

## EARLY YEARS ATELIER AT THE WHITWORTH

**Founded in 1889, the Whitworth reopened in 2015 after being transformed by a £15 million redevelopment project. The museum doubled in size and new spaces were created that embrace the park in which it is located. Part of the University of Manchester, the Whitworth focuses on research and academic collaboration, with learning and engagement teams generating new approaches to working with non-traditional arts audiences.**

### SUMMARY

The Early Years Atelier runs every Monday from 10am to 3pm and is a free, drop-in space for child-led artistic exploration. It's a place where babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers can get messy, play creatively and follow their own interests. Every week, the Atelier is full of materials for children to choose from such as paint or clay one week, to cardboard or sand the next.

The space is inspired by the philosophy of Reggio Emilia, an educational approach that underpins the Whitworth's learning programme as a whole. In Reggio Emilia thinking, the environment is key. It is believed that children should have plenty of natural light, access to the outdoors and space to encourage independent play. Our Atelier provides just that; huge folding doors let light flood into the room and open straight out into a sensory art garden, extending the room and blurring boundaries between the indoors and outdoors.

An Atelierista (or studio assistant) is always on hand to help. Their role is to guide and observe rather than teach. The Atelierista keeps a diary of observations, documenting the learning that they observe in the space. They make notes, take photos and film anything that surprises them, for example, any early language, communication and social interactions taking place.

Here is a snippet from the Atelierista's diary from a session exploring the difference between hard and soft objects. The space was filled with a combination of stones and feathers.

Child: 'Can throw feathers.  
Don't throw stones.'

Artist: 'Why can't you throw  
stones?'

Child: 'Stones are hard and  
feathers are soft.'



## AIMS AND GOALS

The Early Years Atelier was designed with the aim of creating:

### For our organisation

- A free drop-in space for under 5s and their grown-ups
- A complementary activity to other events, such as the oversubscribed Toddler Art Club sessions, a Welly Walk Guide, Picnic Hamper or play in the park, providing families with a full day of activities to choose from
- An initiative to break down the barriers of a pre-booked offer, opening up the programme and gallery to a more diverse audience, and to better represent the local community

### For our audience

- A space to engage visitors with the Whitworth, its art, its building and park through hands-on, child-centred play and exploration of ideas, materials and techniques
- An opportunity to develop confidence, creativity and expression in both children and adults
- A model to connect to, and inform current research methodologies and practice

## OUTCOMES

### For our organisation

- The success of the Atelier has exceeded all expectations. The initial aim was to offer it as a drop-in alternative to the Toddler Art Club sessions. Two years on and the Atelier has overtaken and replaced the popular Toddler Art Club.
- Participants have confirmed that the Atelier provides a focus within a full day visit:

‘We love the Atelier, we come every Monday. With a play in the park and visit to the café we can stay most of the day.’ (Parent, 2017).

- No prior bookings and a drop-in system have provided a noticeable increase in new and diverse audiences (see Lessons Learnt section for examples). During 2016-17 the Atelier engaged 13% more children and adults through hands-on, child-led exploration than the original Toddler Art Club practitioner led sessions.

### For our audience

- Feedback from visitors has told us they prefer the more play based, child-led nature of the Atelier:

‘Most other baby workshops are adult led so it was nice not to be told what to do and for us to have the opportunity to explore for ourselves’ (Parent, 2017)

- Participants have told us that the sessions have developed their confidence, creativity and expression:

‘We loved trying everything and it has given me lots of ideas and the confidence to try things out at home’ (Parent, 2017)



## LESSONS LEARNT

We have learnt that the drop-in, child-led nature of the Atelier works best for our audiences, particularly for:

- those with two or more children who find it difficult to manage a led workshop and prefer a more relaxed, self-directed option
- those where English is not their first language and might find a booking system difficult
- home educator parents and carers who want to take part in social activities with their children
- dads who more frequently seem to prefer the flexibility of a non-bookable session in comparison to mums
- parents and carers with babies who have just begun to walk/very active toddlers who are keen to explore and not sit still
- those who seek opportunities for messy play as they lack the time and space at home.

‘I’ve learnt to be braver with how much I set out in the space. I used to put loads of different things out as I was worried that there wasn’t enough to do but as time has passed my confidence has grown and I let the materials do the work for me. Less is definitely more in this case. I find the children (and adults) tend to be more creative with the materials if there are less of them. The children always surprise me with how they engage with the materials so I always remind myself to have faith in their ability to play and explore.’

Frances, Atelierista

## TOP TIP

Less is more. Be confident that the space, materials and participants will be the right ingredients to encourage communication, creativity and imaginative learning through play.

## BUDGET

The Atelier is free for our visitors. £200 per day for an Atelierista once per week. Less than £10 per week, on average, for materials and resources.

## FUNDING

The early years work at the Whitworth is funded by Arts Council England and the University of Manchester.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

You can see more about the weekly goings on in the Early Years Atelier by visiting our blog: [earlyyearsatelier.wordpress.com](http://earlyyearsatelier.wordpress.com)

Or follow us on Instagram: [@earlyyearswhitworth](https://www.instagram.com/earlyyearswhitworth)

This case study was written by Lucy Turner, Early Years Coordinator at the Whitworth.

