

Great North Museum: Hancock, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums

Why take part?

After reviewing their learning programme the museum decided a Toddler Takeover Day would help them develop provision for families with young children and encourage families to use the whole museum, not just the under 5s area (the Mouse House).

Who took part?

118 under 5s over two sessions with accompanying adults. The majority of children were aged 24-36 months. The event was promoted on social media and the museum website. The initial release of tickets was quickly taken, so further tickets were released to respond to demand.

What did they do?

Toddlers participated in a series of simple activities that represented tasks performed by museum staff such as cleaning, patrolling, sorting and packing objects. Activities were based on Early Years schemas – patterns of play or repeated behaviours that children exhibit when they're exploring the world. For example rolling things or an interest in wheels is a common schema. The Great North Museum has more information about schemas on their resources page under Early Years.

How did they spend their time on the day?

Eleven activities were offered during the one hour session. Each activity station was manned by a member of staff or volunteer and families were given a booklet of 'museum worker jobs' to explain what they had to do. The most popular activities included:

- Cleaning glass cabinets with soft cloths and sweeping up pieces of paper
- Transporting replica artefacts in toy trolleys, unpacking these and organising them on a shelf
- Making puffballs out of tissue paper to pack objects

What happened next?

By matching activities to common schemas, the museum was able to capture and hold individual children's interest, offering powerful learning experiences. Staff observed children were highly involved with their chosen tasks and parents commented that they were appropriate and exciting. One activity required children and parents to wear a bracelet with images of objects on and to find these within the museum to check that they were safe. Later that day, a staff member spotted a child on the Metro still wearing her bracelet.

The activities also provided feedback. As part of the 'patrolling' task toddlers were able to wear cycle helmets fitted with cameras that filmed their journey through the museum. For the 'researcher' task, children were given a list of themes such as lots of legs/no legs and asked to identify and record objects in their chosen category. Both tasks offered insight into toddlers' interests. This is being used to develop a 'Big Book' which will support parents and group leaders in exploring the museum outside the Mouse House.

Due to the success of the event, a second Takeover Day was scheduled at the museum.

'Staff were fantastic – seemed genuine and pleased to see so many excited kids. Couldn't thank them enough. We (parents) both enjoyed being able to let our toddler be noisy / excited and not be worried that we were impacting on other visitors.'

Parent of Takeover Day participant