



Lessons learnt

This document describes some of the key lessons we have learnt over the nine years of running the early years programme at the Museum of London and Museum of London Docklands.

Some lessons have been driven by audience research findings, some have been down to logistical restraints, and some have been part of the natural experience gained from growing a programme from nothing to engaging over 12,000 people per year.

WORK CLOSELY WITH YOUR VISITOR EXPERIENCE TEAM

One of the most significant lessons we have learnt is the importance of communicating with other departments, in particular Visitor Experience (VE). They welcome visitors when they arrive at the museum and to our activities, so it is crucial that they are well informed. We work very closely with our VE team, from sharing information about our under 5s sessions by attending their morning briefings, to adding information to their weekly staff emails. These are systems they already use for sharing information within their team and we have found it works best if we slot into their ways of communicating, rather than adding another system.

We have also found that training the VE Hosts to deliver some of our sessions, such as under 5s storytelling, and involving them in the development of early years resources, such as gallery trails, means they remain excited about the programme and can see the value in providing sessions for very young children. To further a sense of excitement around the programme, we also encourage involvement from Hosts in other aspects of the under 5s work, for example by acting as an early years ambassador within the VE department.

But it is not always easy to work closely together and we have learnt to recognise and communicate when the different departments have their own priorities that need addressing before any further work can continue. So when we feel it isn't working, it's better to put a pause on activities until both departments can effectively work together to develop and deliver a high quality programme.

BUILD STRONG CONNECTIONS WITH COLLEAGUES AND LEARN FROM OTHERS

We are lucky to have a large learning department, resulting in a wide range of programmes and staff experiences focussing on different strands, eg primary, secondary, special and supplementary schools, families, family festivals, digital learning and more.

We have found that working closely with our colleagues across the team on particular projects is a really effective way to promote and integrate early years learning across our department's different programmes. It also helps to spark creativity and share workloads. In 2016, the Early Years Programme Manager worked closely with the Archaeology Learning Programme Manager to develop and deliver an activity that took place at Latitude Music Festival. It was a fantastic opportunity to combine our knowledge of under 5s with our knowledge of archaeology, to create something that would highlight a particular part of our collection and be appropriate for under 5s as well as older children. The new knowledge gained from this partnership subsequently led to the redevelopment of an existing Foundation Stage session called Dig it!

Through working with our colleagues, we have also discovered the value of programming small-scale activities at larger events, such as festivals and during school holidays, even when there isn't a specific under 5s focus. These types of events have allowed us to engage with new families who up until this point have been unaware of our under 5s offer. These events give us the opportunity to advocate what we do with our general audience. For instance, at the Lord Mayor's Show weekend festival in 2017, we ran a small drop-in activity where families with under 5s could come and re-build London using lots of different types of building materials. Although this was attended by less than 50 people and is small in comparison to the overall festival, which was attended by 2700 people, we met many new families on the day who have since come back to our toddler and baby sessions. Small targeted under 5s events at larger events also means that we can ensure that there is always something on offer for our youngest visitors.

DELIVER SOME SESSIONS YOURSELF

Our early years programme is delivered primarily by freelancers but some sessions are also delivered by museum staff. Delivering sessions ourselves means that we have developed good relationships with our regular families, as well as with freelancers and volunteers supporting the programme. It helps us increase our own knowledge of the museum's collection by discovering new objects and stories to focus our session on. It is also extremely beneficial for our professional development. It keeps our skills sets up to date and means that we can step in to cover or support a session at the last minute.

PLAN ACTIVITIES WITH YOUR FREELANCERS

As mentioned above, our under 5s programme relies heavily on freelancers to deliver our sessions. They range from educators to artists and actors, all with a variety of expertise. We have learnt that putting time aside to plan and prepare together as a group with our key freelancers (we do this once a term) results in higher quality sessions. It has allowed us to combine our creativity and different skills to create brand new ways to interpret our collection for our youngest visitors.

DON'T AVOID DIFFICULT TOPICS THAT MIGHT SEEM CHALLENGING FOR UNDER 5S

At first glance, some of the ideas and issues in our galleries might not appear suitable or seem too difficult to understand for children under five, for example, in our Docklands at War gallery. Over the years we have learnt to approach these galleries and their content in different and more creative ways, rather than avoid them. For instance, a recent theme for half term activities at the Museum of London Docklands was 'change through civil action'.

We chose to approach this by examining how people, in particular volunteers, made a difference during the Second World War, eg the work of fire brigade volunteers during the war effort resulted in new laws around the handling of fires, and how victory gardeners grew food so that no one would go hungry.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO TAKE RISKS AND TRY SOMETHING NEW

We have run a successful early years programme for over nine years and our regular and weekly baby and toddler sessions are always over-subscribed. But we have learnt the importance of not just sticking to the tried and tested. In recent years we have taken more risks and tried new things which have challenged us, as well as the families attending the sessions. New types of activities we have tried include:

- under 5s shows, including pirate and archaeology themes
- dance sessions
- a two-day 'Toddler Takeover' weekend festival
- sensory rooms
- archaeology activities at Latitude Music festival.

Some of these activities didn't go to plan and some surprised us. Dance sessions proved particularly popular with our audience and we were surprised by how easy it was for us to find stories or objects that could be incorporated into a dance session. Our Toddler Takeover drew in much larger numbers than we had anticipated and we now know to programme activities that can accommodate much larger numbers of families if we run a similar event in the future. All of these activities resulted in us learning more about our programme, our visitors and our museum.

INCLUDE OBJECT HANDLING

During our sessions we have observed that families gain a lot from being able to get up close to objects from the museum's collection, and that this opens up discussions between adult and child. For instance, whilst handling a conch shell, a parent started to talk to their child about their trip to the beach and the shells that they had seen. Unfortunately, many of the objects in our handling collection are not suitable for handling by under 5s - some pose risks due to sharp edges, while some are fragile and require a more gentle touch. We have developed an alternative to traditional object handling, where we only showcase one or two objects at once. We purchased a light box to display the objects in an inviting way, but also to allow children to get up close without touching them.

BUILD, NURTURE AND MAINTAIN PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES, BUT BE AWARE OF THEIR INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

We have found that working with our local community can be very rewarding and beneficial for everyone involved. Whilst planning our Toddler Takeover festival, we consulted regular families about what themes and activities we should include in the festival. This gave them a feeling of ownership and us a good base to start planning something that families really wanted and would enjoy.

Early Years toolkit

However, we have also learnt that not every group is the same and that it is extremely important to consider the individual needs of each group we work with. During our Toddler Takeover festival, we also worked with a local children's centre to develop an activity that would take place on the weekend of the festival. Although the children's centre had a long-standing relationship with the museum and had participated in projects previously, families who took part in the project told us that they felt that they did not have enough time to become familiar with the museum on the day of the festival, they felt overwhelmed and required more support than we had planned for. This was important learning for us and we will approach similar events differently next time. The families also said that they really enjoyed project work, where they developed their own story and props with our storyteller, and that they also enjoyed their visit to the museum prior to the festival weekend.