

Please note that our Early Years Toolkit resources were created in 2018 and may not have been updated since then. While we aim to provide valuable information, some content may no longer reflect the most current research or best practices. We encourage you to use these resources with this in mind.

Evaluating provision for under 5s

This document covers some of the ways we have evaluated sessions and overall programmes with our under 5s audience and their families at London Museum and London Museum Docklands. We have included pros and the cons as well as recommendations.

SNAPSHOT EVALUATION

We tend to carry out snapshot evaluation at the end of our regular activities. This is done through simple methods that don't require a lot of preparation and provides results that can be easily collated. We find it gives a good overview of whether the activity was a success and means we can get feedback immediately. It does not however, give any in-depth feedback and participants might be reluctant to leave negative responses if it's done as part of the session.

It might be in the form of:

- **sticky notes:** where we ask families to write a comment, eg about something they learnt or topics they would like us to cover in future
- **voting system:** where families put a counter in a box or put stickers on a board to indicate whether they did or didn't enjoy the activity
- **smiley faces:** where families decide which face best fits their mood and colours it in. The faces have different facial expressions from smiling and laughing to frowning and being unhappy.

How has this type of evaluation influenced our programme?

Whilst using sticky notes recently, many families noted that they particularly enjoyed the physical aspects of our activities. We have incorporated this feedback into our planning and now include more opportunities for physical activity, eg obstacle courses.

FEEDBACK FROM SESSION LEADERS/VOLUNTEERS

For most of our sessions we gather feedback from facilitators, volunteers and any other members of the team who have supported the activities. This means we can gather anecdotal evidence from different perspectives, and this can be particularly useful as some parents and carers might not feel comfortable giving more critical feedback. This type of evaluation also encourages reflective practice and ensures freelancers and volunteers feel valued.

In order for this evaluation technique to be effective, it's important to have an open and reflective relationship with staff, freelancers and volunteers. This includes having regular meetings and providing them with the opportunity to pass on their feedback. We have often found that our regular freelance artists would pass on feedback from parents and carers to us as well as their own, and we now have a notebook that the freelance can use to record their and the parent/carers comments.

The process can be time-consuming and it's important to build up the freelancers' and volunteers' understanding of the programme so they can determine what kind of feedback is useful.

Sessions had space for up to 30 people to ensure the experience was intimate and playful. The places were first come first served and we offered two sessions per day. We were able to accommodate most families but did have to turn some away.

How has this type of evaluation influenced our programme?

Whilst in a discussion with a freelancer, it was highlighted that there was a need for parents and carers attending weekly sessions to be more aware and prepared for what activities were taking place on the day and what would be coming up in subsequent weeks. We decided to implement a signage system where we inform families of what is happening in current and upcoming sessions.

QUESTIONNAIRES

We use questionnaires when we want to delve into a little more depth with families. We use a standard form that we have developed over the last few years where we adapt certain questions and change them to match the activity or if there is anything specific we want to find out about that particular session. Using a standard form has allowed us to compare results over time. We include both closed (eg 'Is this your first visit to the museum?') as well as open-ended questions (eg 'What will you remember about today's session?') on our form, which means we can get numerical statistics from multi-choice questions and more in-depth comments from open questions.

Other questions we have included in the past include:

- Do you visit a children's centre regularly? What is the name of the centre? (This allows us to identify local children's centres for potential partnership working)
- What other events have you attended at the museum? (This provided us with information that influences how we cross-promote activities at the museum)
- What is your postcode? (This allowed us to understand our reach and how far people are willing to travel to attend our sessions. We could identify areas we aren't reaching and target our marketing accordingly)
- Would you recommend the museum to friends or family? (We use this as a measure of success).

We provide paper copies of our questionnaires, or use an iPad on the day. We have also emailed questionnaires to families a day or two after the sessions have taken place.

Families can be reluctant to complete this type of evaluation as it is time-consuming. We often receive more quantitative data than qualitative, as families tend to only complete closed questions and ratings and will leave comment boxes empty. Regular parents and carers also sometimes find this type of feedback frustrating because they have already completed the same forms before and don't feel that they have anything new to say.

They tend to prefer evaluation methods where they can comment specifically on that day's session.

How has this type of evaluation influenced on our programme?

Using this type of evaluation and asking 'how did you find out about today's sessions?' meant that we discovered the app 'Hoop', which lists a range of activities for children and their families that we were previously unaware of. Our events are now regularly listed on this app.

DATA COLLECTION

Our weekly baby and toddler sessions are bookable and families visiting our children's gallery also need to book in advance or collect a ticket on the day. This allows us to collect valuable data such as postcodes and names of those visiting. This type of data can easily be analysed and compared with data from previous years, which can reveal any patterns that have formed. For example, how common are repeat visits, do families progress from baby to toddler sessions, and do families from the local area visit more frequently?

How has this type of evaluation influenced our programme?

We asked families to book tickets for a free summer show in 2016 and the data we collected through these bookings told us that people were travelling reasonable distances specifically for this event. This meant that when we ran a similar activity the following year we knew that it would have a wide reach.

CONSULTATION AND REPORTING

We use consultation to undertake in-depth analysis of long-standing or new programmes – there might be something we know we want to change, or a project we are starting from scratch. This might take the form of focus groups with users/non-users or could be a report based on desk research or benchmarking. For this type of evaluation we normally use specialist consultant, but we have also worked with colleagues from outside our organisation to review and report on our activities. This has allowed us to utilise expertise within the field and gain perspectives from outside our organisation.

This type of evaluation can be costly, so it's important to have a good understanding of what you want to find out and a clear brief. In 2016 we conducted our own consultation in relation to the Arts Council England's (ACE) Quality Principles. We decided not to appoint an external consultant as we were not asking visitors to comment directly on sessions, but were looking at quality as a concept. The work involved nine 30 minute in-depth interviews with families who attended regular under 5s activities. We wanted to interrogate

the Quality Principles to see how our programme could better support ACE's priorities and how our visitors viewed quality: what did an inspiring and enjoyable session look like to them, how should a session be planned for it to be inclusive and positive, and how can we as staff tell that families and children are actively involved in their learning? Families told us the following about being exciting, inspiring and engaging:

'An inspiring early years session will involve new resources, ideas and experiences. Things that haven't been used before by families or using familiar things in exciting new ways are particularly inspiring to this audience.'

We can see that families attending an early years event are inspired and engaged when they are fully participating and both adults and children/babies look happy and confident in the session. For many families, an inspiring session means that they might go home and try something similar or find similar resources.

How has this type of evaluation influenced on our programme?

We have used findings to inform our planning. To sit down with our visitors and have a general discussion about quality was incredibly rewarding and it helped us understand not just the details of what a good session looks like, but also what provides the right ethos and character of a programme.

One specific outcome was that we now programme more sessions to take place in our galleries rather than in learning spaces, as many families told us that they particularly enjoy gallery visits because they provide learning opportunities for both children and adults.

TRIALLING

Whenever we are developing new types of activities or resources, we trial them with families as part of a piloting stage. We sometimes do this informally, eg introducing the activities as part of a regular session, or we might contact families beforehand and invite them to test a new activity for us. We find that this type of evaluation is useful because it allows us to observe families whilst they are testing the activity and see if they are engaging in the way we expected them too. It is particularly important for us to test resources we intend to be more long-lasting; this is so we can pick up any logistical or learning issues before we create the final resource, which would be difficult to change at that stage. Trialling of resources does however require a lot of staff time, as somebody needs to be present to observe or gather feedback from the families on the day or through follow-up interviews.

Early Years toolkit

How has this type of evaluation influenced our programme?

In 2017 we developed a self-directed resource for families with children under two to use in the museum's galleries. The resource is in the shape of a play mat with different items attached, including a rabbit soft toy and plastic gardening tools. We tested the mat with families during some of our regular baby sessions and ran a 30-minute dedicated trial session with four families. We took the families to the gallery where the mat was designed to be used and observed how families engaged with it. Informal discussion took place whilst families were using the mat and we discovered that families felt the mat needed more vibrant colours and that instead of elastic threads that get tangled easily, using thick lace or Velcro to attach items would be better for the babies. We collated all our feedback and sent it back to the producer of the mat with recommended alterations before creating the final version and making it available to our visitors.