

Art for all

An award-winning art gallery has been running sessions to encourage children to engage with and explore its collections. *Sue Owen* finds out why the project was a hit with childminders

Earlier this year, childminders were at the forefront of a project to open up art galleries to young children. It is a subject that divides opinion, and the art world. Only recently, visual artist Jake Chapman dismissed taking children to galleries as 'a total waste of time' because they couldn't begin to understand art. In reply, sculptor Antony Gormley said, 'I don't think art is to be understood – it's to be experienced.'

The viewpoint at the Towner gallery and museum in Eastbourne is that everyone should have the chance to visit. The award-winning contemporary art gallery was established in 1923, with a bequest of 21 paintings by Alderman John Chisholm Towner together with a sum of money to establish 'an art gallery for the people'. In 2009, the gallery moved to a striking new building near the seafront.

Until this year, it has been run by Eastbourne Borough Council, but in July it became an independent trust with broadcaster David Dimbleby as chair of trustees. It has an unrivalled collection of paintings, prints, china and textiles by local (but now internationally renowned) artists such as Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious and also puts on stunning temporary exhibitions by modern artists. So Towner is a local gem that attracts visitors from all over the world, but not many of them have been under-fives – until this year.

With a grant from the Challenge Seed Fund for Creative Early Years Partnerships (from Artsworld, a youth art development charity), the Towner's outreach team developed a programme called Tiny Towner. Its aim was to lure young children and their parents and carers through the museum's glass doors and into the galleries, to look at current exhibitions and to enjoy producing their own work.



Also involved in Tiny Towner is Eastbourne's library, and during each session librarian Henry Young and Towner outreach co-ordinator Kat Owen take turns to provide resources and fun ideas for using the resources to both children and adults.

FIRST AUDIENCE

Over a five-month period, the organisers held five pilot sessions and chose childminders as their first audience. The East Sussex Standards and Learning Effectiveness Service contacted registered childminders to find out who might be interested and who would be free and able to bring children to the gallery once a month for five Tuesday mornings.

To make full use of this pilot, the programme staff also undertook an evaluation of the childminders' experiences and took photos of the activities that the children enjoyed the most.

The childminders were understandably uncertain about letting babies loose in an art gallery, but after the first session – which was a

great success – they were eager to return and all the sessions were nearly full, with nine childminders and about 22 children at each one.

The staff chose a theme for each workshop related to the exhibitions and building, and they started off with a free-play session in one of the galleries where there were no exhibitions on at the time or the art was robust enough to withstand a few small collisions.

The children loved being able to run around in a huge room and sometimes using

sculptures for hide and seek. Some also liked to take in the atmosphere of a gallery more quietly, and would stand with their childminder looking at the art and having aspects of it explained to them.

After that, there was a reading session upstairs in a smaller room where

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Quotations from some of the childminders taking part in the gallery project:

'We have all enjoyed every session. Children are all aware of the art gallery. When I say we are coming they are very excited. A parent told me their two-year-old woke up and immediately started saying "art gallery" very excitedly.'

'I would definitely recommend to any parent/childminder to come and

make the most of the brilliant opportunities.'

'Unusual combinations of media – for example, clay, paint, straw, water and full ability to explore the media in their way.'

'They loved the activities in the little room (Fuse Box) when the walls and floor were covered in paper for mark-making and sticking.'

'Creativity from birth!! Thank you! From Gemma, Abigail and Ella.'



Some children liked to have aspects of the art explained to them

Mr Young chose a book that fitted in with the theme. The children would often know the book and be able to join in the story. Then there was activity time.

TAKING SHAPE

The pictures here are of a session in which the chosen book had contained many different shapes and the children then took paper shapes and wandered around the galleries looking for matching shapes. Sometimes the shapes appeared in art and sometimes in the architecture of the building. There was great delight when all the shapes had been matched, sometimes many times over.

One of the most popular sessions was when Ms Owen covered an entire room (floor and walls) with drawing paper and the children could draw anything they liked, anywhere they liked – a great way to end a session and to create their own ‘site specific installation’.

An obvious problem with very young children in a gallery is that

they want to touch everything. Paintings can be high up on walls so don’t pose a problem, but the

MORE INFORMATION

- Increasing numbers of art galleries are trying to attract young children and their carers, so find out what is happening in your area. For a list of art galleries (and museums), visit www.britainsfinest.co.uk/museums
- Tiny Towner sessions, www.townereastbourne.org.uk/event/tiny-towner-bookable-sessions

Towner often has quite fragile sculptures and installations that can be damaged easily.

The staff approached this challenge by talking to the children about the work and explaining that it couldn’t be handled. They also provided a range of ‘diversionary’ activities to keep the children’s hands busy – providing torches, magnifying glasses and view finders to enable the children to look more closely at the artworks and pencils and paper for recording what they were seeing.

It seemed to work. No damage was done and these children are hopefully learning that an art gallery is a place where they are welcome and where they can enjoy finding out about the different ways in which people see the world. Indeed, the children really seemed to enjoy the contemporary art as they looked at it afresh and with none of the preconceptions that many adults bring.

The sessions were so successful (see box with quotes) that Towner has now made them part of its ongoing programme. Under-fives and carers are invited to a free drop-in at the Gallery every Tuesday from 11am to 1pm and there are small, denim explorer jackets full of resources which they can borrow for their visit.

There are also bookable sessions each month, which are similar to the ones run during the pilot.

The first of these was held at the end of September – and the first to book were some of the childminders who had enjoyed the pilot so much. ■

CROSS-CURRICULAR LEARNING

The project opened up opportunities for learning across all areas of the EYFS:

- **Expressive Arts and Design** The most obvious area of learning here and the one that was embedded in all that the children did.
- **Communication and Language** Listening, understanding and speaking about the art works and the children’s own art.
- **Physical Development** Moving around the gallery and negotiating the spaces; handling

different materials, magnifying glasses, torches, paper, pencils, crayons, paintbrushes and feeling paint, water, clay and many other textures in the activity part of the workshops.

- **Personal, Social and Emotional Development** Building relationships with other children and developing confidence in new places, self-awareness and managing behaviour in a public building.
- **Literacy** Listening to stories, looking at words

and signs, and talking to one another and the project leaders about what they are seeing, giving meaning to marks.

- **Mathematics** Developing their understand of shape, space and counting.
- **Understanding the World** Exploring the museum and talking about features of their environment. Children explored shadows and light, sound and movement, spiders and webs, animals and local farming, spring and flowers, and colours and textures.