

The Museum of London tells the story of the capital and its people from prehistoric times to the present day. The museum has three sites, the Museum of London in the City, the Museum of London Docklands in Canary Wharf that charts the history of the River Thames and London's trade with the rest of the world, and the Museum of London Archaeological Archive in Hackney (the largest archive of its kind in the world).

SUMMARY

In April 2017, as part of the Family Highlights project, the Museum of London Docklands installed three small scale family-friendly interventions in different galleries - a workbench next to our displays about shipbuilding in the 1800s, a toy grocery shop in our Sainsbury's gallery and an oven next to a 1915 baker's shop. In December we added two more interventions, a play kitchen adjacent to our World War II mobile kitchen, and a train table in a gallery that includes the story of the extension of the Jubilee line in 2000.

The preparations for this included consulting families with under 5s about our plans, including regular visitors and those who had never been to the Museum of London Docklands. The feedback suggested that families were eager for opportunities to have open-ended play in the galleries, and that the interventions needed to be both multi-user and multi-generational.

All but one intervention (the train table) was bought off the shelf. They are aimed at families visiting with children between two to five years old and provide small world, as well as child-led play, with the opportunity for social interactions between children or between children and adults.

Other parts of the Family Highlights project include children's captions with illustrations, new gallery introduction panels with text suitable for younger readers, two book boxes, three larger interactive areas, and a printed map that highlights all the family-friendly areas in the museum.

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

To provide engaging and enjoyable visits for family audiences at the Museum of London Docklands and to grow our reputation as a family-friendly destination. The museum attracts large numbers of families with young children due to our hugely popular children's gallery, Mudlarks, and our successful baby and toddler programme. However, these are usually booked to capacity and we wanted to make other galleries more attractive to families so that they make better use of the rest of the museum.

For our audience

The museum has many regular family visitors and we wanted to provide them with something new to enrich their visit. We also wished to provide families with self-directed and child-led learning opportunities in quieter environments.

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

In 2015 we installed two interventions, a drawing table and a dressing-up station at the start of our immersive Sailortown gallery. We wanted to test the practicalities of these types of smaller gallery interventions and activities that are self-explanatory and don't need constant tidying or resetting. After consultation with our Visitor Experience team and observations and discussion with visitors, we realised that these types of activities worked incredibly well and achieved high levels of engagement.

For our audience

The interventions provided a welcome change of pace for families as they offer the chance to sit down and do something practical. We found that many families were combining a visit to Mudlarks with exploring the new interventions in other galleries. Although we have not yet carried out formal evaluation of the latest installations, our observations suggest that they are having a similar impact. The family-friendly interventions are also generating lots of positive comments on social media.

LESSONS LEARNT

Everyday, simple play activities can be an effective way to provide family-friendly interpretation of stories and objects on display, while providing self-explanatory and open-ended learning opportunities. Involving the front-of-house team from the beginning has worked well and they are now keen to tell families where to find the highlights and to encourage them to use them. Considering the number of small items in the grocery shop and work bench, we have been surprised by how few of them have gone missing. If you are buying things off the shelf you can't guarantee the place where you bought them from will still stock them in the future, so buy plenty of spares.

TOP TIP

If your budget is small or time tight, carefully chosen off-the-shelf activities can provide equally valuable learning opportunities as bespoke ones, providing they are safe, robust and in keeping with the aesthetics of the galleries in which they are to be placed.

BUDGET

The overall budget for all five interventions was just under £4,000.

FUNDING

The cost of the interventions was covered by core budgets.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This case study was written by Sandra Hedblad, Senior Learning Manager at the Museum of London.

All images © Museum of London 2017.

