

Welcoming Under 5s: A Review of the 'Let's Talk Museums' Project

About the project

The Let's Talk Museums project created new resources for an Early Years audience in seven very varied museums across Suffolk during 2011. The resources developed are themed loan boxes relevant to the museum collection with the option for a simple supporting site visit. A key feature of the offer was that there was minimal input from museum staff or volunteers for the management and ongoing delivery of the resource to improve the likelihood of its long-term sustainability.

How the resource works

Each museum developed a loans box for use in an Early Years setting and a corresponding museum visit. The boxes supported a pattern of 'child-led' learning and were designed to be used by practitioners in their own settings without any requirement for museum staff to deliver sessions. However, it was also envisaged Early Years groups borrowing the boxes might visit the museum and that museums would therefore make provision for an associated, self-led early years museum visit.

The Loan Boxes

Leiston Long Shop – Mr Garrett's Magnificent Machine Shop

This was a science and maths box focussing on Shape and Size. The most popular item was the toolbox containing real tools. The children used new vocabulary which was recorded at home by the parents. The recorded words were *'Spindle, washer, centimetre, width and length'*. Feedback from children accessing the box by themselves at the Children's Centre indicated that the Mobilo and puppet mouse were the most used and enjoyed resource in the box.

'The parents were quite unsure of going to the museum but we were able to change their minds' Early Years practitioner on a visit to Leiston Long Shop



Museum of East Anglian Life – Farmer Blossie's Fabulous Farm Box

A box based on farming. Overall the practitioners thought the box was good although they felt it was very jumbled and require lots of sorting before an activity can begin. The most used and enjoyed items were: What is the animal called?(really like this); let's find out about pigs (really popular); let's go to the farm (nice with really simple text, ideal) farmer display & finger puppets /story sack.



Moyse's Hall Museum – Moyse's Box of Mysterious Things

The box contains objects themed around 'time'. The museum staff found most successful part of the box is the large dice with images of different objects to find. This worked very well in the gallery and the museum would like more of them to use around the galleries. They used the keys and wheels to make marks. The children tried to construct the arch and discussed colour and size as they did so. They were able to chat about the images of the arches and ordered them into natural and man-made, old and new.

'My favourite bit was watching the children try to use the large metal keys to unlock the pre-school doors...the excitement on their faces was amazing as they worked out the concept of why it wouldn't fit' Early Year Practitioner



Ipswich Museum– Woolly Mammoth's Adventures

The treasure box contains a variety of handling objects from the museum together with explorer's equipment, such as torches and magnifying glasses, a Woolly mammoth toy, mammoth story book and the Ipswich Museum picture book. Photo prompt cards suggest themes to talk about when handling the objects.

'The project has increased staff's confidence working with this age group. It has been really surprising to hear the rich conversations children and adults about the different objects and the level of engagement and wonder among very young children.'



Gainsborough's House – Gainsborough's box of gorgeous things

A well organised box with a wide range of activities relating to exploring art. Most popular have been creating landscape scenes with animals, and the Face It expressions chart which is very helpful for portraiture work and links well with Personal Social and Emotional development. Viewfinders allow children to focus on one little bit of a painting or view at a time. A prism was also added to allow colour and light exploration

The feely box of materials was very successful and the children enjoyed wrapping themselves up in the larger pieces of silk.

National horseracing Museum- A day at the races



The box contains everything you need for a day out at the races. Children at a stay and play session made hobby horses and then 'raced' them and were particularly keen on the dressing up element, spending a long time trying on the silks and the hats. They children also loved the binoculars and magnifying glasses. *'The magnifying glasses help you look closely'*

Lowestoft Museum – Time for T



A box based on a picnic basket, complete with china cups, saucers, napkins and a teddy bear, with supporting literature and story books. The activities covered speaking, listening, writing, mathematics, music, role, play and making.

'They particularly liked the role-play masks, everything associated with having a picnic and the bear'

Early Years in Museums – the wider welcome

A case study: Ipswich Museum: There has been a change in museum culture, welcome and resources in response to the Let's Talk Early Years project which has been significant across most partner museums. This has been most marked at Ipswich Museum who had not previously considered Early Years settings as an audience and didn't usually have such a group visiting.

The progress made by Ipswich Museum provides inspiration and lessons for future provision for Early Years across Suffolk museums. Their example shows that even larger staffed museums can learn and develop a great deal through a small project and by making simple changes. The museum has added 3 new elements to their EY offer, alongside the loan box.

Gallery boxes and self-led sessions

As a response to the Woolly Mammoth box and to provide assistance to EY groups as part of a self-led visit to the museum, three themed gallery boxes have been developed, focussing on different galleries. These contain handling objects, a story book, trail and craft activity and box of magnifying glasses and torches. A mat is put out for a base in the geology gallery. The gallery boxes have given an excellent focus for pre-schools and nurseries visiting the museum and require minimal input for staff. The gallery boxes are £20 for the session.

Gallery Activity Trolley

A general activity trolley, focussing on the under 5s, but used by families (and adults!) of all ages has been added to the museums. Front of House staff say it is really well used and families particularly love the torches, binoculars and animal costumes. Of these, the costumes are the most popular. The trolleys provide lots of opportunity for open ended play. This small addition to the museum has had a larger impact on the culture of the museum and staff are very positive about it, signposting it to visiting families.

Events

As a result of the Let's Talk Museums project, Ipswich museum now put an event in each programme geared for younger visitors (2 – 7 yr olds). Once a year a new Under 5s day event has been established. Last year was Beatrix Potter day (with costumes and activities). Many people attended. This year is giraffes 103rd birthday. This event was emailed to all nurseries and pre-schools in Ipswich. Seven booked to come on the day, with 150 under 5s and 76 adults attending! Under5s are now the museums fastest growing audience.

Caroline Hammer, Learning Manager says "the project has had a massive impact on us. Having Wigwams nursery and watching them really looking and getting excited, totally changed our outlook."

Top tips for Early Years Loans boxes

- Boxes should be easily transportable – if it doesn't fit into the back of a small car or is difficult to lift, then there is too much in it!
- Working with a partner Early Years setting and practitioners ensures content is relevant to the audience as well as to the museum collections.
- Boxes should be well-organised with clear activity ideas for the objects/resources. Sometimes practitioners felt overwhelmed with the amount of objects jumbled together and had to spend time sorting the box before introducing it to children.
- The best outcomes for the children and museums alike are when the loans box is used as a tool for a successful museum visit. This could be by way of an introduction to the museum or as part of the visit.
- Even if the box is just hired, maintaining accurate records of how many children used the box could help with future funding bids.
- The activities and resources developed for the Let's Talk Museums boxes lend themselves very well to become gallery-based activities for families.

Special note: A common problem for museums is getting useful evaluation/feedback from resources – particularly handling boxes. Early Years practitioners and children are used to using the Travelling Ted format, where they record their experiences of borrowing Travelling Ted in a diary. This type of idea can work well as an evaluation tool by adding a character relevant to the loans box/museum and accompanying diary to a resource box. The experiences recorded will act both as evaluation of what activities are well used and enjoyed as well as providing new ideas for future practitioners.