

Museums and children under 2

The Museum of London and Museum of London Docklands are frequently approached to share their experience and understanding in providing for very young children in museums.

The Museum of London Docklands was amongst the first to establish provision for children 2 and under. Sessions for babies were piloted at the Museum in 2007. In the last 4 years, the provision has developed dramatically. Weekly sessions are now part of the core provision for families at both museums, holiday and weekend programming is inclusive of children under 2, new galleries at the Museum of London were designed to include families with under 5s and the audience profile has shifted in response.

In Spring 2012, the Museum commissioned an independent evaluation of their provision for children under 2. The following pages capture the 10 key elements of effective practice that were identified through the study and give some top tips from the Museum's experience.

1 a safe and comfortable space

- families need to feel confident and comfortable to participate: the space is a key component in this
- sessions use learning spaces that can be closed to the general public and where noisy and messy activities can take place
- sessions use enclosed or semi-enclosed gallery spaces where a group can gather together, e.g. a corner
- sessions provide cushions and rugs to make spaces more comfortable and demarcated

2 well organised logistics

- booking for sessions is important to enable numbers to be controlled. It also gives an opportunity for getting contact details for families so you can keep in touch. The Museum sessions are over-subscribed and the booking system is changing in response. Booking 2 days in advance by phone has been very popular with parents. Having a regular weekly session enables parents to build sessions into weekly routines
- arrival and sign in is important to get right. The Museum uses signing in to greet families, gives out stickers with family adult and child's name on and has free play at the beginning of sessions because families don't all arrive at the same time
- signposting where the session is avoids frustration. Sometimes this involves extra Learning staff in the Museum, which may not always be possible. Designing some colourful signs to point the way is one of this report's recommendations for the Museum
- it is important to have space for families to park buggies. The Museum always designates a space even if that is a corner in the gallery
- choice of activity is central to success with under 2s and this means lots of resources. The Museum has boxes and trolleys for transporting resources to the session space. The group leader gets help from other staff to transport and clear away resources



3 an enthusiastic and caring session leader

- to encourage family adults to actively participate, session leaders are extremely confident, enthusiastic and engaging
- session leaders understand babies and children's needs and are at ease with families needing to breastfeed, put children to sleep or move around within an activity
- session leaders establish an informal, easy familiarity, using their own first names, using family adult and children's names and getting to know individual likes and dislikes, interests and motivations

4 age appropriate activities

- the Museum began offering session for under 5s, but found that most children were under 3. Even within that age group, the babies clearly had different needs to the slightly older children. By splitting the sessions between babies (sitting to walking) and under 5s the Museum is able to offer much more tailored activities
- if the activity is too difficult for children, parents will tend to feel they have to do it for them and children may lose interest. Too easy and parents disengage. In either case, the collaborative learning, curiosity and communication has been lost. It is difficult to find activities that enable children and adults to work together but it is the key to success. The Museum has found this most difficult to achieve in craft sessions
- no single activity is likely to suit all families all the time. Even children of the same age are developmentally very different. One way to cater for this is to provide a range of activities within a sessions, free flow times and where a common activity is happening, make sure it is open-ended so family adults can pitch it to suit their children

5 parents as children's first educators

- the session leaders explicitly tell parents that it is their role to sing for/to their children, do actions, make animal noises, use puppets, explore objects, look at displays, help with sticking etc
- the space is set out to indicate parents stay with their children, i.e. there is never seating round the edge of the circle for adults and resources for children in the middle
- sessions include activities where parents are expected to help their child do something, at which point session leaders come round and ask parents about it or join in and model new ideas

6 songs, actions and rhymes

- session leaders and parents agree that songs and rhymes are a really important ingredient. They get family adults involved, children can join in at any level and they establish an informal atmosphere
- it's important to offer as many ways as possible for families to communicate verbally and non-verbally
- using well-known songs and rhymes helps participation and can provide a vital familiar element that builds confidence and connects to children's existing knowledge
- well-known tunes can have new words added as a way to introduce new ideas or vocabulary
- songs can introduce difficult ideas more easily, e.g. the Museum used a simple Nigerian song, that was very catchy and had great whole body actions, to think about different communities in London. It was so catchy, family adults were singing it leaving the session and four asked the Museum for the lyrics the next week
- songs are great ways to start and end sessions. The Museum uses a "hello" song with children's names in to start baby sessions which really engages all the babies

7 music and mess

- the most highly valued activities for family adults are ones they feel they can't get normally, either because they wouldn't have thought of them or because they don't have the space or resources. The Museum's messy activities are very popular, e.g. not just playing with home made playdough but making it from flour and water too
- even glue sticks and scissors may not be something young children have access to at home
- consider what kind of activity families might not normally be able to do. The Museum of London Docklands has a gravel and water exhibit and many parents value this highly as they live in flats and don't have access to sand and water play
- the Museum's music sessions were not observed as part of this study but were mentioned by parents as being exciting and different. They are led by a musician and the feedback was that seeing instruments being played was inspiring for toddlers

8 up close with objects

- family adults may be attracted to Museum sessions by age appropriate songs and resources but one of the things that they feel makes sessions special and successful is getting up close to objects and exploring the building and displays. The Museum has a monthly rota of sessions, one of which is gallery based (the others are messy, music and make it). One Dad said he'd like to go to the galleries every week while another Mum said she'd like to tie more closely into the things on display
- for babies, using a gallery space and transforming it into a baby-friendly area helps families feel confident. Incorporating a brief session of gallery exploring helps family adults engage with nearby displays. For this to work well, displays need to have objects that have some level of familiarity, so that family adults can talk about them. Hiding things around the space so that babies can help "find them" worked well, e.g. small plastic frogs were placed around an area
- the toddler Gallery session included a handling table with objects and their modern equivalent for families to explore, torches and coloured acetate to explore in the gallery while singing London's burning and a simple sheet with four pictures of objects to find and stickers to put on them once found. These activities worked best with children closer to 2, who benefitted from meeting the same objects in different contexts

9 time and space to socialise

- whilst a strength of the sessions is that parents are focused on their children, they and children also benefit from the chance to socialise with other families. Providing free flow activities at the beginning and end of sessions gives some of this time
- the Museum of London Docklands has a separate interactive space called Mudlarks in which they provide extra toys and resources on Monday morning. This space is then reserved for families, which provides further chances to socialise around the led parts of sessions
- in both museums the café is a crucial place for families to socialise before and after sessions. The cafes are family friendly and many families meet with friends there during the week. Museums without cafes could consider providing refreshments as part of sessions

10 something to take away

- the Museum has found that making activities work best when families make something to wear or play with in the Museum and/or to take home
- songs and rhymes are the easiest thing to "give" to families and help keep the connection till the next session
- parents interviewed mentioned a number of things they had taken home and continued to use, e.g. the playdough and a simple hobby horse. They were keen to be able to make these again when they finally "fell to bits" so putting instructions on a sheet or online is a good idea