



The communication friendly museum

“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’



The projects

During 2006-08, 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.

The project is significant for the museum sector because its primary aim was to improve museum displays to give adults the tools to communicate about collections with under-5s.

What are the benefits of becoming a communication friendly museum?

Research, observational studies and evaluation have clearly demonstrated that the introduction of displays, services and resources aimed at supporting communication between children and adults offers museums a wide range of important benefits. These include:

- increasing visitor numbers – up by 50% in one case.
- positive organisational change where excellence, innovation, risk-taking and best practice can be demonstrated.
- community engagement – communities feel they have more of a voice in how the museums are developing as a result of being involved.
- inspiring staff, particularly cross-team co-operation.
- developing skills, including learning, project management, gallery design, visitor services and evaluation skills.
- strengthening the profile and reputation of the museum through media interest, word-of-mouth recommendations and advocacy.
- visitors spending more time looking at displays, interacting more deeply with the exhibits and, as a result, spending more time in the museum.
- museum staff being able to exploit collections in innovative and creative ways for the wider benefit of communities and the long-term benefit of the museum.
- getting families talking: the evidence shows that the changes made through the projects have increased the number and length of conversations.
- new partnerships - museums can demonstrate their role as equal partners in delivering local services to communities, which can lead to the museum being invited to contribute to other programmes.
- building visitors' confidence: adults feel more able to support their children's learning in the museum so visitors enjoy their visit more and become more independent learners.
- attracting more families from a wider range of backgrounds.
- visitors changing their perceptions of museums.
- becoming more visitor friendly throughout the galleries and in changing staff attitudes towards adults with young children.
- strengthens the museum's hand in securing funding when it comes to decisions on resource allocation.

“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... 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 of The
National Literacy Trust.

Text: Ian Blackwell

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

Project and Publication

Advisor: Jo Graham, Director,
Learning Unlimited

Design: Kingfisher Print &
Design Limited, Totnes
www.kingfisherprint.co.uk

Images courtesy of

The Potteries Museum & Art
Gallery, Worcester City Art
Gallery & Museum,
Peterborough Museum and
The New Art Gallery Walsall

Why is communication important?

Communication is at the centre of our lives and the ability to communicate is the basis of our social, economic and emotional well-being. The consequences of growing up with language delay include low educational attainment and poor job prospectus. Given the high instance of language difficulties in children across the UK, developing good communication skills is now at the heart of Government policy for young children.

In every neighbourhood the development of communication skills in young children is now recognised as a crucial issue. Indeed, each Local Authority has statutory education targets at Foundation Stage for communication and language skills in their Local Area Agreements. All organisations, whether publicly funded or not, should consider how best they can contribute to improving communication skills.

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 tackle language difficulties and support the development of communication skills between children and adults? The projects featured in this leaflet have achieved just that.

Want to know more?

For those interested in creating a more communication friendly museum, a free booklet, which outlines the projects in more detail and includes a 'How to' section, is available to download from
www.stokemuseums.org.uk



NESTA is the National Endowment for Science, Technology & the Arts. Its mission is to transform the UK's capacity for innovation. With the largest portfolio of early-stage businesses in the country, it is a leading authority on how to support and grow new ideas. NESTA also devises radical approaches and shapes policy to address today's pressing economic, social and environmental challenges. www.nesta.org.uk