came to £3 per week.

Materials were provided jointly by the gallery and mindfulness practitioner and consisted of yoga mats and cushions that the gallery already owned.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Find out more about Baby Mindful, including feedback from participants and how these sessions fit in to the rest of our Early Years offer here: orleanshousegallery.org/news/2018/10/youre-never-too-young-to-visit-orleans-house-gallery/

This case study was written by Heather Whitt, Early Years & Parties Co-ordinator at Orleans House Gallery.

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