

DEVELOPING EARLY YEARS EXHIBITIONS THROUGH OPEN-ENDED PLAY

The Herbert Art Gallery & Museum displays historic collections from the past 5,000 years and has a strong collection of art works from the 16th century to present day. It has been offering early years exhibitions since 2008 when the museum underwent a major redevelopment. The museum won the Kids in Museums Family Friendly Award in 2010 and was shortlisted in 2017.



SUMMARY

A Very Viking Voyage included a Reggio Emilia*-inspired space for 0-4 year olds to explore, whilst exposing them to open-ended experiences and encouraging imagination. The exhibition included:

- structures for climbing and crawling through, promoting physical development within the museum
- loose parts play to empower children's creativity
- noisy objects enabling children to be instigators of playful encounters through music and sound
- activities to develop fine motors skills, including a weaving wall where children could move large, easy to grip pieces of fabric in and out of thick elastic inside a purpose built frame
- an art installation and bold design work, creating a visually stimulating environment.

We also built a buggy park for families to keep their pushchairs in. This was within the exhibition space but sectioned off with temporary walls. This meant the play space did not become overcrowded or hazardous for children. It also provided a space for picnic benches and a bin, which allowed families to have a dedicated snacking area. The exhibition was monitored by our front of house team and supported by volunteers when possible.

We held a family launch event with activities suitable for preschool children and ran three early bird sessions for SEND children and their families, providing a calm environment to play in without the worry of too much noise or crowded spaces.

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

2017's exhibition, A Very Viking Voyage, was developed in-house by the Learning team. The theme of the exhibition linked with the museum's main summer exhibition, Fearsome Craftsmen, on loan from the JORVIK Centre in York. We have a large early years audience, with around 400 visitors taking part in our regular ongoing activities, including storytelling, sensory and messy play each month. The early years exhibitions allow us to widen our audience through access to free, play-based learning opportunities, and wider publicity of these exhibitions attracts families from outside the city.

For our audience

Our free early years exhibitions have become a core part of our offer during the school summer holidays. They are free of charge, in keeping with the accessible nature of the museum, and are designed around open-ended and sensory play. Through our early years approach to the Viking topic we enabled the youngest of children to gain first-hand encounters with a subject that is often seen as too complex for such a young age. Our goal was that the families would ultimately feel comfortable accessing our core programmes.

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

Awareness of our dedicated early years programme has been increased and over 7,000 visitors came to the 2017 exhibition. Our early bird sessions for families with SEND that were delivered as part of the exhibition were not as well attended as we had hoped during term time but our sessions during the summer holidays were fully booked. Two families attending these sessions also booked a future early bird session. Furthermore, the exhibition has raised our profile for early years best practice, resulting in us being invited to speak at a number of events and contribute to publications.

For our audience

Viking themed storytelling and rhymes sessions throughout the summer holidays allowed us to increase our overall offer for early years, which saw a rise in participants taking part in other family activities by 68% compared to the previous year. The family programme at the Herbert is partly charged for and therefore we also saw an increase of 42% for family learning income on the previous year. Whilst this may not be as a direct result of the early years exhibition, from discussions with our visitors over the summer we know many of them chose to visit the Herbert because of the variety of activities available that were suitable for all ages, with many families making repeat visits to us through the summer. One visitor commented that the exhibition was 'brilliant - this is the third year that we've come over from Birmingham for your sensory experience. Just love it - so different to what is on offer elsewhere.'



LESSONS LEARNT

Having staff and volunteers to facilitate these spaces is of the utmost importance but we have been unable to do so in previous years due to lack of funding. The early years exhibition usually runs alongside two larger-scale temporary exhibitions, which are staffed by our front of house team. In 2017 however, we only had one other temporary exhibition, allowing for staff to be allocated to the early years exhibition without any cost implications.

Having the space monitored by front of house staff allows visitors to have someone to turn to for information and help and when working with such a young audience, help is often needed. This could be anything from directing parents/carers to the nearest toilets, to removing damaged play items to keep the space safe or cleaning up puddles of milk. These spaces naturally become messy very quickly and having a member of staff present allows the space to be tidied regularly so new visitors have the same first encounter as those who walked through the doors at opening time. Visitors also feel safe - should any issues arise with rough play or overcrowding, the member of staff can manage these situations immediately.

It also allows you to track visitor numbers accurately - our front of house staff manually record the number of visitors, gender and approximate age range in our data collection folder.

TOP TIP

When using loose parts make sure you have a lot of spares – even strong items get broken, damaged and dirty!

BUDGET

The exhibition had a budget of £4,000 to cover materials, construction, the artist installation, graphic and design work and play items. Additional remaining money from the budget has been used to support the family launch day, activities and some staff costs.



FUNDING

The exhibition is funded through our core budget. In previous years we have received additional external funding and we hope to achieve this again in the future to allow us to work with external artists and enhance the additional activities offered, in particular to support community outreach work.

FURTHER INFORMATION

*For more information about the Reggio Emilia Approach visit:

reggiochildren.it/?lang=en

This case study was written by Lisa Ford, Learning Officer at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum.

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