



The importance of adult involvement

At the Museum of London and Museum of London Docklands, our early years programme and wider family programme value the role of the adult visiting with their child. We programme activities which encourage the adult to participate, rather than be a bystander or observer whilst their child is taking part.

WHY DO WE THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO INVOLVE ADULTS?

Adults are their child's first teacher

In the first years of a child's life in particular, parents and carers are a child's first and their most important teacher(s). When an adult takes part, we often see that their child is more open to taking part as well, and so encouraging them to take part is pivotal in getting the children involved. By allowing the adult to actively participate we are hoping to facilitate the growth of a stronger bond between child and adult. With everybody taking part, families are also more likely to remember the activity and talk about it at home - creating shared experiences.

By involving the adults, we are giving them the opportunity and time to have a voice, and share that voice with other adults. We have witnessed groups of new families attending our weekly sessions forming relationships, and spending time together outside of the sessions themselves eg going to the café for lunch after a baby session.

Supports knowledge and skills development

We find that some adults look to us for advice on how to support their child's learning and development, so by involving them more, we can demonstrate to them how to scaffold and model learning for their child. Parents and carers regularly ask our session leaders for ideas and look to them for guidance and support.

Ensures learning carries on outside of the museum

If we can inspire adults by giving them the knowledge and tools to learn together with their child, they will be far more motivated to continue this learning at home. They might also themselves become interested in finding out more about the topic.

Encourages repeat visits

If adult and child both feel involved, they are more likely to come back to the museum or to recommend it to friends or family. A regular visitor told us that they feel it is important for them as a parent or carer to be included in a session because it is 'part of us learning how to be with [their child]'.

The adults feel like wanted visitors too

Although we often receive feedback from parents and carers that relates specifically to the experience of their child, it is important to recognise that we are not just here to support a child's learning – we can, and should, engage the adult too. During some in-depth research with our regular families, one parent told us that she enjoyed gallery sessions the most because she felt like she was able to learn something new at the same time as her child. Another parent told us that to them, an excellent session leader is someone who is inclusive of all adults.

Increases other adults' likelihood to participate

During sessions we have definitely witnessed that when one or a few adults are fully engaging with the session eg joining in with singing, this participation trickles down and encourages other adults to get involved and take part without feeling any sense of awkwardness. It often leads to laughs and a more enjoyable and active session.

Helps us with marketing

Adults are the ones that bring the children to our activities, so we need to be appealing to them. We need to consider what they want, and what they might want for their child and family. We do this through images and text that is aimed at the adults, and includes practical information about lunch spaces, buggy parking and nappy changing facilities.



HOW DO WE INVOLVE THEM?

Before their visit

We make sure it is clear in our marketing and on our website that we invite adults to get involved too eg using language such as ‘fun for the whole family’, and we prefer to use images that include both adults and children. For bookable sessions we ask visitors to book adult and child tickets which reinforces the value of the adult, and the fact that we include them within the activity.

For activities such as messy play, we email families in advance to inform them of what ingredients we will be using in case of any allergies, but we also take this opportunity to tell parents and carers that they will be getting messy too!

During activities

Our session facilitators include a short introduction at the beginning of each session and will encourage and welcome the adults to get involved. We don't provide many chairs in the classroom, mainly just for those who are less able to stand or sit on the floor. This encourages adults to get stuck in and to actively take part with their child, rather than take a seat around the edge of the room. We do this for all activities such as messy play, singing and dancing, and dressing up. We will also do our best to provide props that are obviously for the adults, and not just for the children.

All of our activities are designed for families to work on together. This means that sometimes we might pitch our activities a little higher than the average developmental age of the children, so that adults are needed to support and guide their child - we might use a trail during a gallery session that needs to be read out loud by the adult to the child. There is of course value in allowing children to explore independently, but we see our sessions as a key opportunity to encourage and model to adults effective ways of engaging with their child in a museum setting. Part of doing this well is also to step back and reassure the adults that they are doing the right thing.

After activities

Our weekly sessions follow one theme for a whole month eg Fire Fire, or Frost Fairs. At the end of the session we provide families with a sheet that summarises the theme and gives an example of an object or objects in our gallery that relate to the theme, a map to where they can find it/them, and a suggested activity to do at home eg using empty toilet roll tubes to create their own Thames Tunnel. These sheets provide adults with guidance and information so they can lead further activities with their child(ren) both in the museum galleries and at home.



Consulting/helping out at events

We have reached out to our regular families to help us plan upcoming events. For our Toddler Takeover weekend family festival in May 2017, we invited families from our weekly sessions to discuss our ideas for the festival, and to hear from them what families would want from this kind of weekend event. A member of staff facilitated activities for the children to take part in whilst the adults spoke with staff. We feel that this gave the adults a real sense of ownership over the event and that they were therefore more likely to attend the day – one of the adults who took part in the consultation came back on both days of the festival! And many of the adults who took part in the consultation offered to distribute flyers for us about the event, which was a fantastic marketing opportunity, especially as we know that our early years audience tend to hear about and attend events due to word of mouth. This type of consultation gave us the opportunity to acknowledge the adults as the true experts when it comes to their child(ren).

For the same event we also asked our regular families if they would like to help during the actual weekend, handing out programmes to visitors and directing them inside as they arrived. We had two fathers and their daughters help with this task and we feel that again, this gave the adults a true sense of belonging at the museum.

HOW DOES THIS BENEFIT THE MUSEUM?

Increased family enjoyment

We receive high praise in our feedback from families and in 2017-2018, 100% of 238 families who completed an evaluation sheet marked our sessions as either 'good' or 'excellent', with 88% rating them as 'excellent'. We believe that by involving adults in our activities, the whole family is having fun and enjoying themselves, not just the child(ren). We recognise that adults and children have different needs, interests and motivations, but we can tailor our activities to accommodate this, ensuring that both old and young leave having enjoyed themselves and learnt something. This attention to both adults and children means that families are more likely to come back and visit us again. We have a high rate of repeat attendance at our regular baby and toddler sessions and believe this is due to making both adults and children feel comfortable, welcome and valued during our sessions.

Word of mouth recommendations

The adults will talk to other adults about what their family does and by doing so, market us to other adults. By ensuring that they are having a positive experience as well as their child, we think they will be more likely to share their experiences and encourage other families to visit us as well. In 2017-18, one in four families who completed an evaluation form told us that they heard about the museum through word of mouth.



Sometimes the adults are just adults

By ensuring the adults feel welcome and comfortable at the museum we are encouraging them to come back to attend other events, perhaps with friends, partners or older family members. We have seen some parents and carers coming back to adult-only events, such as a Crafty Fox Christmas Fair, and one parent who attended storytime sessions with their child applied for, and got, a role to become part of the Visitor Experience host team.

Links to Arts Council England's Quality Principles

The early years programme at the Museum of London Docklands and Museum of London is funded by Arts Council England (ACE). ACE's Quality Principles, which aim to raise the standard of work being produced by, with and for children and young people underpin all of our work across the early years programme. By involving adults in our programming, we are:

- **Being inspiring** by giving adults ideas of things to do independently in the museum and at home
- **Enabling personal progression** by developing the skills and knowledge of parents/carers
- **Ensuring a positive and inclusive experience** for all of the family
- **Actively involving children and young people** as well as their parents/carers
- **Developing ownership and belonging** to the museum and the programme

Acknowledging, valuing and involving adults underpins all of our work with our early years and wider family audiences. We believe this has huge benefits for both the young children and the adults, as well as for us as a museum. We encourage anyone programming activities for early years families to consider whether, and how, you are encouraging both young children and their adults to take part in your activities.

