

## SENSORY EXPLORERS: WORKING WITH LOCAL FAMILIES TO DEVELOP AN EARLY YEARS RESOURCE

**The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich explores Britain as a maritime nation, covering a broad geographical and temporal range. From contemporary issues facing the Polar Regions, to Tudor and Stuart exploration and encounter, the museum introduces visitors to epic stories of exploration and endeavour that have shaped the world today.**

### SUMMARY

The Family Programme at the National Maritime Museum caters for intergenerational groups with children aged between 0 and 13 years. The programme previously existed as weekly facilitated workshops, including school holiday workshops, character encounters and large-scale cultural events.

The Family Programme is transforming to create a more consistent offer that empowers families by developing a range of self-led visit resources. We have been working with local families to discuss how they want to explore the collections, find out what tools or equipment they need, and to test activities. As part of this process it was identified that the museum was missing a sensory and tactile self-led offer for families. Families saw this approach as being particularly important for early years and families with children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), where a multi-sensory, object-based exploration of the museum was most important.

The idea for a sensory backpack was refined through consultation and testing with local families. Local families were invited through Twitter, Hoop and museum tannoy announcements to participate in a session exploring sensory activities in the museum's galleries. During the consultation session, families were invited to select items that interested them, choosing between binoculars, toy coins, fabrics, soft toys and more. There were also a range of different bags and holdalls to choose from. Once the selections had been made, families were taken into a gallery where they explored the contents and experimented with how each object could be used. Through this process we discovered which items were most popular to use in the galleries (binoculars, magnifying glass) and which objects were of less interest to families (coins, soft toys). We also discovered that families found the messenger bag style to be most functional and useable as children could wear the bag and access its contents without having to take it off. This meant that children were more likely to wear the bag for the full museum journey. Finally, adults also wanted some written guidance to use alongside the kit.

Having selected items to go in the kit, we followed up a month later with a testing session. Families who took part in the consultation were invited back, and new families were invited via Twitter, Hoop and tannoy announcements. Families tested out the kit and all of the items that had been selected, as well as a prototype of written resources that would go with them. It was at this point that the 'Sensory Explorer' name was chosen for the backpack.

From this testing session we refined the format of the written resources. Instead of a booklet, we created separate pages for each activity so that they could be used individually. We also learnt that families wanted specific examples of activities in specific galleries to provide them with ideas before they set off on their own journey of exploration.

This kit is the first step in creating a suite of activities for families to lead their own visits at the museum. The final backpacks are being launched alongside trails, with an additional backpack planned for 2019.

## AIMS AND GOALS

### For our organisation

In 2017-18 the museum engaged with 11,308 family learners. Families with under 5s are regular visitors, in part due to the popular AHOY children's gallery. The number of visiting families (and school groups) with children with SEND has also been growing steadily and we wanted to work with both groups to encourage families to explore the rich content in the museum. In particular, we were aiming to:

- find out what families wanted from the museum and how resources could best suit their needs and reflect their interests
- provide activities and resources to help facilitate family engagement with museum collections
- develop resources in conjunction with the local community
- develop accessible resources to enable first time visitors to engage with the collection with confidence.

### For our audience

- Early years families and families with children with SEND have the opportunity to share their experiences and needs with the museum
- Families have their voices heard
- Families are provided with resources that are relevant and useful to them
- There is a tactile, flexible and hands-on opportunity to facilitate families' engagement with the collection
- Adults and children have the opportunity to explore together, having conversations and sharing the experience as they go
- Families' confidence in using the galleries and, more generally, using museums increases
- Provide an alternative offer to the AHOY gallery and facilitated holiday workshops
- Encourage return visits and a sense of ownership for families over their local museum

## OUTCOMES

### For our organisation

- Five Sensory Explorer kits have been created. These will be available from the Play and Explore trolley. Families will be asked to leave a contact number whilst they borrow them. If the pilot is successful, more will be made available
- Consulted with 22 adults and children from local families and tested with 13, including one family who participated in both consultation and testing
- Developed new relationships with local families
- Gained useful insight into the needs of families that can be transferred to inform other projects
- Perceptions of the museum are beginning to change as families begin to see the museum as open to working with them

The Sensory Explorer kit project also demonstrated that there is a demand for self-led resources, and local families were very keen to be involved in the development process. This collaborative approach to resources is now central to the programme going forward.

## For our audience

- Families who worked with us told us that they felt listened to and felt that their input was valued
- Families are more aware of opportunities to get involved in developing our offer and are positive about working with us in the future on other projects
- Consulting with early years children and those with SEND has resulted in a resource that families with these needs see as relevant and useful
- The Sensory Explorer kits added to the existing offer for early years families, providing an additional offer to AHOY and a part-guided route into the galleries
- Feedback from testing shows the Sensory Explorer kits have increased the accessibility of the galleries and the collection by guiding families through it

We will monitor use of the explorer kits to ensure the aims of the project continue to be reached.

## LESSONS LEARNT

The language we used was important eg calling the backpack a 'sensory backpack' when we recruited families - a lot of interest came from families with a child with SEND.

All families who participated were keen to provide feedback not just about the backpack, but about the struggles they faced during a visit to the museum.

For instance, finding their way around the museum, or feeling unsure about whether they could sit and do an activity in a gallery. We considered all the feedback to make the Sensory Explorer kit accessible for family groups regardless of ability or confidence. This has included briefing the front of house team about the contents of them to ensure they recognise when a family is using one, and can actively encourage them to spend time in a space without worrying about impacting other visitors' experiences. Since consultation, families have remained in touch with the Learning department and often relay their experiences back to us.

We tried a number of ways to get families involved, including posters in our dedicated learning space, flyers, tannoy announcements, Twitter and Hoop. The best response from families outside the museum was via Hoop and Twitter, where specific groups were tagged (for instance Museums Disability Co-operative Network, local Greenwich groups and Kids in Museums). Inside the museum we found tannoy announcements on the day of the sessions were most successful.

Families are all different. Providing a range of items to engage with allows children to find something that appeals to them, and allows them to find their own way to engage with the kit and the museum collection.



# Early Years toolkit



## TOP TIP

Projects like this are a great way to start conversations with your local families. What do they need or want from the museum?

## FUNDING

The kits were funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund as part of the Endeavour Galleries Project at the National Maritime Museum. The project aimed to shift perceptions, make the museum more relevant and useful, embed the museum in the local community and reach out to the national audience.

## BUDGET

£1,980 fee for leading consultation, testing and development  
£300 for materials (testing and for the final five kits)  
Cost per kit: £52

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information contact Katie Cassels at [kcassels@rmg.co.uk](mailto:kcassels@rmg.co.uk)

For more information about the Endeavour Galleries Project, see the Creating a more inclusive museum publication:  
[rmg.co.uk/sites/default/files/creating%20a%20more%20inclusive%20museum.pdf](https://rmg.co.uk/sites/default/files/creating%20a%20more%20inclusive%20museum.pdf)

This case study was written by Katie Cassels, Family Programmes Producer at the National Maritime Museum.

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