

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

The Museum of London Docklands has been running messy play sessions since 2008 as part of the regular early years programme. Each session lasts 1 hour, with 30-45 minutes of messy play and can accommodate up to 15 children and 15 adults. Baby sessions are specially designed for babies on laps who cannot yet walk, while our toddler sessions are aimed at children from the time they can walk up to the age of five. We have found that on average the majority of our audience ranges from six months to three years.

The sessions aim to tell the stories of the museum in creative ways and provide a safe space for families to experiment with a variety of wet and dry materials, eg fruit and vegetables, soil, shredded paper and paint. We encourage families to use different tools to engage with the messy materials to help develop motor skills and hand to eye coordination. This includes brushes, squeeze bottles and lolly sticks to aid the development of pencil grip, as well as hands and feet! We try to use natural materials, including clay, sand and soil, which provide a variety of tactile experiences and encourage exploration of the natural world.

Examples of activities we have found to be effective include:

- mark making with goods that arrived in London's docks, such as tea and coffee as well as sugar, which would have been stored in the warehouse that the museum is housed in
- experimenting with chemical reactions using bicarbonate of soda, vinegar and food colouring to create 1960s inspired colours – linking to our New Port New City gallery where photographs of the Beatles are on display
- experimenting with diverse materials such as apple sauce, shaving foam and food colouring to recreate the river Thames.



AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

Families with children under five are one of the Museum of London Docklands' main audiences. It is therefore important for us to provide a varied programme of events which can attract new families and maintain engagement with existing ones. Messy play sessions allow us to provide multisensory learning experiences for our youngest visitors and promote the museum as a destination for families with under 5s. Messy play also encourages session leaders to interpret our collection in new and creative ways. These sessions provide opportunities for families to engage in messy play if they are unlikely or unable to do so at home. We aim to offer families a safe space to experiment with messy play.

For our audience

Messy play can also help to develop children's motor skills, mathematical/measuring skills and confidence to experiment with new things. According to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the sensory experience of mark making in damp materials aids physical development particularly between the ages of eight and 20 months. Messy/sensory play gives children the opportunity to explore unusual materials, colour, texture, space and mixing different media. It can also be used as an activity which encourages children to express their observations and experiences verbally, when they reach that stage of development. By the age of five children are expected to have reached the following Early Learning Goal:

'They safely use and explore a variety of materials, tools and techniques, experimenting with colour, design, texture, form and function.' (Development Matters, 2012)

At the museum, we find that messy play is also a social activity between parent/carer and child, where families can work closely together and share resources with other families. It is ideally an open-ended activity, which allows families to experiment and explore in their own way. Messy play also has the potential to be more accessible than activities such as storytelling, which may require a certain level of English and understanding.

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

Our messy sessions have contributed to the success and positive reputation of the early years programme by encouraging families to return again and again. The sessions are usually fully booked with both regular and new families. Providing sessions which are tailored to under 5s and their parents and carers, such as messy play, has allowed the museum to become known as a safe and stimulating place for this audience and encouraged families to feel more comfortable within a museum setting.

The success of these sessions has encouraged us to run messy play drop-in sessions with larger numbers of participants at family festivals and during half term holidays. They have also motivated us to use ordinary materials in unusual ways, for example, recycled paper can be transformed in to soil or snow. Due to the nature of these activities, we are limited in the museum spaces that we can use and so must plan accordingly. We also have to ensure all materials are appropriate and safe to use.

For our audience

These sessions are extremely popular with our under 5s audience. One of our regular families would even miss a day of nursery in order to attend the messy session. Parents and carers are informed of the materials used in messy play session on booking, so they know what to expect and can prepare. Families have reported that knowing what to expect along with the regular nature of our sessions has helped them to develop a sense of belonging at the museum and within the programme. Families also often tell us how much they appreciate the opportunity to get messy outside of the home. Families have fed back that:

‘These sessions are great for my baby’s development and a great way of bonding as well.’

‘We love the messy sessions because we can try new things we can’t try at home.’

The museum setting is valued by our families and seen as an important context for the messy sessions. Families have told us that they value the variety of sessions on offer and the expertise of those delivering sessions.

LESSONS LEARNT

Inform parents prior to the session, if possible, of the materials you will be using, in case of any allergies – we do this via email. We also encourage them to bring a change of clothes or wear appropriate clothing. We try to use safe ingredients and materials that are unlikely to cause allergies eg gluten free flour. For the babies, we use edible ingredients, eg yogurt and food colouring for painting. The packaging from all materials is available for parents to view on the day.

TOP TIP

Encourage families to get messy and explain why it is important. We created a [handout](#) to give to parents when they attend the sessions. Prompt parents and carers to talk to the children about the materials they are using, the things they can do with them and the stories they might tell.



BUDGET

We have a budget of £150 per month for materials to cover all weekly baby and toddler sessions, a small proportion of which is used for the messy sessions.

FUNDING

The early years programme is funded by Arts Council England.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Don't forget to see our [top tips for messy play!](#)

This case study was written by Zoe Culley, Early Years Educator at the Museum of London.

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