

**Northern Ireland Museums Council**

**Museums Tell Stories: Books and Storytelling**

**Introduction**

It is a truism that museums tell stories. And it can be argued that a museum that does not do so in an imaginative and engaging manner is not living up to the expectations we have of our museums as places of inspiration, learning and enjoyment. Indeed, so critical is the interpretation and communication around the collections held, that most museums have now developed interpretation strategies and plans which set out what they are trying to interpret, why, and for whom, together with the associated objectives and implementation plans.

Such plans may extend to describing the approaches to be undertaken in engaging particular groups of visitors, be they defined by geography, interest or experience, and the associated activities to be delivered.

This guidance aims to assist museums to engage younger children through the use of books and telling stories, as a means of interpreting their collections, and making them and the museum as accessible as possible. It draws upon the outcomes of a series of training days delivered to local museum staff and volunteers by LibrariesNI and covers;

* Literacy and Child Development
* Why museums?
* Age appropriate books,
* How to choose a book,
* Developing a theme and making a collection link,
* Developing a workshop or session,
* Putting together a story box/suitcase,
* Practical considerations.

The use of stories and books in a museum environment can be driven by a number of factors, including;

* **Led by the book** - there is a book that is recommended, which is known to be really engaging, and whose potential is recognised in terms of its quality or capacity to inspire hands on activity.
* **Led by the Collection** - key aspects of the collections which are relevant to young children and their experiences, for example toys, animals, home life, transport etc.
* **Led by the aspiration to engage a particular age group or audience** – for example, a museum may desire to develop programmes for children under five, together with their parents and carers, or target nursery schools, or the like.
* Or, a combination of the above.

**Literacy and Child Development**

Reading and books are important for child development in particular their language skills (listening and speech), and social skills, and stories can also foster imagination and creativity.

Children are just like adults and enjoy different things and learn in different ways. Therefore having a range of activities within a session is a good approach for keeping the attention of all children. Attention spans may be short, so activities lasting for bursts of 5 to 10 minutes and then changing can help to accommodate this. Children learn through play and having fun. They learn through ‘doing’ experiences, therefore activities should be hands-on and engage the senses as fully as possible. Children are not passive recipients of information but rather should be involved in and be part of the process.

There are 5 areas of child development that can be summarised as;

* Cognitive - thinking skills, knowledge acquisition,
* Social/emotional - playing with others, turn taking, empathy,
* Language - listening, talking,
* Fine motor skills - drawing, cutting,
* Gross motor skills-physical development – such as climbing or catching a ball

Thus developmental sessions may seek to support one or more the areas, and those designing such activities often include;

* Movement/actions/drama - gross motor
* Drawing/making/craft - fine motor
* Singing/speaking/reading/storytelling - language and social
* Turn taking/sharing - social
* Imaginative/role play - social/emotional

With activities involving the fullest range of senses (touch/light/sound) through the incorporation of feely bags, sound effects, music, creating shadows, and such like, being found to be particularly effective and engaging, especially when there is an emphasis upon fun and variety.

**Why are museums good environments for reading books and telling stories?**

By the interpretation of their collections and through exhibitions, museums are in the business of creatively telling stories about the past, with flair and imagination.

While the exhibition may not be the best technique to engage young children with an aspect of the collection, the use of a story or book linked to key objects can make the museum a fun and exciting place for young children. Museums are not primarily concerned with children’s literacy, but they do recognised that books and stories are an effective way in which to open up what is special and unique about the museum environment.

**Age appropriate books**

In engaging children with museum activities through books and stories, museums should recognise that books aimed at different ages have some generic characteristics.

Books for babies tend to be constructed of soft cloth or small boards with contrasting or brightly coloured large pictures, often with single or no words. These books often include a mirror or interactive elements such as a bell, or different textured materials.

For toddlers board books or simple story books are common, and often cover familiar themes such as toys, animals, families or transport. The pictures are generally still large and colourful, often accompanied by single words or simple sentences and sometimes using rhyme. Books for this age group can have interactive features, such as a flap to lift.

Books for pre-school children tend to move away from the board format, but retain the picture storybook approach. Generally the stories have a simple plot with a beginning, middle and end and the illustrations help to bring life to the simple story. These books may involve rhyme, which is particularly important for reading aloud.

In books for older children the pictures get smaller and the amount of text increases. Around the age of 5+ children tend to start to become readers themselves, and while picture books are still appealing, perhaps up to the age of 7 or 8, the older child enjoys a chapter book read aloud.

Quite obviously the guidance above can only be general, as each child will be unique in the development of their literacy, thus an older child may enjoy a ‘younger’ stage book and vice versa. It is recommended that museums try out books for group storytelling and see what works best, recognising that the appeal of the story or book depends to a considerable extent upon the storyteller. It is important that the storyteller has pre-read the book, is familiar with the story and can communicate an enthusiasm for it.

**How to choose a book**

In view of the overview provided above, when choosing a book it is important to look beyond the cover: look for attractive, colourful illustrations; a fun and engaging plot; language that flows and preferably involves rhyme; and which offers opportunities for children (and parent and carers perhaps) to join in.

LibrariesNI has developed a book list with museums in mind that can be accessed at ???

This has been structured around nine themes – Animals, Homes, Transport, Books, Music, Castles, Toys, Growing, Light and Shadow – and includes a range of board and picture story books.

As suggested previously it is important for the teller to have pre-read the book and enjoyed the story themselves, but another crucial aspect is the linkage between the chosen theme and selected books, with aspect of the museum collection.

**Developing a Storytelling Session**

Given the driving factors listed above, there are key elements which lead to a successful session, either as a stand-alone event or part of a series of linked activities for young children and families. These include;

* Having a clear link between the book and the collection, with a preference towards objects that are colourful, expressive and engaging.
* Developing a theme in support of the story being told – for example, domestic life collections may give rise to themes around the home, people or living spaces; or an agricultural collection could be used to explore the seasons or food.
* Ensuring that the storyteller or facilitator is well-briefed, rehearsed and clear on the process and its aims, and capable of fostering enthusiasm amongst the group.
* Supporting the theme by way of handling objects or having a story sack/suitcase.
* Actively involving the children by asking them questions about the book - What do they think happens next? Get them involved in the story by making sound effects or other role play. Bringing along toys which relate to the theme and which can enact part of the story. Get them involved in making or finding objects related to the theme.
* Incorporating a number of other experiences, such as music and song.
* Ensuring sessions are FUN, VARIED and ENGAGING.

**Putting together a story box/suitcase**

The themes, styles and content of story boxes, or suitcases if the resource is to be portable, are endless. The key components may be illustrated through the following example;

Collections link: domestic life and toys.

Book: Peace at Last, Jill Murphy.

Suggested target age: 3+, nursery class or P1

Content: Period suitcase, patchwork quilt, oil lamp, 1950s telephone with dial, tinplate aeroplane, wind up alarm clock, black cat soft toy and three teddy bears to represent family group. The objects can be replica or support collection items and are mentioned in the story or included in the book illustrations.

The event can be supported through children bringing along their teddy bear.

The book is read through, and then reread during which time the children are encouraged to make the appropriate sound effects, cat, tap, clock etc., and with story supported through objects from the box or suitcase.

To make the session a little more interactive or physical by introducing some role play, with the children being asked to pretend to be asleep or yawn with tiredness.

It could involve some rhymes about bears or sleeping/bedtime - Teddy bear, Teddy bear turn around, 5 Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed, If you go down to the woods today, and the like.

A simple bear-themed craft activity could be included.

The session could conclude with a teddy bears picnic and the children bring a snack/break with them.

**Practical considerations**

When developing a storytelling activity for young children, some key practical considerations should be borne in mind.

* **Be clear on the form of the session**. Is it exclusively for a particular group (nursery school class, Sure Start or play group or suchlike) or open, and will it operate on a pre-book or drop-in basis? Experience suggests that museums developing their engagement with young children begin by developing relationships with groups so as to ensure an audience and build confidence of the staff piloting the sessions, before opening for drop-in activities.
* **Will there be a charge, or free access?** This will likely be governed by the existing policies on ticketing and access, although museums may wish to operate a particular approach for this type of engagement.
* **How many?** The number of participants will be governed principally by the age range of the children involved. Thus a nursery class could have some 20 children, plus 3 or 4 teachers/helpers, whereas for younger ages a group of 8-10 plus a carer/parent may well be the optimum number.
* **How long?** Similarly, the length of the session will depend on the target age range. For a toddler (aged 2 to 3 years) potentially 30 to 40 minute of structured activities with each activity lasting 5-10 minutes would suffice. For older children, aged 4 to 5 years, the session could last for an hour, with each associated activity being 10 to15 minutes long. Again, there is no rule of thumb, with experience and the views of parents and carers being the best guide.
* **Additional needs.** It goes without saying that particular consideration will need to be made of the additional needs of any participant and a plan agreed on how best to focus and tailor the session to ensure that it is engaging and rewarding.
* **Participation.** It is better that parents, carers and/or group leaders not only attend the session, but are actively involved in it to ensure that all children are supported and to minimise the pressure on the facilitator. This also helps foster a positive, fun learning environment for all.
* **Risk Assessment.** As with any activity involving the public in a museum setting it is necessary that risk assessments are carried out in advance and that all staff/volunteers and facilitators are aware of and work in line with the Safeguarding policy in operation. A detailed assessment of the physical environment needs to be undertaken.
* **Facilities.** A suitable space is necessary for storytelling and indeed any activity involving young children. This can be defined with mats or cushions and could be temporary or permanent within the museum environment. Depending how storytelling is being used and how it fits within the broader engagement activities for young children there may be a children’s play space or interactive area within the museum.
* Attention should also be given to ensuring that all service facilities are of a good standard. These include clear orientation and signage, toilets and changing facilities, parking for buggies, easy access routes, child friendly café (food types, plates and utensils, and seating).
* **Staff Briefing.** All staff, volunteers and external facilitators directly involved in the planning and delivery of the activity should be briefed and be aware of the purpose of the session, the range of activities involved and the age and expectations of the group. Aspects of the briefing need to be extended to the front of house and other service staff.
* **Evaluation.** Evaluation now forms a significant part of the planning and service delivery in museums. As with other activities, book storytelling sessions require to be evaluated robustly. While the views and opinions of the parents and carers can be incorporated into the front-end, formative and summative evaluation processes, staff and facilitators may also wish to use other techniques as well. Observing the response and engagement of children involved in the session is also crucial to explore what works well and what needs to be altered.

**Further information**

There are many bodies and organisations and groups in Northern Ireland that can provide advice and guidance on engaging with young children, including;

<http://www.playboard.org/>

<http://www.youngatart.co.uk/>

<http://www.early-years.org/>

<http://www.ni4kids.com/>

Concerning storytelling:

<https://crickcrackclub.com/>

<http://www.sfs.org.uk/content/using-storytellers-museums>

[When puppets tell the story... | National Air and Space Museum (si.edu)](https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/when-puppets-tell-story)

<http://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/storytelling_resource_changed_font_size.pdf>

With other useful guidance including;

<http://www.safeguardingni.org/cyp/welcome>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/northern-ireland/legislation-policy-guidance/>

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