

Communication Friendly Museums





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Foreword

Talking to babies and children is vital to their personal, social and emotional development. It sits at the heart of attachment and stimulates brain development. And it's not hard. Mum says "Your granny had one of those at home" whilst looking at a mangle. Granddad says "Can you feel how smooth the old coin is?" and something amazing is happening. The benefits of talking to babies are long-lasting for the individual, the family and the community. However there is significant evidence to suggest that many parents and carers are unaware of how this simple activity can profoundly benefit their child.

At a national level, organisations like the National Literacy Trust, through the 'Talk to Your Baby' campaign, are trying to get the message across that this simple activity can change lives. In 2008 the Government-commissioned Bercow Review argued strongly for an increased focus on support for the development of speaking, listening and communication skills of children. There are now high expectations that education and health policy and delivery will respond to its recommendations.

However the real difference will be made at the local level – as projects like Stoke Speaks Out are demonstrating. All services that have contact with babies, children and families need to know that they have a vital role in creating communities where adults talk to babies and children in language-rich environments.

It is impossible to overstate the potential of museums in this context. They are echo chambers of the community's memory. In museums the voices of past generations as well as the experience of today can be heard. They are centres of story and identity. They stimulate talk like no other community space. Where else is the potential for intergenerational reminiscing so rich and stimulating? Museums make people chat. They have a unique role in supporting parents, grandparents and carers in talking to their children.



Through this publication and the support of NESTA, museums have an important new tool in developing their approach to supporting babies' and children's early communication skills. The practical examples for developing communication-friendly exhibitions, interpretation and resources will support museums in developing new approaches in tune with the requirements of the Early Years and Foundation Stage Curriculum.

If museums respond creatively to this challenge, they will be positioning themselves as a powerful resource in addressing what is increasingly being recognised as a national priority.

Jonathan Douglas Director National Literacy Trust January 2009



The need for communication friendly spaces

G Communication is the fundamental life skill for the 21st Century. It is central to children's life chances, directly underpinning learning, attainment, friendships and well-being.

Virginia Beardshaw, CEO of 'I CAN'.

Communication is at the centre of our lives. Without good communication skills, children can struggle to make friends, socialise and learn effectively. The consequences of growing up with language delay include low educational attainment and poor job prospects. More fundamentally, we communicate to ensure that our needs are met, to indicate our likes and dislikes, to request information and to refute something, as well as to establish and maintain relationships. The ability to communicate is the basis of our social, economic and emotional wellbeing.

Communicating is a national issue

In 2008 the Government published the Bercow Report into services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs. This Report argued that it is crucially important to raise awareness of the need to regularly communicate with children from the very start and that children should be supported at every stage in their development. Bercow also urged people and agencies to work across traditional boundaries to address children's communication needs.

C Evidence illustrates that there is insufficient understanding of the centrality of speech, language and communication among policy makers and commissioners nationally and locally, professionals and service providers, and sometimes parents and families themselves.

Bercow Report.



Developing good communication skills is now, justifiably, at the heart of Government policy for young children. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) places emphasis on children as skilful and confident communicators, stressing the need to develop language for thinking, as well as language for communication. Communication, Language and Literacy, along with Personal & Social Development, are the only areas of the EYFS on which Local Authorities have a statutory duty to report. Communication has also been a key component in Sure Start initiatives, with Sure Start commissioning 'Communicating Matters' a training programme which helps professionals become more effective in encouraging and supporting children's development as communicators.

The significance of good communication has been carried into the Children's Plan (see www.dcsf.gov.uk) with a pledge 'to increase the skills of the whole early years and school workforce in dealing with children with speech, language and communication needs.' All this demonstrates that the development of communication skills in young children is now recognised as a fundamental issue. All organisations - including museums - are facing the challenge of how best they can respond.

Communicating is a local issue

Local research, often initiated by Speech and Language Therapy Services, has discovered high levels of language delay in pre-school children across the UK. Local Authorities, charged with the duty to report on progress in communication skills, have been keen to support initiatives that support families.

One such example is in Stoke-on-Trent, where research in 2001 indicated that around 70% of children entering nursery had a language delay. These shocking statistics led to the development of a joint initiative called Stoke Speaks Out to tackle the causes of language delay in the city. Partners from education, health and voluntary sectors joined forces to create a long-term vision of 'a city that communicates', where children and young people are able to take full advantage of health, education and employment opportunities. Each agency contributes its expertise to help resolve the underlying issues causing language delay and to improve children's communication skills.

Many other similar examples are taking place across the UK. But where do museums fit in? It is



widely acknowledged that a fundamental purpose of a museum is to communicate and to encourage discussion. But can museums help children develop language skills and support communication between children and adults?

This booklet aims to explore the idea of museums as communication friendly spaces drawing on the experiences of the museums involved in this project.





Developing communication friendly museums

Background

During 2006-08, four museum services - The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery in Stoke-on-Trent, Peterborough Museum & Art Gallery, Worcester Museum & Art Gallery and The New Art Gallery Walsall - took part in a partnership project, funded by NESTA. What makes this project significant is that its central aim was to investigate how collections and their interpretation can be used to nurture communication between babies, young children and their parents. Working with partners, the project came about in direct response to the communication needs in these towns. As would be expected, the changes also helped the museums become more welcoming places for families with young children, especially those who were infrequent visitors.

The project was led by Amanda Heath of Stokeon-Trent Museums Service. It was supported by a NESTA mentor, Jo Graham, who is an Early Years and Museums Advisor. Early in the project, Dr Vicky Cave was commissioned to carry out research to identify barriers to communication within the partner museums and to inform the project planning. Each partner took part in the research, which included baseline studies and extensive observation of visitors. Museum staff also went to other museums to investigate practice and attended training in early years and communication issues.

The inclusion of Stoke Speaks Out, a multiagency partnership focusing on the issues underlying children's language deficits, was crucial in ensuring that project members understood the issues surrounding family communication. Stoke Speaks Out also provided access to groups of 'difficult-to-reach' parents. Following outreach sessions, discussions with visitors and focus groups, gallery improvements were piloted, installed, evaluated and refined.

External evaluation of the project has clearly shown that museums have a key role to play in providing safe, welcoming environments that encourage communication and close family learning.

The projects in brief

The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent

The Potteries Museum focused on the River and Hedgerow display in the Natural History Gallery and the 'Frog Mugs and Cow Creamers' display in the Ceramics Gallery. Following the observational research museum staff consulted with existing Stoke Speaks Out groups and carried out further observational research in the galleries. This led to the changes that are now in place such as comfortable seating close to displays, a special animal puzzle, treasure baskets and a tree that you can go inside. Trails were also introduced to help navigate families to areas and to increase communication about the exhibits.

Peterborough Museum & Art Gallery

At the start of this project, Peterborough had a Mini Museum, a dedicated space for under fives. It was beginning to look 'tired', so it was decided that the best elements should be moved into the galleries so that there was at least one permanent space to play and learn in each gallery. Following recommendations from the research, Peterborough developed a fun Early Years trail where families follow dinosaurs around the galleries. They also introduced boxes containing costumes, puzzles and books, all of which encourage exploration of the galleries, interaction between family members and increase the opportunities for communication.

We've been three times in a week... and there's something different every time.

Parent (quoted after changes).



Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum

The Talking to the Animals project gave Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum an opportunity to recapture the enthusiasm of family visitors for a previous project Big Art for Little People. It came at an important period of change as staff planned how to bring collections and museum users more closely together to support the future of the museum building. Education, Collections and Visitor Services staff have worked together on pilot ideas based on shared observation of how families communicate in the museum. The work has resulted in a much wider use of fragile collections in family activity sessions as well as ongoing changes to the displays that encourage families to share the visit experience together.

The New Art Gallery Walsall

Walsall wanted to revitalise its popular hands on Discovery Gallery to increase opportunities for families to communicate. Significant changes have been made, including the introduction of more appropriate seating and tables, prop bags, a 'beast' for families to play with, puppets, musical instruments, games and costumes, and more activities focusing on developing communication skills, as well as creative and artistic skills. All of the new activities relate directly to nearby art works and aim to focus family discussions on the collections.

If you would like to contact or visit the partners, details can be found at the end of this booklet.



Benefiting from the changes

Museums that took part in the project benefited in a wide range of ways. Developing communication friendly museum spaces:

Increases visitor numbers

G The museum in general is being very well used with increased visitor figures of 51% in 2006-07. In particular school holidays visitor numbers have increased rapidly and evidence indicates that a major factor in rising numbers, family visits and customer satisfaction is the family interactive content...**9**

Museum Manager

Increases dwell time

Visitors with younger children spent more time looking at displays, they explored more of the galleries and interacted more deeply with the exhibits.

G The improvements to the Museum for children to enjoy it more are brilliant. It is so fantastic here now. Thank you so much for all the thoughtful things for the little ones to make it fun for them. **99**

Parent

Gets families talking

The evidence from evaluation showed that changes made through the project have increased the number and length of conversations.





Builds confidence

Adults were more able to support their children's learning in a museum. Families enjoyed their visit more and became more independent in their learning.

G By involving our parent and toddler groups it has empowered parents to have influence over their community environments which has given them in turn confidence and a feeling of being listened to all good for their self-esteem.

Stoke Speaks Out Manager

Attracts more families from a wider range of backgrounds

Changing your interpretation to support communication provides an opportunity to work with local families and gives you something to advertise to draw in new visitors. Following the success of the initial changes, the education team at The Potteries Museum were invited to curate a summer exhibition on nursery rhymes which attracted even more new families.

G The nursery rhyme theme over the holidays has opened up a new environment for us to access parents and families. Families see this as a neutral environment, i.e. not school or a statutory place, so their feedback is good and they have enjoyed the experience.

Museum Learning Officer

Helps your museum become more visitor friendly

Through involving curatorial, technical and Visitor Services staff, the projects have increased visitor understanding across the organisations.

We have become more aware of the impact and importance of quality experience and activity on our visitors. Involvement in this project has inspired us to explore further the family experience in galleries.

Museum Learning Manager

Involves communities

The museums found that local parenting groups and Children's Centres were keen to be involved when they realised that their ideas and opinions would directly influence provision.

Raises your profile locally

The Potteries Museum in Stoke-on-Trent has particularly benefited through working with a local strategic agency like Stoke Speaks Out.

F Partnering in this way will raise the profile of the museum as a valued quality learning environment both for families and for professionals.

Museum Learning Manager

Develops a greater range of partners

The museums demonstrated their role as equal partners in delivering local services to communities, which has since led to them being invited to contribute to other programmes.

G The main thing Stoke Speaks Out has felt from this work is that it has opened up new opportunities for parents and for joint working.

Stoke Speaks Out Manager

Develops and inspires staff

Many of the staff working on the changes have developed skills in areas such as team-building, learning, gallery design, visitor services and evaluation. Staff have been inspired to explore new ways of improving services and working with collections. For example, at The Potteries Museum, Front of House staff were involved from the beginning with the initial creative ideas meeting and assisted with the training day held for the partner museums.

G The project has brought Front of House staff into the decisionmaking role – [they feel a sense of] ownership of the project and hopefully, therefore, there's more longevity. **55**

Member of Museum Staff



How to create communication friendly museums

The following sections of this booklet are designed to provide some practical ideas and advice on how to develop museum spaces to enable families with young children to communicate.

Getting started

Involve other museum staff

Plan your improvements with partners and staff. Work with a broad range of colleagues so that they have a chance to contribute ideas. This will also help everyone understand the thinking behind any changes to interpretation and the museum environment.

C Activities for under fives need to be embedded into the gallery experience, with all museum staff understanding and engaged with the purpose and impact of this provision.

Museum Learning Manager

Learn from others

Look at the experience of other museums and heritage sites, as well as reading literature available from organisations, such as the National Literacy Trust or I CAN. Planning for communication is a good opportunity to consult local organisations or departments you might not have worked with before. It's also a good idea to involve your management as early as possible in the planning to make sure of support.

C We have been able to support this work because we were invited to attend. So many departments only talk to people from their own agency and so much opportunity is lost this way. Think outside the box!

Stoke Speaks Out Manager

Assess your museum for communication

Evaluate your galleries with communication in mind and study children and adults using observation templates. Invite families from Early Years settings in to assess your current provision and to suggest modifications (you can use these contacts again when you have designed prototypes and need to pilot improvements). Activities that encourage young children to communicate need to focus on the things they are really interested in so invest time in watching them in the spaces you are planning to improve, and identify which objects attract and hold their attention.



Make contact

Go out to a Children's Centre, Stay & Play or Toddler Group where parents and carers meet with their children to discuss ideas. You can trial activities to see which ones encourage families to talk together. After a few sessions, when the adults and children are more familiar with you, invite them to come to the museum. Offer incentives if you can, such as free family entry, a goody bag or a discount in the shop or café.

C Testing out the activities was a good way to reach parents and talk to them about the project as many of them had preconceptions about what a museum was like and viewed it as a place they would not feel comfortable taking their young child.

Museum Learning Officer

C The observations at the partner museums, as well as visits to other museums, provide us with detailed information on what stimulates communication between carers and children. This information can be used to improve the boxes and trail, as well as the development of the gallery based activities for families.

Museum Learning Officer

Make people feel comfortable

Tell people what to expect

Families with young children benefit greatly from knowing what is available specifically for them as soon as possible. Staff at the front desk should welcome the group and give out information on arrival. This could be a verbal explanation, a leaflet, trail or activity pack. Publicity material aimed at this audience, such as flyers announcing special events or a section of the website, is equally important. Staff may need specific 'welcoming' training.

Be clear

Good signposting, clear orientation and signalling activities were all found to be successful in initiating and supporting communication between carers and their children. This can be distinct signage, icons to spot or activities in clearly marked containers which target younger audiences. Create a clear 'brand' for activities so that resources have a similar look and feel. This encourages participation from families as they will recognise the identity of the resource as something for them and seek out the next activity.

Help the adults

If carers are unsure what to do, they tend not to interact with their child and they may even move their child on if they themselves feel uncomfortable. You need to provide activities that give the adult a clear role and are intuitive to use. Knowing how they can help and what they can (and cannot) do helps carers relax. They are then more likely to communicate with their child. Clear labelling or trails can help adults know what to say as they engage with their children and the displays.



66 Many parents were worried that their children would break something ...so some were reluctant to let their young children out of their pushchairs.

Member of museum staff

Prompt adults

Prompts for carers can be helpful but should be used carefully. They should not be too prescriptive and should help the carer and child take the initiative. Use open questions and words which suggest activity, such as: 'See if your child is interested in...' and 'Why not try...'. Avoid quiz type questions which only work if you can find the 'right answer'. The New Art Gallery Walsall placed large vinyl text above several artworks to encourage carers to talk to their children about the art.

Provide seating

To promote, support and extend communication, spaces need to be inviting and bring carers and their children close to each other (not separate them). If carers are able to get down to their child's level, they are more likely to communicate with them. Providing cushions, carpet squares, mats or appropriate seating next to the displays encourages families to stay longer, look more closely and talk together. In a relaxing space, children are far more likely to initiate activities and carers are more likely to respond. Put well-lit, comfy seating in the centre of an activity, directly next to the related display. The Potteries Museum has integrated low level domes into padded bench seating. The seating has made the gallery more comfortable and the domes invite families to explore the collections with little need for a written label.

The message to parents is:

Gget down to your child's level and look at him when you are talking to him.

Stoke Speaks Out website.



Think about your space

Be aware of physical spaces

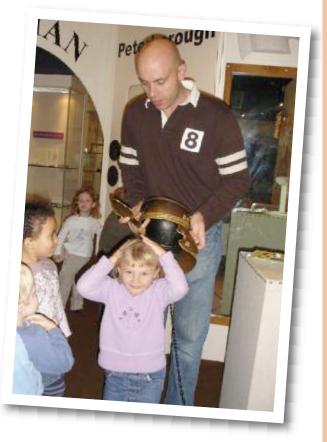
Spaces which encourage a child away from their carer can be an important part of a gallery experience but they are not useful in terms of communication. Intimate spaces, such as places to crawl inside for both an adult and child, on the other hand, encourage communication, as long as such spaces are welcoming and children do not feel forced in. Routes which are atmospheric, such as a themed corridor leading to an exhibition, also encourage closeness between adult and child. But be aware of making a space too interactive or stimulating - if you do, parents tend to sit back and let children play.

C The aspects which have a negative impact on child-carer communication include: location of activity, inter-related activities not being together, distractions, noise, low light, hard floors, lack of seating adjacent to activities, any activities that cause carers to worry about health and safety, and lack of clarity.

Talking to the Animals; Observational Research. July 2007. Dr. V. Cave

Making a noise

Making a noise is our first step towards communication. You can encourage carers to make the noises of animals or machines for their children to copy simply by providing the relevant toys, puppets, hats and so on. However,



everyone finds excess noise disruptive. The research showed that musical instruments for example, whilst child friendly, can stifle communication. Too much noise will mean some groups move away from an activity or people begin to shout. Planning for quieter activities and using sound absorbent materials in more noisy areas can help keep the right balance.

Keeping the conversation going

Having things to take away provides opportunities for adults and children to talk about their day later. This gives children the opportunity to explain what they have been doing to other family members, providing opportunities for them to remember aloud. Family trails, stickers to collect or drawings done at the museum can all provide something to talk about at home. It is also a good idea to build in photo opportunities so that the visit to the museum goes into the 'photo album' to be revisited and remembered.



Get families looking together

Looking in

Let children get close to the collections, even if they are behind glass. Ideas which work well are peepholes, magnifying glasses, lifting flaps, clear domes and exhibits where visitors can poke their heads in. The Potteries Museum introduced a fox's den and dome cases integrated into seating, all of which are immensely popular with visitors. Providing things for visitors to peer through doesn't have to be expensive. The Potteries Museum put a small willow screen in their river display, with a hole cut out. Peeping through gave children a 'secret' view of a duck's nest and prompted lots of family communication.

Looking through

Initial research found children and adults liked looking at each other through display cases. This simple effect prompted people to communicate their pleasure and excitement. This idea was not 100% successful in piloting but could still be worth trying as it seems to work, especially where the cases are low and families can move around all sides.

Getting close

Children get really excited if they can touch things, especially animals, large objects and unusually shaped items. They also love different textures and things that provide an unexpected surprise (a sound going off or something popping out). Carers will respond by also touching and talking about the object. This activity will work with both easily recognisable objects, such as household items, and more curious objects from the collections. You can hide objects behind curtains or in 'feely holes' to add an element of expectation. Make it clear to visitors what can and cannot be touched – if things can be touched, make sure everyone can reach them.



Trails

The research has demonstrated that trails are very popular with both adults and children. After testing ideas, Peterborough Museum has introduced ten dinosaur pictures placed around the Museum to show each stopping point for a different activity, such as a counting, spotting or comparing game. Before the introduction of the trail, the team at Peterborough identified key objects that attracted younger users and got them talking. The Museum then piloted a range of multi-sensory activities that related to the objects and developed the dinosaur character as a link on the trail.

6 My daughter really enjoyed the footprint trail... so I think that there is a need for more activities that are on the floor.

Visitor (before changes).



Give families things to do together

Open-ended activities

Try to provide activities that are open-ended and don't have specific outcomes (but nonetheless provide a sense of achievement). Open-ended activities that involve exploring, problem-solving, creating and decision-making give real reasons for adults and children to talk together.

Games

The opportunities for communication are extended where there are more chances for joint play between adult and child. The museums in the project found tea-sets and table settings, magnetic fishing games and fabric pictures work particularly well. Shape sorters have also proved excellent in prompting conversations: The Potteries Museum used a chunky, 3D animal puzzle where children push the correct animal through the animal-shaped holes. This gives children simple choices, it is fun and the seating allows parents to sit with the child to help out.



Using dice introduces a game to play, focused on the collections. The Potteries Museum provided a dice with images of six animals on and children have to find the animal they throw.

Masks & hats

Masks, hats and headpieces encourage a great deal of communication between carers and children, both verbally and non-verbally. Ensure you have some for the adults too as an interesting hat for a child prompts play, whilst interesting hats for both children and adults prompt communication. The observations showed that putting on masks and headgear encourages both children and carers to laugh,

make eye contact, make up games and to communicate in a range of ways.

'Unpacking the box'

Observations showed that having activities in boxes to unpack together encouraged families to communicate. The research showed that the boxes gave parents a clear role. Children really enjoy taking things out of boxes and bags, showing their carers what they have found and talking about them. Several themed, family-orientated boxes around the whole

museum work well: Peterborough Museum introduced four boxes, each made attractive to young children and each with similar content. The activities in the boxes give families the opportunity to take part in both structured and unstructured activities, and encouraged exploration of the galleries.

Reading stories

Whilst not all carers are comfortable reading aloud to children, most recognise a clear role for themselves in sharing a book. Provide books linked to your collections and encourage connections between the story, the pictures in the book (or the associated props you have supplied), and the displays. You can also try prop bags, like The New Art Gallery Walsall, to encourage discussion and story-making about your collections.

Drawing and tables

Carers will spend time with their children at activity tables, working alongside them, chatting, encouraging and asking questions. Like many of the other ideas here, this type of activity provides a valuable, shared experience for both carer and child. It is essential that suitable adult seating is placed in these areas. Colouring sheets do not generate conversations as they restrict choices and ownership, and, as a result, conversation too. They should be used sparingly, if at all. However, carefully designed drawing and making activities do support communication. Walsall introduced new craft activities linked to their art exhibition and The Potteries Museum used paper outlines of a cowcreamer and invited children to draw their own designs. In both examples, the adults were seen to talk to their children much more about the activity and to show the children the actual artefacts nearby for ideas.



Matching activities

Providing matching object activities which relate to the collections will encourage a closer scrutiny of the displays and will prompt carers to initiate discussion. Animal figures to match with the animals on display worked well at The Potteries Museum and a xylophone placed under a stripy art work helped prompt conversation in Walsall. The research showed that structured games, such as puzzles or card games like snap, need to be carefully designed and pre-tested as they are not always appropriate for the youngest children.

...and finally

Remember to monitor developments by comparing your findings with your initial baseline notes so you can continually improve activities and displays. This will also give you evidence to demonstrate the difference the changes are making.

Useful resources:

www.ican.org.uk

I CAN works to support the development of speech, language and communication skills in all children.

www.literacytrust.org.uk

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity that changes lives through literacy. Its website has very useful section on 'Resources' and 'Useful Links'.

www.stokespeaksout.org

Stoke Speaks Out is a partnership approach to tackling the causes of language delay in the City.

www.dcsf.gov.uk

The Department for Children, Schools & Families.

www.dcsf.gov.uk/bercowreview

Bercow Report website where you can download the report and keep up-to-date with progress.

www.surestart.gov.uk

The section on research into early language development is particularly useful.

Contacting the project partners:

You are welcome to contact or visit the partner museums to discuss the project.

Amanda Heath, Education Officer. The Potteries Museums & Art Gallery. Bethesda Street, Cultural Quarter. Stoke-on-Trent. ST1 3DW 01782 232323 amanda.heath@stoke.gov.uk

Philippa Tinsley, Collections Manager. Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum, Foregate Street, Worcester, WR1 1DT 01905 25371 ptinsley@worcester.gov.uk

Pam Russell, Education & Learning Manager. Peterborough Museum. Priestgate, Peterborough, PE1 1LF 01733 343329 pam.russell@peterborough.gov.uk Zoe Renilson, Education Curator. The New Art Gallery Walsall. Gallery Square, Walsall. WS2 8LG 01922 654403 RenilsonZ@walsall.gov.uk

Janet Cooper, Stoke Speaks Out Programme Lead, Stoke Speaks Out. c/o Stanfields Nursey, Dollys Lane, Stanfields, Stoke-on-Trent ST6 7AW 01782 234501

Jo Graham Learning Unlimited Director. jo.graham@learning-unlimited.co.uk www.learning-unlimited.co.uk















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Text: Ian Blackwell

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