

SCIENCE MUSEUM GROUP

TOP TIPS: DEVELOPING EARLY YEARS EXPERIENCES

Early years children make up a huge part of a museum audience, and experiences in early childhood have a huge impact on our lives as adults. We define 'early years' as children aged 0–6 years, although the approaches outlined here may also be appropriate for children outside this age range. Here we share some of our top tips for developing experiences for early years...

1

GIVE YOUNG CHILDREN AGENCY AND CHOICE

Young children are at various developmental stages. To accommodate them design open-ended activities that provide young children with agency and choice so every child can get involved at their own level and pace. For example, providing craft materials and inviting children to create stories about gallery objects allows them to make sense of museum content using their existing experiences, interests and imagination.

2

PLAYFULNESS IS KEY

Play in early childhood is directly linked to social, emotional and cognitive wellbeing. Encouraging play and embedding playfulness in all activities is key to engaging and supporting young children's development and learning. Examples of playful activities that harness active thinking, meaning-making and joy include physical games such as hide-and-seek, construction play, board games, pretend-play with objects and role-play.



3

DON'T FORGET THE ADULTS

When thinking about early years children, think about the adults who accompany them too. Parents, carers, family members and teachers are essential in making sure children can engage in playfulness and exercise agency and choice. Develop activities that include adults, and ensure adults recognise their active role in supporting young children. Provide adults with conversation prompts and develop games that everyone can play together.

4

ENGAGE YOUNG CHILDREN'S SENSES

Early years experiences that encourage the use of multiple senses enhance learning, inclusion and playfulness. The use of touch, sight, sound, smell and even taste create immersive experiences that engage young children in various ways. For example, storytelling can be enhanced through the use of relevant sounds or smells, and a display can be enriched if it can be touched or manipulated.



5

USE MOVEMENT AND GESTURE

Children love being active – in fact, sometimes it can be difficult for them not to move! Think about how you could incorporate movement into experiences to support young children's engagement and understanding. This can include inviting them to clap, jump, blink their eyes or stamp their feet. Encourage young children to use gestures and use gestures yourself, for example showing how an object works can help children make sense of what they are experiencing.

6

BUILD YOUNG CHILDREN'S SKILLS

Early years children are naturally inquisitive and observant, just like scientists, and generally like asking questions. Encouraging and further developing these attributes and skills supports young children's confidence, curiosity and learning. For example, you could invite them to engage in problem-solving, communication, imagination and observation by providing tinkering and craft activities, such as asking children to take apart objects or create their own designs of objects that interest them.

7

BE FRIENDLY AND CHILD-CENTRED

Children learn through positive relationships and social interaction. Not all children will want to get involved straight away, so give them time to observe, choose and settle into an activity at their own pace. Make sure too that you physically get down to their level, use their names and show them you are interested in them as people. Interaction with early years children should be centred on the individual child's needs and interests rather than on predefined outcomes.



8

ASK QUESTIONS

Asking young children questions helps to establish positive social connections and helps you to gauge their understanding. It also allows children to bring their prior knowledge into play. Using open-ended questions and prompts can help tease out the richness of young children's thoughts and feelings. For example, if a child suggests an idea, ask them how they came up with it, or what made them think of that. Really listen to what they tell you and use their language back in your reply.

9

THINK ABOUT PLACE AND TIME

It is important to consider the various needs that early years children might have. This includes their practical and physical needs, such as toilet facilities, and if and where they can eat. The timing of the activity is also important – young children might be tired in the late afternoon, for example. Providing activities in places and at times that allow adults to accommodate children's potential needs can help ensure continued participation, engagement and inclusion.



10

EXTEND THE EXPERIENCE

Think about how you can extend young children's experiences beyond their immediate engagement with the activity. What thoughts and ideas would you like children to take away with them after the activity has ended? It can be helpful to provide mental prompts or questions that support young children and accompanying adults to continue making meaningful connections between activities and what they already know in their everyday lives.

EXPLORE MORE

To find out more about Science Museum Group Learning, including resources to use in informal learning experiences, at home and in the classroom; training opportunities; and insights and research around STEM engagement, visit: learning.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk

For further information, contact us at: SMGAcademy@sciencemuseum.ac.uk

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