

PINEAPPLES AND GINGERBREAD MEN AT THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

I am a Child and Family Worker based at the North Cambridge Child and Family Centre and I run groups for children aged 0-5 years all year round and 0-8 years in school holidays. Funded by Cambridgeshire County Council, Child and Family Centres (C&FCs), I provide support to families with children aged 0-19 years via Stay and Plays, parenting groups and advice.

The Fitzwilliam Museum is the art and antiquities museum of the University of Cambridge. The collection includes objects from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman worlds, paintings, drawings and prints covering over 600 years of history, artworks from the Far East, manuscripts, and a wide variety of applied arts including armour, ceramics, sculpture and furniture.

SUMMARY

We were delighted to be approached by Nicola Wallis (Museum Educator) to take part in the Creative Families Talking and Eating Together Workshops at the Fitzwilliam Museum. The workshops were linked to a current exhibition at the museum called Feast and Fast. One of the features of the exhibition were images of pineapples, chosen because the grandfather of the founder of the Fitzwilliam Museum had been the first to grow pineapples in England. The museum had installed a beautiful giant pineapple in the front garden and the children looked for it each time we visited the museum.



In order to recruit families who I felt would most benefit from the museum workshops, I approached Family Workers within Cambridge City, Cambridge Women's Refuge and King's Hedges Family Support Project. Not all of the families I approached were engaging with the C&FC's activities or with Cambridge Museums, so it was fantastic to be able to offer such a good opportunity for families that were new to us and would hopefully then engage with our programme of activities, as well as those of the Fitzwilliam Museum. I also offered places to families that were attending my Storytime sessions that are run in collaboration with Cambridgeshire libraries.

Nicola ran an introductory session at the North Cambridge Child and Family Centre where she talked to the parents about what to expect when they came to the museum. She also gave each family a scrapbook that they would be able to add to throughout the project. It was lovely to see that most of the families remembered to bring their scrap books to each session.

I discussed travelling with me on the bus to the families and was surprised to find that two of the families had never travelled into the City of Cambridge by themselves – they had relied on partners and family members to take them. After the sessions ended, I bumped into one of these parents in the City Centre and was happy to hear that she now comes into Cambridge regularly with her child, and often goes to the Fitzwilliam Museum to attend the First Free Saturday events.

The project consisted of three workshops that took place at the museum and each session had a different theme. The first session focused on containers for food and the families made a clay teacup. The second session focussed on recipes and the families all made a recipe book. For the last workshop, we looked at historic gingerbread moulds in the gallery and Nicola told an interactive story about the Gingerbread Man, encouraging us to move around the galleries whilst we pretended to run after the Gingerbread Man.

After each session we had a feast of our own in the Museum Café where the café staff provided us with sandwiches, fruit and cookies. On the last day we had warm gingerbread stars fresh from the oven. Each family took home a gift, paid for by the bid, to extend the learning at home. Gifts included a tea set, recipe book for cooking with toddlers, and a story book about the Gingerbread Man and a gingerbread cutter.

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

Creative Families is one of the projects supported by Talking Together in Cambridgeshire (TTC) which works in areas of high need in order to improve communication, language and literacy skills in the Early Years. One of the areas chosen by TTC was North Cambridge where, due to the impact of socio-economic deprivation, language and communication outcomes for children at age five are lower than many other areas around the country.

For our audience

From a Child and Family Centre point of view, the intention of these workshops was to introduce families who would not ordinarily take their young children to visit a museum to access the rich source of information and opportunities for learning that can be found there.

For the Fitzwilliam, the museum workshops are intended to give families rich experiences that will stimulate conversation and add to the children's vocabularies and life experience.

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

Having access to the galleries gave the families rich experiences that extended their vocabularies and life experience. One father who attended said that they have revisited the Feast and Fast Exhibition, and a favourite activity for his daughter was sitting on a bench in the gallery just looking at the cabinets and watching what was going on around her.



The recipe books that families made introduced mark making for a purpose to the older children – one father told me that his two children use the recipe book in their role play, pretending to read it and cook.

The interactive stories encouraged the children to join in with the words and sounds, therefore developing and improving their communication, language and literacy skills.

For our audience

I can see from talking to the families how this programme has benefited their confidence, social interactions, and positive relationships between children and adults. For example, a shy child with Cystic Fibrosis who initially hid behind her grandmother at groups came out of her shell during the sessions. The grandmother said that she settled into her new nursery class straight away, which she thought was due to the social experiences she had had at the museum and C&FC groups.

One family was referred to me because there was concern about the lack of play opportunities at home and they were not attending groups, but they engaged with the museum activities with encouragement and asked me at the last session to let them know if there were any similar activities.

All the families said that they were very sad that the workshops were over and Nicola and I signposted them to other museum events, including Family First Saturdays, which I know some of the families have attended.

The obstacles we encountered were linked to how the parents/carers would get to the museum and how to encourage families with young children to come when their impressions of visiting museums came from childhood memories of stuffy galleries where they had to be quiet. We overcame parents'/carers' reservations by inviting the families to an introductory session at the North Cambridge Family Centre: a comfortable and familiar environment for most of the participants. At the introductory session Nicola spoke to all the families and was able to answer any questions they had. The travel issue was easily solved because money for transport had been written into the funding bid.

LESSONS LEARNT

The big surprise for me was that there were no tears! The youngest child was eight months and the oldest child was three years. Even though children and parents/carers were entering a new environment, they all settled into the museum and found their own level of interest. For example, the babies were happy to be held by their parents, be shown the wonderful and intriguing exhibits in the galleries and to sit on their parent's lap and handle the items from the themed treasure boxes that Nicola provided. During both activities parents and carers were encouraged to talk to their babies and name the objects they were looking at, which would enrich their own and their child's vocabularies. Fitzwilliam staff were always on hand to explain and name the exhibits which helped enormously.

The older children were happy to explore the space in the galleries and get involved with the storytelling and art activities – making their own choices about which exhibit to look at and which art materials they wanted to use. Some of the older children were able to ask questions about what they saw in the galleries and therefore increasing their understanding of the world.

All the parents relaxed very quickly and I think this was down to the excellent customer service that the museum provided. Reception staff were very welcoming and if we were waiting for families, they happily looked out for them and directed them to where we were. Nicola and her team were fantastic – everything was very well organised and nothing was too much trouble.

My biggest lesson learnt – sometimes life gets in the way! Not all the families managed to attend all four sessions due to various reasons including sickness and urgent appointments. I operated a long waiting list so that I could fill a gap at short notice. There was funding for 10 families per visit and each session was a standalone session so I could slot people in easily.

BUDGET

The project cost just under £2,000, which covered additional Museum Educator hours, transport, meals and take home gifts for families.

FUNDING

Cambridgeshire County Council have provided funding to an initiative called Talking Together Cambridgeshire which invites Early Years providers and community groups in specified areas of high need to put in bids to fund activities that encourage language and literacy skills to be gained and develop.

TOP TIP

Relax! It's in everyone's best interests to enjoy the museum. The parents/carers I spoke to were concerned that their children would run around and disturb everyone's peace. But once we got into the galleries the children and parents/carers were fascinated by what they could see and had a lovely time.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information, contact Nicola Wallis, Seasonal Gallery Educator at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/parenting-and-family-support/child-and-family-centres>

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