

Paint and Custard:

Parent and Child Bonding through Creativity

Background

The Holburne is an independent art museum in Bath. At its heart is the collection of Sir William Holburne (1793-1874) which has been added to significantly and includes porcelain, silver, bronzes, and portraits. The museum also has a lively programme of exhibitions and contemporary art installations. The museum's vision is "Changing Lives Through Art".



Project

The museum has been running creative Early Years sessions for fifteen years – starting with one monthly session and now five sessions per week in term time. They are designed for different age groups: *Arty Babies* for parents of pre-crawlers, *Yearlings* for 12 to 24 months and *Toddlealongs* for 2–5 years. Children mostly attend with a parent, but some are accompanied by another relative or a childminder. This case study explores the unexpected outcomes of the sessions and shares some of the practical lessons that we have learned that can be applied to similar groups.

Approach

The sessions are run by Chrissie Weltike, a highly experienced Early Years practitioner with a background in nursery education. They take place in the cosy Gardener's Lodge, in the adjacent Sydney Gardens and offer a mix of song, storytelling and creative, sensory activities inspired by the museum collection, exhibitions, grounds, and the seasons. The availability of the Lodge, leased from the Council, enables us to run far more sessions than would be possible in our main Learning Space. Each session lasts 1.5 hours, with spaces for between ten and twelve children plus accompanying adults, depending on the group. We charge for the sessions in order to cover the costs of the practitioner, materials and refreshments.

Parents tend to be people who visited museums and art galleries before they had children and are attracted to the groups because of the setting. They often perceived the Holburne as an adult space but seeing the collection through a child's eyes enriches and broadens their experience. Many of the parents are professionals working in the health sector, education or media. Whilst not a natural target for a socially-engaged museum like the Holburne, they too have needed what the sessions help address. This is not something that we had anticipated; groups that were initially just about art have become about parents' wellbeing too – as discussed ahead.

Many of the parents lack confidence in relating to their children. In these collaborative sessions, both parent and child benefit from exploring, playing and making together. Some parents have high expectations of their children but discover that when you're being creative – it's ok to make mistakes. The sessions sometimes involve messy, safe, creative play with sand, clay – and even custard; parents gain the confidence to continue the creativity at home – albeit with more conventional materials such as paint. Sessions in the galleries also help parents to develop skills for exploring museums and other places with their children – independent of the group.

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social networks. Parents have often moved from outside the area and some are suffering from post-natal depression. These friendships can last right from *Arty Babies* to the end of *Toddlealongs* – and beyond.

Obstacles and issues

- It's important to have the same format each time – it re-assures both parent and child.
- If possible, be flexible within that format, e.g. adapt to the weather or an object that a child has brought in.
- Adapt to group dynamics too, e.g. if a group is particularly noisy, more focused activities may be necessary.
- Make the room welcoming and beautiful; we all have to deal with multi-purpose learning spaces in museums but music on arrival, displays of artwork etc. make a big difference.
- Provide nice refreshments for both parents and children if you can.
- When travelling around the museum, make behaviour concerns part of the journey or a story e.g. 'we're walking like mice'.
- The museum spaces are just as important to a child as the collection.
- In the galleries, focus on pattern, form, colour.
- If possible, make links between your collection and the seasons e.g. look at bugs painted on ceramics in the summer – that they may then see outside.



- Ensure that gallery activities are focused e.g. a 'bingo' sheet of objects to find.
- Singing and doing activities in the galleries shows the museum in a different light – both to participants and other visitors.
- Ensure that other visitors are made aware of activities like singing; most love it but give them the option to avoid it!

We are very aware that the group is only accessible to people who can afford to attend and would like to be able to find funding to address this issue. However, we currently have waiting lists for some of the groups and don't have the capacity to run

more sessions. Other factors such as the pending end-of-lease for the building may mean we need to consider different ways of running the groups in future.

Find out more

www.holburne.org

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