

**Jo Graham welcomes a focus on early intervention but urges that we do not overlook the role of museums and heritage sector as safe spaces to support family learning.**



### **The Softer Side of Early intervention**

The policy wind is blowing in the direction of early intervention. Whilst there may be discussions around how to afford it at a time of deficit reduction, when Local Authorities are closing Children's Centres and removing funding from parenting services, all the rhetoric is firmly pointing towards early intervention driving policy decisions.

Whether it is Iain Duncan Smith's principled endorsement:

"Getting Early Intervention right is crucial to breaking the inter-generational cycle of many of the social problems Britain is facing. By improving outcomes for children who have had a difficult start in life we can help them to meet their hopes and ambitions.

or the logical pragmatism of long-term savings expounded by ministers such as Oliver Letwin:

The great power of Graham (Allen)'s work is that it vividly illustrates the need to put more of our effort into solving problems early and cheaply, instead of spending vast sums trying (often vainly) to cure them later. Whether you measure this in terms of human happiness or in terms of taxpayer value, earlier is better."

It is clear that senior government figures are being won over by the findings of the Allen Report. But what shape will this new-look early intervention take? With money tight and services more targeted will early intervention necessarily become more focused, more formalised, more measured? In targeting, will we adopt a deficit model of parenting where families take part in programmes that look alarmingly like lessons or counselling sessions,

where genuine intergenerational communication is difficult to achieve and family agency suffers even if other positive outcomes are achieved?

'*Grasping the Nettle*', C4EO's practice based report on early intervention, highlights the characteristics of effective provision, calling them the five golden threads. Although they stress all five need to form the foundation of policy, they state:

Of all the potential areas for intervention, it is in the combination of early years development, including language and communication skills, and parenting support that the most significant impact could be made."

This is the arena in which museums and heritage have the potential to make a huge contribution. Museums have not been at the forefront of strategic thinking when it comes to envisioning family support services. They rarely offer formal programmes for under 5s, tend to have hard-edged, quite adult environments and, with the exception of the Science and Natural History Museums, still aren't always seen as "family destinations".

But museums can support the three golden threads that sit firmly within the key area of intervention identified by C4EO: the best start in life, language for life and engaging parents. What's more they do it in a "soft" way, providing genuine reasons to communicate, shared intergenerational experiences that underwrite family narratives and independent activities that give families agency to follow their own interest, spend as much or little time as they want, bring their own experiences to bear and leave and come back when they want to.

Interesting work to engage parents with their young children has taken place in a number of museums across the UK. In Stoke, the Potteries Museum worked with Stoke Speaks Out and Sure Start to develop their wildlife gallery into a communication-friendly space for families with young children. Whilst the museum does run staff-led events from time to time, most of the Museum experience is self-managed. Comfortable seating close to activities prolongs adult-child interaction. Games and toys that link directly to artefacts in the cases prompt playful communication and knowledge sharing.

The relatively simple but thoughtful set of changes made by the Museum has seen the number of families using the space increase by 51% in the first year. The length of time they spend there increased significantly as did the number and length of conversations. What's more the social profile of families using the Museum (as evidence by postcodes) has shifted with a much higher proportion of local families from areas facing deprivation visiting.

In the South West an exploratory research project following families in six museums across the region concluded that with the right playful equipment to hand and an organisational environment in which families feel they have permission to explore and play, almost all family adults could engage with their under 5s to explore the museums' displays. What's more, arming children with torches, magnifying glasses or binoculars empowered them to initiate activity and prompted family adults to fall in line, following children's lead and providing a narrative for the exploration.

Of course each family did this at their own level and in their own way. The research found that families who would not usually use museums did not always feel comfortable and confident to explore the space or use resources on their first visit. Because this was a funded programme however subsequent visits were able to familiarity and as confidence grew so did communication. At the end of the project, all families were using the same resources. All that parents from disadvantaged areas needed was the time and support to access what can be a universal service.

Work in Manchester reflects similar findings. There they are extending their innovative work with 3-5 year olds to children 0-2, resulting in the "Culturebaby" conference in November to explore museums, policy and practice in the context of early intervention.

**Just as the logic of early intervention versus late seems irrefutable, so it seems logical that encouraging families to explore intriguing places together in a carefully supported but totally informal way should offer a growth in confidence, in relationships, in communication , in curiosity and in understanding.** After all this is what many families who already feel comfortable using museums take away from their visits.

**What's more, exploring the past as a family enables parents to be experts, gives children insights into their family's history and enables them to see their parents as individuals with lives of their own.**

Unfortunately not all museums offer the best environment to support this kind of exploration and the museum sector has not been the focus of much research into family interactions with young children. The potential hinted at in the South West study therefore is not well evidenced. But the project did show that parents have the capability to engage with their children and develop meaningful conversations, even sustained shared thinking on occasion.

**Rather than reducing cultural services therefore, perhaps there is a case for Local Authorities in particular to take a fresh look at their museums. Can they be better utilised as part of Family Learning?** Can they offer supported exploration as part of parenting support? Could they provide communication-friendly spaces, promoted as social, free-choice weekend destinations through schools and health services? Could their museum services work more closely with other agencies to encourage families to explore their own stories? Can we harness the power of heritage to help families build a sense of who they are and how they belong? If heritage becomes part of early intervention could we help children and families feel more "rooted" as they face the difficulties of adolescence?

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