



Museums as spaces for curiosity and conversations

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We would rarely question whether museums are appropriate places for adults, or school-aged children. We see and hear them engaging with our buildings, collections and stories. It's easy to see they are learning. But what about children under five? What can they get from visiting museums? Can you be too young for museums?

WHO ARE CHILDREN UNDER FIVE?

To answer this question, we need to understand what children under five are capable of. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework provides a very helpful insight.

The EYFS is the curriculum for children 0-5. It is more flexible than the school curriculum, being mainly skills based and emphasising learning through play. It is based on long-term research into the most effective ways for young children to learn, so is useful for those new to thinking about catering for pre-school children.

The EYFS rests on four principles, which underwrite all early years practice. That:

- children are individuals, with their own needs
- effective learning is achieved through positive relationships
- to learn well, children need enabling environments
- whilst children learn holistically, their journeys can be mapped across areas of development.

Children under five develop at their own speed. However, the learning journey they are on has some distinctive features common to most children.

The EYFS describes learning outcomes for different stages in overlapping clusters, to highlight that children do things at different ages. So, under each area of development, the framework lists outcomes for children from birth to 11 months, then 8 to 20 months, 16 to 26 months etc.

The implications for museums:

- when planning activities for children under five, we need to consider them not as one 'block' but as a range of ages and stages of development
- the EYFS outcomes document can give us a good idea of what these stages are
- one way is to cluster the six stages used by the EYFS into babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers
- many museums have programmes targeted at these different age groups.

HOW DO CHILDREN UNDER FIVE LEARN?

The processes of learning for children under five are the same as for older children and adults. It may not look the same, but the emotional, cognitive and neural processes at work are very similar.

Everything is new to us when we are in the early years of life. We have a stronger need to explore, to identify and to make sense of things through connecting them. Young children are capable of having a very short concentration span and also doing the same thing over and over again.

As adults, we're often familiar with the way young children develop physically, from sitting, to crawling, to walking and from large-scale physical movements to fine motor control. We are perhaps not as familiar with how children's thinking is developing, or how their brains are growing.

First-hand experiences help our brains to grow. We need them to develop our cognitive thinking, our emotional development and our sense of ourselves. Curiosity makes us seek out those experiences and positive experiences make us more confident and curious.

The implications for museums:

- when planning activities, we should build in as many first-hand experiences as possible: opportunities to explore, experiment and try things out
- having plenty of resources that can be used in a wide variety of ways will cater for those with short attention spans
- it's worth investing in some popular play items as they will get used time and again. Children may come specifically for a particular play experience or favourite object.
- we can use the idea of encouraging curiosity in planning both displays and programmes.

EFFECTIVE EARLY LEARNING

Children can be strong and competent learners but they need the right kind of experiences to develop their thinking. We need to create activities and environments that encourage high quality early learning.

The key processes for effective early learning are:

- social or collaborative learning
- active learning
- learning through play.

Museums can be great places for all of these types of learning.

Social learning: chatting and learning together in museums

Language and interaction is central to early learning. Adults can help contextualise and frame shared experiences by helping children name new ideas, things or sensations, by making links to children's prior knowledge and by asking and answering questions. Adults can model thinking and learning skills. Together children and adults can build their own family narrative: a set of understandings about the world around them and their own relationships. Encountering new things in museums can prompt these new conversations. Museum programmes can also be great ways for pre-school children to meet and gain socialisation skills. Younger children will often imitate each other, whilst slightly older children communicate and can even form friendships.

Active learning in museums

Active learning does not mean physically active. Active learning happens through first-hand experiences, where the learner decides what they want to find out and how. The best active learning experiences are real (multi-sensory and engaging with authentic objects or environments) and open to choice, either in how a situation is explored and resolved or in what is produced. Decision making in learning is another great way to prompt conversations. Families making decisions and explaining their thinking to each other is a natural form of 'sustained shared thinking', which research has shown to be a key way young children develop their metacognition (thinking about thinking).

Learning through play

Play is a form of active learning. It's immersive and engaging and in the control of those playing, even if there are rules. We know how important play is to young children. A child's right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, we don't always recognise the learning value of play. Instead we may see play as what younger children do because they're too young for proper lessons.

Educational psychologists and theorists have identified different models of play. Some useful categories include:

- Exploratory play
- Pretend play
- Physical play
- Games with rules

- Construction play

Exploratory, Physical and Construction play enables children to explore the world around them, objects, materials and their own potential. Pretend play develops symbolic and abstract thinking and allows children to explore emotions, language, self-expression and social skills. Games with rules encourage self-regulation and executive function, ie working memory, mental flexibility and self-control. Play is a key development route for all these ways of thinking.

The implications for museums:

- Family conversations can be learning conversations
 - When we set a trail, choose things to find that will spark discussions. Could there be something familiar, exciting, humorous or out of place where families are looking?
 - In activities, ask open-ended questions
 - In led sessions, give families time to talk and chances to make decisions, solve problems and build their ideas together
- Active learning helps children develop 'agency' and strong learning dispositions. Agency is where children have their own thoughts and feel confident enough to act on them
 - We need to provide resources and 'loose parts' for this and not just paper and pencils
 - Real objects can give children real reasons to explore
 - Let's check we're not asking children always to just look, even when they're exploring
- Playful learning can involve adults or just children
 - When we plan for play we need to allow for children to play alone, together or with their family adults
 - Let's offer different types of play, not just jigsaws and dressing up. As an example, children could explore an idea like windows through exploratory play (different shapes and colours of things to look through), pretend play (pretending to clean windows with overalls, buckets and squeegees), physical play (an 'assault course' of different shaped window frames), games with rules (window snap or a board game where you collect panes for your leaded window) or construction play (build a house and add the windows)

WHAT CAN YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN?

Although young children's learning is often skills based, there is always some conceptual content. This needs careful planning, as with any other audience. Early learners start from familiar concepts, building a frame of reference for new ideas.

The implications for museums:

- Don't assume that children can only learn about simple topics

Early Years toolkit

- Pare back concepts to their simplest forms, plan a session on windows or doors, not buildings or homes
- Take one idea and explore it through lots of different activities
- Start with the familiar, then move to the novel. Children may want to return to the familiar again too.

TO CONCLUDE...

Children learn from the moment they are born. They learn most when they get the widest possible range of experiences: sensory, exploratory and playful. They learn best when they can develop their thinking and language through interacting with others. Museums are great places for providing an amazing range of experiences and sparking interesting and new conversations. So, you are never too young to visit a museum, and museums should take pride in the potential they have to support early learning.