

# *A Playtrain Children's Consultation*

*Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery  
Early Years Project Report  
4th March 2008*



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## *Introduction*

*Playtrain is the leading provider of hands-on training, creative children's consultations and research for organisations working with and for children and young people. Playtrain aims to promote the creative potential of children to help make childhood an inspiring journey of discovery and provide children and young people with a voice concerning matters affecting them.*

*The Playtrain Children's Consultancy scheme encourages organisations to become more child-friendly, and suggests they should seek expert advice on how to achieve this. It goes on to suggest that the best experts on child-centred provision are children themselves, and so it is children who should be brought in to act as consultants on improving the quality of provision. The Playtrain Children's Consultancy Scheme seeks to facilitate this process and make it work effectively.*

*Playtrain was approached by Nuneaton Art Gallery and Museum to deliver a creative consultation session with children under five years. The aim of the consultation was to inform the Gallery and Museums overall strategy for improving access and make recommendations for the development of current displays and interpretation resources for an early year's audience.*

*The Community Plan produced by Nuneaton + Bedworth Borough Council identifies a need to support and foster a learning culture across all age groups within the community*

*Under its Forward plan the Museum + Art Gallery seeks to achieve the following*

- The Museum will continue to utilise a range of methods and approaches to ensure that the interpretation of its collections is appropriate to all learning styles*
- The Museum will seek to further develop and diversify its audiences*

*Under the Education + Learning Policy seeks the following*

- To create partnerships within the local community to improve and promote educational resources within the Museum Service.*
- To increase the diversity of the Museum audience, encouraging members from every community to use the museum*
- To work with local and national organisations to gain advice and assistance in carrying out these aims and objectives.*

## Picture Gallery

The consultation was to take place in the newly refurbished picture gallery. The Picture Gallery at Nuneaton museum + Art Gallery was refurbished in 2007. The former red gallery has been refurbished, a new hanging surface created, new lighting and carpeting as well as new interpretation panels. As well as featuring new pictures, the gallery includes new sound pieces to accompany three of the pictures. There is a variety of interactive interpretation pieces aimed at children including:

*Colouring in activities* - pens and paper are available on tables in the gallery

*Picture Jigsaws* - set out on tables in the gallery.

*'Sound Pieces'* - accompanying three of the pieces of art are button operated sound pieces that play a pre-recorded piece of audio relating to the subject matter.

*Noah's Art building blocks* - colourful wooden building blocks that relate to the artwork depicting animals.

*Puppets* - a variety of animal puppets and puppet booth relating to animal based artwork.

*Full body Mirror and dressing up hat* - relate to paintings depicting soldiers for role-play activity.



*Picture 'cut-out'* - a portrait that stands at child height has the head cut out so that children can put their head through and become the face in the picture.

*Perspex display cabinet* - this display is at child height and angled towards the viewer. It contains small cameo portraits and has a cover attached by Velcro, which can be removed by viewer. Next to it there is a second angled surface with a tactile activity using magnetic frames that can be manoeuvred and reshaped.

*Sculpture puzzle* - a low level interactive shelf containing a puzzle relating directly to the style of the sculpture and positioned directly in front of it.

## Participants

Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery invited a group of parents and young children from the local Sure Start project to visit the gallery and take part in the consultation. The group of 10 parents and their young children, between the ages of 1 and 4 years, had not visited the gallery before and so the consultation would be an ideal opportunity to test the current display and interpretation resources as well as to form a relationship with this neighbouring children's centre.



## Methodology

At the core of Playtrain's early years consultation method is the acknowledgement that young children express themselves in many ways. Playtrain has developed a unique approach that values and draws upon non-verbal language through a combination of observation and child led creative activities. When consulting young children, Playtrain also acknowledges the importance of incorporating the views of adults connected to the child.



Playtrain's early year's consultation method varies according to the research question; the age and number of children involved and the length of the consultancy. The following format was followed for the consultation of Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery

- *Observation and documentation*

The children and adults are welcomed into the gallery space and are free to explore the gallery space as they find it. Playtrain practitioners observe and use documentation as a vehicle for expressing children's responses and actions.

- *Reflection*

The practitioners reflect on what happens and then decide on a way forward that will best enable the children to explore the space. This includes discussion with parents, carers and members of staff.

- *Activity*

This session is an opportunity to become thoroughly involved in an experience. This is a child centred activity led by playtrain, allowing for choice in the level of involvement and encourages children to explore themes in more depth.

- *Discussion and reflection*

Children and adults meet to review the activity. They may have lasting impressions and memories that can be shared. The facilitators gather the views of adults connected to the children involved. Playtrain facilitators draw up conclusions about the children's experiences and share this with them.

- *Reporting back*

Documentation of the entire project informs the final report. Reports will be compiled as a visual record of the children's 'journey' or exploration of the theme. The report will include all reflections on the process, the perspectives of all project partners, conclusions and recommendations to the client based on the documentation.

## Findings

*On entering the gallery space the young children reacted in different ways according to their individual personalities and interests. Some children were happy to actively explore the space while others relied more on parental encouragement and direction.*

*The children's experience of the gallery was very much linked to the parent. Either the parent would follow a child's interest and get involved, or, the parent directed the child to a particular activity and encouraged their involvement.*

*The most popular points of interest were things that:*

- were situated at the children's own eye level*
- the children could touch and examine further*
- where there were opportunities to play and interact with others*



## *Child led activities*

The first child who entered the gallery ran excitedly into the space and was drawn straight away to the African chair exhibit. He put out his hand to touch the piece and realised that it was behind a piece of glass. He quickly diverted his attention to other things that he could touch and examine with his hands. He was very quick to discover the Perspex display cabinet by removing the fabric cover. He was excited by what he found underneath and then began to beat his hands on the Perspex cover. This had the effect of attracting other children to the display. Different children then interacted with this exhibit and with each other. They enjoyed pointing out each cameo portrait to each other. The children then became interested in playing with the frames on the panel next to this.

The puzzle activity situated below the sculpture was also popular with the children. The activity was very tactile and had colourful parts which related well to the sculpture. Again this was at an ideal height and the slant of the display had the effect of leading the gaze towards the sculpture.

The puppet play activity also proved popular with some of the children, however they did not necessarily link this to any of the artwork on display. Equally some children enjoyed peering through the cut-out portrait turning this into a game with both their parent and each other.

Two of the children were independently attracted to the paintings. One girl was intrigued by the large portraits and pointed to them, returning to them at different points throughout the session.

*"My child was pointing up to the picture on the wall so I lifted him up to see it"*

Parent

Although the paintings were at a lowered height the majority of children did not tend to look up and beyond their own eye level.

## Parental Involvement

Parents were involved in their child's interaction with the gallery throughout the session. Some parents allowed their children to explore freely, others diverted their children to a particular activity. It was noted that parents seemed more likely to engage their children with an activity they were more familiar with themselves, such as the central table top activity containing the jigsaws and the building blocks.



After a period of letting the participants freely interact with the gallery, Playtrain practitioners began to encourage the children and their parents to investigate the exhibits further. They were encouraged to show the children the paintings, directed to the sound buttons, and showed some of the less familiar artefacts such as the role playing with the hat and mirror. Once they had been made aware of these activities, the children became more deeply involved. The children enjoyed pressing the buttons on and off once they were shown how to do this. Although they could not understand what was being said they enjoyed the interactive element and were intrigued about where the voices were coming from.

During this time Playtrain practitioners spent time talking to parents about their thoughts and experiences of the gallery.

It was noted that parents were least likely to draw the children's attention to the paintings. On discussing this with some parents, some of the reasons were as follows:

- They lacked confidence in talking to the children about the art because they were unfamiliar with it themselves.
- They had little interest in art as explained by a parent  
"I'm not interested in art so would not come to the gallery just for the art"
- They followed their children's interests.

### Playtrain Activity - Pictures Make Sounds

In this group activity the children and their parents were brought together with the aim of directly engaging the children with some of the art on display. Using sound recording equipment, microphones and computer based software the group took part in this creative play activity producing sounds that related to pictures. Two paintings were focussed on: a sea scape and the large animal landscape.

Once sounds had been produced they were played back. The children were asked to respond to the sound scape using coloured pens on a shared, large piece of paper. The resulting artwork was celebrated by holding it up next to the original painting.

The children were intrigued by the recorded sound scape, listening intently. They then began to repeat the sounds: the sea noises and the animal noises whilst looking at each painting. The group were equally excited and involved with the collective mark making activity.

The sound-scape activity worked particularly well with the large animal landscape painting. It not only drew the children's attention to the painting but seemed to bring it to life. Some of the children pointed out different animals in the painting and related them to the noises.

"making the animal sounds in the pictures really helped Jake to think about the painting and the other things in it" Parent

The parents were also engaged in the activity. They actively encouraged their children to take part, making the noises with them and supporting them in their drawing.

"this activity is a good thing, he was looking at the painting trying to make the sounds with you" Parent

## Reflection

After the sound-scape activity there was some reflection time around the whole visit in which parents expressed their thoughts about the visit.



All but two of the parents attending the session had ever thought to bring their children to the gallery before and were unaware of the way in which the gallery had already adapted its displays to provide some stimulus for early years children. The relevance of Art Galleries as engaging places for young children was questioned by parents indicating a lack of current awareness as well as some preconceptions around what museum and gallery spaces offer.

"I would never of thought to bring them here" Parent

One parent explained that she felt nervous about how she could support her child within the gallery.

There was a general feeling that when an organised activity was happening in the gallery space it was more stimulating and enjoyable for both the children and the parents.

"It's hard to get my boy interested in the pictures on their own but he showed real interest when we all came together to make sounds as a group and there was a reason to look"

Parent

"Maybe the focus should be on the activities that draw a person in to the art and not only on the art."

Parent

This could also reinforce the suggestion that parents lacked confidence in engaging their children with the paintings because they themselves were unfamiliar with them. One parent was really keen to visit galleries and to get her child interested but felt she did not feel equipped to engage her child with art.

Despite their early reservations the majority of parents enjoyed the visit to the gallery and said that they would definitely come again.

## Recommendations

These recommendations suggest ways to engage an early year's audience and develop child-focused resources that link to the displays.

### Interpretation panels

The interpretation panels which proved most successful in engaging the children with the artworks were the low level tactile installations situated directly below the artworks. These panels were popular because they were at the right height and provided opportunities for tactile play. In particular the angle of the surface attracted the children to them but also provided a natural route to the artwork above. This template could certainly be developed and extended in future displays. As this appears to be a successful format other interactive pieces such as the sound buttons and labelling devices could be included which will be talked about further in the recommendations.



### Navigating the Building

As already stated the angled interpretation panels provided a clear way in to the artworks. A further recommendation would be to develop a mapping system to help young children to navigate the museum and gallery. This could be done by way of arrows or symbols on the floor, for example large arrows, footprints. These need not be a permanent fixture but attached via Velcro so that they can be moved around. Alternatively these symbols could be on the walls at the appropriate height.

The mapping idea could be translated to an activity sheet for parents to use, describing simple ideas on how to explore the exhibits in the style of a treasure hunt. For example: What animals can you find? Can you find the red buttons? What noises can you hear? How many pictures are there on the walls?

### Exhibition Labelling

Another way to help parents to engage with their children would be to use a simple labelling device. A small label next to the piece could suggest a simply worded question for a parent to ask their child. Furthermore, these labels could present a simple challenge or task:

"How many animals can you see in the picture?" "Please press here." Again this could be done by way of an activity sheet as described in the mapping idea above.

### *Interactive Audio Links*

The Playtrain sound-scape activity showed that linking sound to the exhibits can positively enhance the experience. The children were also intrigued by the sound and enjoyed pushing the buttons.

Playtrain would recommend developing this idea by introducing more sound-scapes and effects that young children may identify. For example this could be the sounds of animals and the sea, as explored in the activity. This would engage them beyond the initial play around the pressing of buttons and extend their involvement around the subject matter of the artworks.

Although the buttons on the units are brightly coloured to draw attention to them, the children did not find them by themselves. Again a labelling device might draw the attention of the parent. Also one of the buttons was positioned too high for the young children to reach. As already stated the buttons could be placed in other areas such as next to or part of other interactive panels.

### *Furniture*

Playtrain recommends the inclusion of small scaled or possibly some soft furniture in an attempt to encourage families to spend time in the gallery space.

### *A Break-out Space*

Many galleries value a space, separate from the displayed art, where, for example, school groups can meet. Some parents liked the idea of having a space that they could break-out to, away from the display areas. This would enable families to divide up a visit into smaller time slots and help maintain a child's interest throughout the overall visit.

### *The Museum and Gallery building*

Nuneaton art gallery and museum is situated in an attractive park side location in the heart of the town. The entrance to the building is grand and traditional as well as inviting and bright.

A minority of parents suggested that reinstating the café facility would have a positive effect on the gallery's daytime usage by families. This would create both a social and resting area outside of the gallery space. In addition, one parent suggested an outside area with tables and chairs during the summertime would both extend the café and also create a space where parents with babies who were crying could breakout to.

The potential for promotion of the site as a place to visit regardless of the particular exhibition on display gives the venue an advantage when trying to attract a new audience.

### *Organised Activities and Events*

Many of the parents attending the consultation seem to have reservations about the Gallery or Museum environment and a certain amount of preconceptions about what they contained and who they were for. This left them feeling unsure about how to use the space. To address this, it is important that new visitors are welcomed and made to feel at ease with the exhibits. Having a regular staffed resource would encourage first time users to revisit the gallery and give them the confidence to return independently at future times. Organised activities within the space can also help to achieve this.

*"Game play and short activities engage kids"*

Parent

As highlighted in the findings, it was felt by the parents, and mirrored in the observations of the event, that younger children become more fully engaged with the exhibits through the interaction of a gallery representative or art worker. These activities increase the enjoyment of the visitors, encourage and extend opportunities for learning, promote the resources and enhance the overall gallery experience.

As part of its overall mission to welcome an early year's audience, Playtrain would recommend that Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery develops a programme of organised activities to support the current collections. This could be a combination of one-off targeted events for families and a regular early year's session. A regular session may be a monthly or a fortnightly slot, lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes. As shown by the sound-scape activity delivered by Playtrain, activities for an early year's group need not be too complex and can be seen as complimentary to the existing interpretation activities.

Another suggestion would be to encourage a local group or service like Sure Start to visit on a regular basis and work in partnership with staff to devise activities that link into the exhibits. For example, the group could do an activity around one painting each visit and work towards creating their own exhibition.

A final suggestion for promoting family activity would be to utilise the excellent outdoor space around the Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery by putting on a creative outdoor summer event.

## Conclusion

As a result of this consultation all of the parents said that they would happily visit the gallery again. This in itself indicates the value of a one-off targeted event, helping to breakdown preconceptions and showing the Museum and Art Gallery to be a welcoming and stimulating environment for families with young children. It also reflects the very positive reception of the newly refurbished Picture Gallery suggesting that the current interpretation pieces are successfully engaging a younger audience. The children themselves were engaged throughout their visit and this can be evidenced by the accompanying photographs.

This report recommends ways in which the Museum and Art Gallery can continue to make its displays more accessible to an early year's audience as well as how to develop its interpretation resources to provide those all important links to the artwork and artefacts.

When developing resources for young children it is important to acknowledge that children have a natural instinct to explore and examine the world around them and draw from their life experiences so far to interpret this. The unfamiliar is explained by the familiar. This was evidenced in the behaviour of the children who attended the consultation. They were attracted to unfamiliar things and then explored them by, for example, beating them like a drum, pointing repeatedly, playing 'peepo' games and responding to the familiar sounds in the playtrain activity. When developing new interpretation schemes, it is these familiar aspects that should be considered carefully to help create those all important links to the exhibits.

Finally, this report highlights the importance of the two-way shared experience between the child and parent. A young child's experience relies heavily on the parent, in getting to the gallery in the first place and then being supported in their experience of it. When the environment excites and stimulates the child's interest this inspires and encourages the parent's involvement. Parents need to feel confident about allowing their children to explore and then able to follow and support their ideas. The recommendations around labelling, organised events, break-out spaces and activity sheets will help to instil this confidence. The more physical recommendations such as the low-level display cabinets, mapping ideas and interactive resources as well as the gallery led creative activities will help young children to engage fully in the museum and gallery experience making it a fun place that they will want to return to again and again.

## Appendix

Quotes from Parents and carers on the day of consultation:

"From a child's point of view activities that help focus their attention on the art are good."

"The level of the art is too high for children."

"My child was pointing up to the picture on the wall so I lifted him up to see it"

"I think she had a good time looking at the big pictures and drawing them with help"

"She's not one for sitting down for long so just sitting looking at art isn't enough"

"My daughter loves the drawing games, pens and paper"

"Making the animal sounds in the pictures really helped Jake to think about the painting and the other things in it"

"Using the microphone was fun, they really enjoyed that"

"Drawing the same as the pictures impressed him"

"Musical/noisy things, brightly coloured stuff captures his imagination"

"Music is always a good one cos he likes dancing"

"They all like music and bright visuals"

"This activity is a good thing; he was looking at the painting trying to make the sounds with you"

"An advert in the paper telling people about play session activities would be good"

"Its about activities, you should bring someone in to do activities based around the paintings"

*"Something to grab their attention for short periods cos they have short attention spans"*

*"Not been here before"*

*"I would never have thought to bring them here"*

*"I'm not interested in art so would not come to the gallery just for the art"*

*"Maybe the focus should be on the activities that draw a person in to the art and not only on the art."*

*(All quotes are taken from recorded audio footage captured on the day of consultation and are quoted with permission of the interviewees at the request of being anonymous)*

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