

Turning museums into learning environments for young children

Many museums today market themselves as places for families. With government supporting the learning culture and stressing the role that family learning plays in this, it is hardly surprising to see funding bids that talk about families as target audiences. Why then do so many families still find museums inappropriate to their needs? Part of the reason lies in a lack of understanding of how families learn together. This is understandable since work on family learning is relatively rare. Another factor is a misunderstanding of what families are and what they like to do. This is less excusable. Many museums have taken on the rhetoric of a target audience but have not yet grasped that this means being specific about the visitors you will cater for and being realistic about those visitor's needs. Where museums have targeted children they often appear to be thinking of some mythical "average" child, usually around 10 years old. This is not a true picture of family visitors.

Families in museums

There are no national statistics, but families visiting museums tend to be a mixture of one or more adults (sometimes parents, grandparents, a parent and a friend and so on) and one or more children. Whilst the children may include siblings, step siblings or friends they are usually not all the same age and many include children under 7. Teenagers rarely visit museums, with or without family adults. The Harris report "Children an audience for museums and galleries" (commissioned by the MGC in 1997) found that children aged between 7 and 11, who visited museums, frequently had younger siblings with them and identified this as a major cause of frustration for families. As one parent put it:

"You learn from your mistakes but sometimes you've got a younger one and you have to take them along with you."

To create learning environments for families therefore, means creating exhibitions that provide for the needs of all family members, including children under 7.

There are other compelling reasons for providing for this audience:

- they represent the cradle end of from the cradle to the grave lifelong learning
- they have fewer things competing for their time (too young for Brownies or serious sport addiction)
- where they are members of socially excluded groups, they are likely to be less embedded in the factors that cause the exclusion than their related adults

Making museums more child friendly

Museums are not intrinsically unfriendly places for children. Children can be fascinated by objects from the past and delighted by the space and feel of new environments. Museums do not need to turn themselves into soft play areas in order to meet the needs of young children. There are however some practical implications for museums wanting to attract, or improve their provision for, young children.

Practical implications

Whilst young children can manage with the facilities provided for adults, the struggle may constitute a barrier to learning. It may simply make the parent or carer's experience so stressful that repeat visits are unlikely.

The following is a checklist of things to consider:

Does your museum provide for:

- buggies

These are not only used to transport children, but all the necessary equipment that families carry with them. Will visitors have to carry buggies up stairs? Is there space to manoeuvre buggies around exhibitions? Can children in buggies see anything? Is there safe space to leave buggies if families want to?

- toilets

Child size toilets allow young children to be independent. Consider children needing to reach hand basins and paper towels also. Can visitors use then toilets with buggies? Can they change nappies in both men's and women's toilets?

- family eating

If your museum is large enough and you want to encourage a longer length of visit, eating facilities are important. Is there a picnic space? Does the cafe provide child friendly food and drink, half portions etc.? Can children drink their own drinks in the cafe? Can buggies be accommodated? Does the cafe have high chairs? Is there a baby feeding room or bottle warming facility?

- physical access to exhibits

An average three year old is around 1 metre tall. Can children under 7 see exhibits? Can they share the same view of them that their family adults get? Can they reach and manipulate controls? Do any cases have sharp corners at toddler eye height? Is there any way they can do anything other than just look? Do adults have to continually pick up young children so that they can join in?

To segregate or integrate?

Whilst in exhibition terms this issue only applies to new projects that have the option of creating a discreet section for young children, it highlights the issues surrounding family learning that all museums face. There are benefits to both approaches.

Segregating young children into a dedicated area, workshop or storytelling session has the advantages that:

- the provision can be really well targeted
- children can often be more independent in something that is totally age appropriate
- parents and carers can stand back a little

It can never however address the needs of children in the rest of the museum. Hence their families will either not go there and the family experience of the museum becomes solely a visit to the storytelling, or, more likely, they will attempt to visit the rest of the museum and the younger child will be frustrated and end the visit prematurely. What's more museums who provide to some extent for younger children and then fail to carry that provision through to other spaces run the risk of disparagement due to raised expectations.

Whether separate events or exhibitions are provided or not, consideration should be given to the needs of young children throughout exhibitions which museums expect family groups to visit. Hence the Challenge of Materials gallery at the Science Museum, London uses a combination of simple activities (hands in different materials to touch) aimed at young children, elements of exhibits incorporated for younger family members, glass cases that go right down to the floor and objects that are likely to connect to young children's experiences to engage young children as they accompany their families through the exhibition. The gallery is not a space for young children but seeks to provide learning experiences at a range of levels.

What is a common experience of museums and galleries attempting to provide experiences for young children, integrated with adult exhibits, is that adults use the children's exhibits too. Walsall Art Gallery and Museum found that adults accompanying children to the Start exhibition were just as involved with the exhibits as the children were.

Intellectual implications

Although young children may manage with adult practical facilities they will not manage with adult content or interpretation. Creating a learning environment that is suitable for children under 7 is not just a matter of putting everything on shorter legs. It is not, however, necessarily a matter of providing a totally separate experience via a plastic table and some jigsaws.

The key to keeping young children interested is variety. Since they are individuals with distinct learning preferences, variety will also allow a range of learning styles to be covered. Specific activities need to spring from the content the exhibition is trying to cover but a general principle would be to base activities on formats that

children are already familiar with and use this familiarity to launch them into the unknown. So a set of dolls to dress may look invitingly familiar, yet if the clothes are period replicas that can be seen in the cases, children will engage with the novel. Children under 7 learn predominantly through play, so a play based approach drawing from many different kinds of play, is the most appropriate. Children also appreciate a sensory approach so opportunities to hear, touch and even smell or taste help their learning.

Often the key to object based exhibitions is child friendly interpretation. The challenge is to interpret the collections to an audience who don't read text and who want to be active in their learning. The secret weapon that museums have to meet this challenge is the adults who always come with children under 7. Not only do young children never visit exhibitions alone, the adults accompanying them usually see themselves as facilitators of the child's experience. They want to be involved in the child's learning and they have the unique knowledge of the child's prior knowledge and interests with which they can connect.

The challenge then becomes two pronged:

- how to provide activity (mental or physical) for the child
- how to empower the adult as interpreter

Providing activity can involve:

- creating specific exhibits for children
- designing exhibits (object displays, computers or interactives) to work as family exhibits, both in terms of content and physical access
- providing family activities at certain points or to be carried around e.g. the family back packs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- providing a trail of suitable exhibits, for example the Buggy Trail being developed by the Norwich Museums Service

In interpretation, labels may still be the answer, but labels aimed at adults as mediators.

A research project in San Jose, US, showed that altering the position and wording of labels can dramatically affect both the incidence of adult-child spoken interaction and the type of talk that is going on. Adults used the labels to help them to make sense of the exhibits for their children and to focus their questions on the point of the exhibits.

In general, labels aimed at adults should be located at around eye height in the place where the interaction takes place. Seeing a number next to an object or activity and going elsewhere to join that number to information is unlikely to be successful. The information given should help adults answer questions children

are likely to ask and prompt them to make connections to children's previous experiences.

Labels aimed at the children themselves should consider the use of diagrams, line drawings or cartoons such as those used in the temporary exhibition on windmills at the Great Yarmouth Museum in 1997. Single words may be appropriate but even a line of text is unlikely to be read.

Conclusion

There is nothing intrinsic to museums that makes them unsuitable as learning environments for children under 7. Indeed many children under 7 already visit museums as part of family groups and some in school and pre-school groups. Their experience is often unsatisfactory however because their learning needs have not been fully considered. Not all museums will be suitable or interesting for young children. For those museums who would like to provide for these young visitors a good starting point is to send staff round with some young families to get a visitor's eye view of what the museum has to offer. You will soon be able to see where the potential lies in your exhibitions and where any problems exist.

Jo Graham runs her own company Learning Unlimited which advises on creating learning environments, particularly focusing on children under 7.