

NOBODY PUTS BABY IN A CORNER!

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

Our Baby Magic sessions are for 0-2 year olds. We ask families to book in advance and limit the group to 12 babies for the safety and comfort of participants. We begin with a short welcome and then spend time together in one of the galleries, exploring a theme connected with the displays. Carefully selected resources allow for open-ended play where babies and adults explore colours, textures, patterns and shapes which are similar to the museum objects which we cannot touch (or lick!). Sometimes we include musical instruments that help to create an additional link with the museum collections and together we'll sing well known rhymes or maybe a new song in a language relevant to the exhibition, for example an Italian lullaby or a Hindi counting rhyme. Finally we'll move into the art studio to explore materials that would be off limits in the gallery. These might range from clay to paint, from water play to investigating natural materials.

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

We wanted to offer sessions specially aimed at visitors under two years old, as we recognised that our preschool sessions based on storytelling and art-making activities were not appropriate for the needs of younger children. There was a clear need for this kind of programming as families had started to bring younger children to our preschool sessions and were asking us about options for babies. We wanted to explore new ways for our visitors to connect with museum objects.

For our audience

Families often seek out new activities and places to go when their children are very young (under 12 months), perhaps owing to new routines during parental leave. We wanted to provide activities for families that would be accessible but also stimulating for babies and adults alike. Parents tell us that they appreciate the opportunity to try new experiences with their babies, in a relaxing and welcoming atmosphere.



OUTCOMES

For our organisation

The Baby Magic programme has helped the museum welcome many new families and established the Fitzwilliam Museum as a place of relevance and interest to even the very youngest visitors. Our participants have given us extremely warm and positive feedback about these sessions, and consistently tell us that they make them feel very welcome and comfortable in the museum. Building the baby programme has helped us to see the collection in a new light and to think creatively about how to provide access to objects and ideas in a variety of multisensory ways.

For our audience

Many families move from the baby sessions into the preschool activities and beyond as the children grow up, forming a long lasting bond with the museum from an early age. Other visitors have also appreciated the opportunity to be alongside the babies in the galleries, spending time watching the activities, or getting in touch via social media to tell us that they were delighted to see such young children enjoying the museum.

LESSONS LEARNT

We have come to understand the importance of watching, listening to and trusting our tiny visitors – they have a lot to teach us. When starting out with the programme, educators and other museum staff were concerned that lots of babies and their families gathered together would make a lot of noise, however we have not found this to be the case at all. The babies are engaged and focused on what they are doing and the objects we are using. They show signs of being totally absorbed in the experience and it's very rare that any of them cry. By the end of the one hour session though, the babies are usually ready for a sleep – they remind us just how stimulating a museum visit can be. Working in the museum every day, we stop noticing the way light reflects differently off glass cases, the changing sounds of our footsteps on wooden and stone floors, the strange smells produced by the air handling systems. The babies' responses have reminded us to be mindful of this sensory dimension, and how overwhelming it can be.

TOP TIP

Spend time watching babies play in your museum - they'll tell you everything you need to know!

BUDGET

The sessions do not require lots of additional funding. We use many recycled, repurposed and reusable resources for sensory play and borrow lots of books from our local library.

FUNDING

The Fitzwilliam Museum receives Major Partner Museum funding from Arts Council England which supports our learning work. We charge £3 per child to cover consumable art materials. This also enables us to offer early years sessions free of charge to groups who may not be able to access our public offer.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Find out about our Creative Families Award for Young Parents:

museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2017/03/29/creative-families-the-first-step/

This case study was written by Nicola Wallis, Seasonal Gallery Educator at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

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