

DEVELOPING EARLY YEARS PROVISION IN MUSEUMS

Resource for learning practitioners



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

Introduction

PURPOSE AND HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

The focus of this advice guide is Early Years provision in museums and galleries, with an emphasis on learning through play. The guidance supports learning practitioners working in museums and galleries across Scotland to develop and deliver engaging, play-based cultural experiences that are responsive to young children's needs, interest and developmental stages for children from birth to early primary. It outlines approaches, resources, and examples of practice to support the planning and delivery of positive and meaningful learning experiences for this audience.

The early years resource echoes the structure of the advice guide [Working with Schools](#) which can be found in the Education and learning section of the Museum Galleries Scotland website. It highlights work with the audience to date, existing good practice across the sector and encourages peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange.

Recognising the diversity of the sector, this guidance is intended to support reflective practice and continuous improvement. It encourages practitioners to consider the theories and principles that underwrite inclusive, welcoming and nurturing cultural provision for early years and apply them to their own venues.

In line with national policy priorities, this guidance promotes cultural learning experiences that are enjoyable, engaging and developmentally appropriate, supporting children's wellbeing, curiosity and creativity.

The practical guidance contains ideas, suggestions, and case study examples to encourage museum learning practitioners to explore opportunities to engage with, and support the development and learning of, children from birth to five through play. Please note that 'Museum/s' in this resource refers to all museums, galleries, and heritage organisations.

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Contents

1. **Why provide for the early years?**
 - Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
 - Frameworks and Policy Context
2. **Who are children under five and how do they learn?**
 - Child development and learning theories
 - How does the curriculum talk about early learning?
 - Young children learning in families
3. **The importance of play-based learning**
 - What is play?
 - Characteristics of play
 - Types of play
 - Benefits of play
4. **Playing in museums and galleries**
 - Playful programmes
 - Dedicated playful spaces
 - Playful carry round resources
 - Playful interpretation
 - Using screen playfully
 - Potential pitfalls of digital resources
 - Taking the play outdoors
5. **Planning for play**
 - Planning engaging play-based experiences
6. **Barriers to access and participation**
 - Physical
 - Sensory
 - Intellectual
 - Social and emotional
 - Environmental
 - Cultural
7. **Practical solutions to overcoming early years play barriers in museums**
 - Improve the environment
 - Increase sensory and play opportunities



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- Support child-led play
- Support family adults and caregivers

8. [Suggestions for building relationships](#)

9. [Reflective Practice and Professional Development \(CPD\)](#)

10. [Support for early years](#)

11. [Appendices](#)

12. [References](#)



1. Why provide for the early years?

ARTICLE 31 OF THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

[Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) states that all children have a right to play and to participate fully in cultural and artistic life. This includes early years, which the Scottish Government defines as children from birth to eight. Museums in Scotland already provide well for early primary (children aged six to eight) so the focus of this resource is on children under five. Providing developmentally appropriate cultural experiences for babies and young children can be challenging and it's worth considering the many reasons why it's an important thing to do. Early years, which the Scottish Government defines as children from birth to eight. Museums in Scotland already provide well for early primary (children aged six to eight) so the focus of this resource is on children under five. Providing developmentally appropriate cultural experiences for babies and young children can be challenging and it's worth considering the many reasons why it's an important thing to do.

The foremost reason is one of rights, equity, access and inclusion. Children from birth to five should be valued in the same way as other visitors and the same effort should be made to meet their needs.

We know that museums play an important educational and cultural role for audiences of all ages, offering rich, stimulating environments that support learning and wellbeing. This is especially important in the early years. Early childhood is a critical developmental stage, where children thrive on a wide range of positive experiences, as they explore the world around them. Museums are great places to develop children's language, social skills, emotional wellbeing, relationships with caregivers, and understanding of the world.

For museums committed to nurturing lifelong learning, children from birth to five are the first step on that journey. Some museums even target programmes at parents to be, for example in 2025 the National Galleries of Scotland ran [Bring your Own Baby/Bump](#) sessions for new and expectant parents.

Although engagement with under 5s in many Scottish museums has increased, research including the University of Glasgow's analysis of early years programming in Scotland shows that further improvements are needed. Play-based activities are effective at attracting young children and families, but fewer than half of museums surveyed offered programmes specifically for under 5s. Provision for babies and toddlers was identified as the biggest gap. The research highlights opportunities for



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

museums to improve and expand activities for young children (Yauger, University of Glasgow, 2022, [Appendix A: Bullets of the findings](#)).

Experience has shown that catering for the youngest members of the family can help increase family visit numbers and enable family dwell times to increase. [A recent research report on the attitudes and needs of family visitors by Baker Richards](#) for ALVA found that families are looking for “experiences which are shareable and memorable”. The report noted: The report noted:

- Key visit drivers – 67% of parents highlight children's enjoyment and 60% talk about memories created. Children's influence significantly impacts repeat visits.
- 41% of families include a child with Special Educational Needs “(defined as requiring additional support with their learning or development)”. These families are more likely to return and become strong advocates if they feel welcome.

Museums therefore have a responsibility to create inclusive environments that support high-quality early learning, foster a sense of belonging, and encourage lifelong engagement with culture. In doing so, they can help our youngest citizens to thrive.

FRAMEWORKS AND POLICY CONTEXT

The early years is a key Scottish Government priority, and this resource aligns with the following government frameworks and guidance:

- Early Years Framework
- Realising the Ambition: Being Me (RTA) (0-5)
- Play Strategy for Scotland
- Curriculum for Excellence (3 - 5)
- National Strategy for Scotland's museums and galleries

These frameworks emphasise children's rights, wellbeing and entitlement to high-quality, play-based learning experiences.

The [Early Years Framework](#) defines early years as pre-birth to eight years old and sets out Scotland's ambition to give all children the best start in life. It outlines the roles of government, partners, and practitioners emphasising children's right to high-quality relationships, environments, and services that meet their needs holistically.

[Realising the Ambition](#) : (RTA) is national guidance based on child development research, promoting child-centred, play-based learning and high-quality early years practice. It's full of useful insight and practical ideas that could be helpful in a museum learning context.

[The Play Strategy Scotland](#) sets out the Scottish Government's vision for play and its commitment to make Scotland to be the best place to grow up. [Play Scotland](#)



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

provides a wide range of practical guides that would be helpful to anyone in museums and galleries considering a more play-based approach to programming.

[Curriculum for Excellence](#) (CfE) is Scotland's curriculum for children and young people aged 3-18. It builds on solid foundations developed from pre-birth to age three. It is an approach designed to provide young people with the knowledge, skills, and attributes they need for learning, life, and work in the 21st century. It links learning in early years settings and primary schools, showing the progression of key concepts. Scotland's curriculum is evolving and Education Scotland has been undergoing a programme to strengthen the curriculum. [The Curriculum Improvement Cycle \(CIC\)](#) aims to strengthen Scotland's curriculum by providing greater clarity, improving coherence from ages 3-18 and strengthening the links between knowledge, skills, and understanding. Further information on this can be found in [this explainer document](#).

[Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy](#) recognises access to culture is a human right and that museums have a duty to enable inclusive cultural participation and support lifelong learning as key contributors to Scotland's education system. The strategy calls on museums to build strong links within learning sectors and support priorities such as anti-racism, attainment, play-based learning, and workforce development.

2. Who are children under five and how do they learn?

Young children are active, curious, and inquisitive learners who bring prior knowledge to new experiences. In Scotland, the early years span from pre-birth to age eight, recognising the importance of early development and key transitions such as starting school. Early learning focuses on both education and care, recognising the importance of relationships in development. Early years learners have diverse and evolving needs. Whilst all young children are developing their physical, social, and communication skills, they do so at their own pace and their own way, and they learn best through play and active exploration.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING THEORIES

Thinking on child development and early years is a huge international academic field, and current leading practice draws on a wide range of learning theories and influential pedagogies. The following 'big ideas' are still a key part of current practice in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings:



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- **Behaviourist theory** – established the idea of rewarding desired behaviour and from that the power of positive affirmation
- **Cognitive theory** – established the idea of developmental stages and shifted the focus onto how children think, rather than what they know.
- **Constructivist theory** – established that learning is a process of building knowledge through experience.
- **Social constructivist theory** – established the idea that whilst we learn through first-hand experience, we can learn more with support from a 'more knowledgeable other (MKO)'. Learning is essentially social, particularly for higher mental functions like reasoning and self-regulation. It also always operates within a cultural context.

Several educational approaches have also become very influential in the early years sector internationally. They each offer distinctive elements, but all give play a central role. In particular, [Realising the Ambition](#) focuses on:

- The [Froebel approach](#)
- The [Reggio Emilia approach](#)
- [Te Whariki](#) - the New Zealand curriculum

[Julie Fisher](#), an independent Early Years Adviser and Visiting Professor of Early Childhood Education at Oxford Brookes University, explains that children learn by:

- **Being active** – taking part in activities and using what they already know to learn new things.
- **Exploring and investigating** – using their senses (touch, sight, smell, and hearing) to understand the world.
- **Playing** – learning naturally through play, which helps build confidence, creativity, and problem-solving skills.
- **Using language** – learning new words and using them to share ideas and communicate.
- **Interacting with others** – talking and working with other people to support learning.
- **Creative and critical thinking**: developing ideas and problem-solving strategies

(Fisher, 2013)

Neuroscientific research on brain development and working by the [Harvard Centre for the Developing Child](#) shows how these types of positive learning experiences physically grow our brains and help us reach our full potential.

Other research by [Baby Lab at Sussex University](#) focused on how babies make sense of the world around them. The research involved working with museums and galleries, including Perth Art Gallery and Museum.



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

[This Kids in Museums resource](#) is a great starting point for thinking about how babies experience, and learn from, the world around them.

HOW DOES THE CURRICULUM TALK ABOUT EARLY LEARNING?

Within the current Curriculum for Excellence, the early level spans pre-birth to early primary (typically up to age 7–8). Children’s learning and development progresses through developmental stages, while contributing [to the four core capacities that underpin all learning](#):

- **Successful learners** – motivated, creative, and able to apply knowledge in new situations
- **Confident individuals** – with self-respect and wellbeing
- **Responsible citizens** – respecting others and understanding the world
- **Effective contributors** – able to communicate, collaborate, and solve problems

[The curriculum guidance identifies four developmental stages](#):

- **Babies (0–1)**: Learning is sensory and relational, with a focus on secure attachments, early communication, and physical development. These experiences lay the foundations for becoming successful learners and confident individuals.
- **Toddlers (1–3)**: Increasing independence, mobility, and language development. Learning through exploration and play supports the development of confident individuals and effective contributors.
- **Pre-school (3–5)**: Development of communication, social skills, and self-regulation. Play-based learning supports creativity, curiosity, and interaction, contributing to all four capacities, particularly successful learners and responsible citizens.
- **Early primary (5–8)**: Continued development across literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing, and the wider curriculum. Structured but active learning supports progression across all four capacities as central purposes of the curriculum.

As Realising the Ambition points out, progression through these stages varies and does not happen at a set age. Understanding the stages and the journey, however, is useful for museums in developing effective provision.

"There are certain characteristics that are likely to be shared by children of similar ages. Understanding this can help in providing experiences opportunities and interactions which are broadly age appropriate. However, age alone is not the predetermining factor in children’s development. Each child will progress in their own way and at their own rate as there are no set rules for when a child stops being a baby and starts being a toddler or a slightly older child"

- Realising the Ambition, 2020

You can explore the full curriculum here:

- [Purpose of the Curriculum – Education Scotland](#)
- [Curriculum for Excellence overview](#)



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

Questions to challenge your thinking

- How do you provide for all four child development stages in your planning?
- How do you support early learning through play and exploration, active learning, creativity, and critical thinking in your museum?
- How do you help and encourage family adults and caregivers to support child-led visits?

3. The importance of play-based learning

WHAT IS PLAY?

Play is a fundamental part of human development, supporting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth. It is central to how young children learn and make sense of the world. [Froebel](#) described play as the highest expression of development, while [Isaacs](#) viewed it as the means through which children grow. Through play, children explore real-life experiences, process emotions, and develop understanding of their world.

Play is considered most valuable when it is freely chosen and child led. However, skillful adult support can prompt, sustain, and extend children's play which can potentially deepen the play experience. Adults looking to facilitate play opportunities need to strike a careful balance between helping shape the play and leaving children with plenty of choice and agency.

The Scottish Government's [Vision for Play 2025–2030](#) highlights play as essential to childhood - joyful, challenging, and expressive. Play supports adaptation, communication and friendships, and should be inclusive so all children can play safely, regardless of background or ability.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAY

Play typically:

- is enjoyable and engaging.
- is self-directed and not goal-driven by others.
- helps children make sense of their experiences.



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- values the process over the outcome.
- builds agency, control, and self-regulation.
- encourages creativity and imagination.
- allows children to test ideas about the world.
- is shaped by social, cultural, and environmental influences.

"Regardless of whether a play activity falls closer to free play, guided play or games on the continuum, optimal learning through play happens when the activity (1) is experienced as joyful, (2) helps children find meaning in what they are doing or learning, (3) involves active, engaged, minds-on thinking (4) involves iterative thinking (e.g., experimentation, hypothesis testing), and (5) involves social interaction (the most powerful resource available to humans -other people)".

- The Lego Foundation



(Characteristics of playful learning experiences, J. Zosh et.al., LEGO Foundation, 2017)

It's worth noting that whilst children will often seek out play partners, they do also



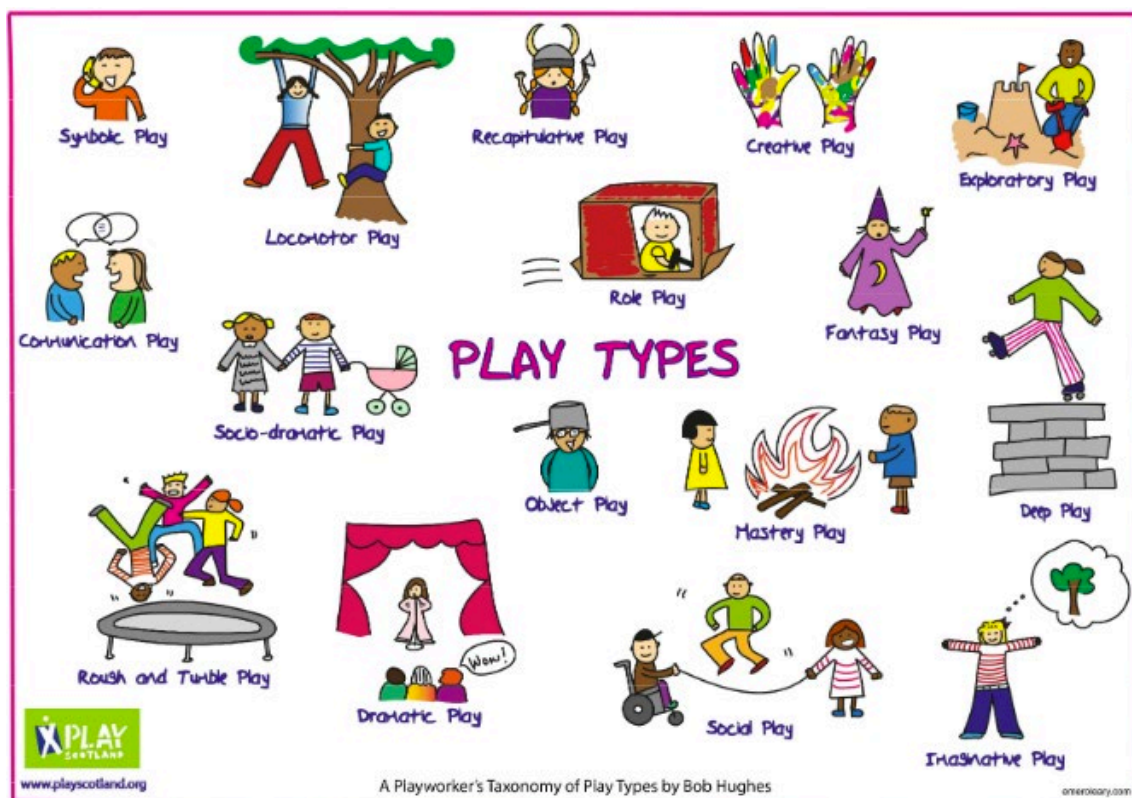
DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

play alone. Academics have described a spectrum of social play from onlooking and solitary play to cooperative play (Parten 2030, Broadhead, 2010). Perhaps the most useful insight for museum planning is noting that babies and toddlers will mainly play alone or in parallel with other children, and so will need their own resources and cannot be expected to share.

TYPES OF PLAY

Thinking about play types can be very useful in planning for playful experiences. It can help ensure that you offer a wide range of types of play, which will appeal to different children at different times.

Academics have devised several frameworks that categorise play into types. Play Scotland uses the illustration below by Bob Hughes in its [Play Types toolkit](#).



A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types, by Bob Hughes

Some people have found it useful to cluster these to keep the number more manageable for planning for example: Exploratory play, pretend play, construction play, physical play, and games with rules. Children can engage in any of the above



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

types of play by themselves or socially with other children or adults.

Another way to categorise play is through 'schemas', which are patterns in children's play.

[Schemas or schematic](#) play refers to children repeating patterns of playful behaviour, for example children in a rotational schema will find lots of different ways to explore the idea of 'round and round' as they play. Whilst there are common schemas that you may spot, children do not work their way through all the schemas, and some children show no evidence of schematic play at all. It can be helpful to us, however, to recognise these patterns as it means we can give children specific resources to continue to explore the schema that is fascinating to them. [Education Scotland has more information about schemas here](#), as well as [a graphic that visually explores the different types of schematic play](#).

Whilst not actually a way to categorise play, both Realising the Ambition and Play Scotland also mention [loose parts play](#). The key idea is that children should be able to create their own playful environments rather than play in static environments created for them by adults. Loose parts are open-ended materials that children can move and use in any way they choose - whether building a robot, creating a den, or exploring textures. With no instructions, they encourage creativity, curiosity, collaboration and agency.

Loose parts play can be challenging in museum spaces, but it provides a highly immersive, child-led way to engage with objects or museum themes. It's particularly good for nurturing imaginative thinking and problem-solving and its open-ended nature makes it excellent for families with children of different ages or needs. Play Scotland's [Loose Parts Toolkit](#) is a good source of inspiration, especially if you have outdoor spaces. However, don't let limited space deter you. Something as simple as a box of fabrics can transform a corner of a gallery.

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

Play is essential for developing children's communication, social, and learning skills. It supports children's physical and emotional development and is key to wellbeing. During play, children explore concepts like science and maths while building confidence and relationships.

The [National Literacy Trust](#) provides a compelling list of reasons for why play is important, which may be useful to refer to for funding applications.

Questions to challenge your thinking

- How do you provide open-ended play opportunities that enable young



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- children to explore your collections?
- How could you enthuse your colleagues about the value of play?
- Do you have volunteers who could supervise loose parts, a space where loose parts could be safely used or could you organise loose parts activities sessions?

4. Playing in museums and galleries

What might playful learning in museums look and feel like? It can take several forms but at its heart it is most effective when it enables children to use play to make sense of our collections, displays, stories and buildings.

PLAYFUL PROGRAMMES

A good starting place for provision is timed programmes. These can be anything from simple participatory sessions with songs and rhymes all the way up to pop up play spaces or toddler takeover days. Many museums have successfully introduced regular weekly or monthly early years sessions, which can build a sense of community.

Examples:

- Using their museum collections, objects and artworks, [Glasgow Life - Museums](#) offers a range of playful programmes and activities for the early years, including nurseries. These include mini museum explorers (for 3-5 year olds) and Art for baby (for babies to walking stage), with a focus on supporting the carer or parent to take part in the group activity.
- The [Scottish Maritime Museum](#) runs regular play-based sessions for under 5s each month. These can include STEM Lego challenges, arts and crafts, and playful prompts through fancy dress and stories to encourage imaginative play.
- [Perth Art Gallery](#) runs regular free Baby Play sessions for children under 1.
- [Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums](#) hosted a "Play Day" for preschoolers and their grown-ups with a free, drop-in loose parts session, where children and families explored creative play using a range of materials—without rules or structure. (Case study a)
- [National Museums Scotland](#) runs "Sensory Sundays" – hands-on sensory play sessions designed for children (including those with additional needs), focusing on touch, sound, and interaction.

Case study (a)



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums - Loose parts play session for young children

Rachel Thibbotumunuwe, Learning Manager at Aberdeen Archives, Gallery & Museums, Aberdeen City Council.

Since 2025, Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums has run a free monthly loose parts session for young children and families. Launched as part of a Play Day, the session is led by an Early Years Practitioner with volunteer support and complements programmes such as Guthrie's Goslings and Baby Boogie, which help families feel welcome and confident exploring museum spaces and collections from an early age.

To establish the programme, we partnered with Dundee-based ScrapAntics to train staff and volunteers and invested in a range of loose parts resources, including wooden blocks, planks, tubes, fabrics and reclaimed materials.

The sessions encourage observation, balancing, measuring, and testing, while building confidence, wellbeing, and social connection for both children and adults. Funding from the Science Museum Group's Science in Your World programme enabled investment in training, resources and storage, supporting our commitment to building science capital through museum learning.

Top tips: Work with early years specialists, invest in quality resources, and plan storage from the outset.

Additional information

London Museums - [Early Years Toolkit: play, explore, and learn together](#)

DEDICATED PLAYFUL SPACES

For museums and galleries with more space and budget, a dedicated early years area can be a good option. This has the advantage of being always available to families and may not need facilitation. If it is enclosed, it can also make loose parts play a possibility. It's often easier to support families to explore the collections, and to offer variety, through programming. However, you might like to read [this](#) blog from American Alliance of Museums on why creating dedicated spaces in a museum are worth the space and/or funding. on why creating dedicated spaces in a museum are worth the space and/or funding.

Examples of playful spaces at museums:



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- [Hands on art](#) at Perth Art Gallery is a dedicated playful space for young children. It offers open-ended exploratory experiences to inspire curiosity and creative expression.
- The [Young V&A \(London\)](#) have created a 'Play gallery' – an interactive gallery with sensory, hands-on displays and a mini museum for babies and toddlers, all designed around play and exploration.
- [Museum of Scottish Fire Heritage](#) created its kid friendly museum with a variety of activities including dress up and family friendly interactives. (Case study b)

Case study (b)

[Museum of Scottish Fire Heritage](#) - Creating a kid friendly museum

Kelly McMeekin, National Museum of Fire Manager at Museum of Scottish Fire Heritage

Opened in June 2023, Museum of Scottish Fire Heritage was praised as a modern, accessible museum packed with history. Early family-friendly features included:

- Replica firefighting kit from the 1800s to the present day
- Interactive touchscreen displays with audio and games
- Colouring sheets
- Gallery Spotter activities

Public feedback highlighted plenty for older children but fewer activities for younger visitors. Some volunteers also lacked confidence in delivering family-focused engagement.

In 2024, the museum partnered with Kids in Museums to create a family-friendly interaction training, recruited a Heritage Outreach and Engagement Officer to develop formal learning programmes, introduced Book Bug sessions, and launched a monthly Lego and Mega Blocks club.

In 2025 child toilet seats and step stools were added, small tables were installed including, toys, bookcases, and books in the gallery and additional paper towel dispensers to some toilets. Two additional baby changing tables were also installed.

In 2026, the museum added two more baby changing tables, introduced paper towels in all bathrooms alongside hand dryers.

It launched Bright Sparks: People Who Help Us, an Early Level workshop for nursery and P1 pupils. The programme includes a gallery tour, hands-on exploration of firefighter kit, a craft activity, and, where possible, a visit to McDonald Road Fire Station.



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

Top tips

- Listen to what people want in the space.
- It's not just about the gallery- think of the site as a whole experience down to toilets and giftshop.
- Don't try to do everything at once, take a stepped approach.
- Share when you have made an update which reflects any response to visitor suggestions.
- Be actively welcoming to wee ones in your gallery space.

Additional information:

Perth Art Gallery [reflect on the first year of operating their Hands on Art space](#).

PLAYFUL CARRY ROUND RESOURCES

Lots of museums and galleries create family trails and quizzes for older children. Playful resources for under 5s look rather different. Try to think of them as the props and prompts for playful encounters with your collections and buildings, rather than a set of instructions to follow.

Example:

Brighton Pavilion worked with Baby Lab at Sussex University to produce a [Baby Guide](#) that encourages caregivers to support their babies in exploring the building.

Additional information

This [research article](#) from the Science Museum, London, considers how using exploratory cubes with prompts to see, wonder and move can support playful collections-focused learning for young children.

PLAYFUL INTERPRETATION

Young children can't yet engage with abstract concepts. They need to start with concrete, first-hand, observable things and make connections to their lived experience and existing knowledge. Start with the familiar and move to the novel. For this reason, playful interpretation focused on specific objects, rather than broad themes, is likely to be most appealing.

Example:

[Glasgow Museums](#) recently reviewed their display narratives and interpretation for early years audiences, placing this key audience at the heart of the planning process. (Case study c)

Case study (c)

Glasgow Museums Planning displays and interactives for early years



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

audiences

*Carolyn Foran, Museum Education Officer / Learning and Access Curator
Glasgow Life – Museums*

At Glasgow Life Museums, identifying the target audience at the start of a project shapes object selection, narratives and interpretation. To support display teams, audience guidelines outline how different groups learn, engage with collections and experience museum visits.

Key considerations for early years audiences:

- Museum visits are about exploring spaces and experiences as well as content.
- Interpretation should engage children while supporting carers with prompts for discussion.
- Select eye-catching, unusual, or accessible objects that spark curiosity and conversation.
- Position objects at child-friendly heights, or incorporate discovery through interactives, drawers, and flaps.
- Learning through play is essential, helping develop problem-solving, motor, social, and language skills.
- Include hands-on activities such as exploring, sorting, hiding, finding, and moving objects.
- Provide opportunities for multi-sensory engagement.
- Create multi-sensory experiences by incorporating touch, sound, movement, texture, and other sensory elements. These encourage exploration, cater to different learning styles and help children connect with collections through active engagement.
- Ensure interactives are highly durable - costumes are popular but require ongoing maintenance.



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Image: courtesy of Glasgow Museums

If you'd like a copy of the draft guidelines, please contact:
clare.gray@glasgowlife.org.uk

Additional information

Whilst not thinking only about early years, [this Museums Journal article](#) by Anna Salaman and Joe Graham looks at using play as interpretation. It is accessible to Museum Association members only.

Kids in Museums has also produced a relevant article: [Creating family friendly interpretation](#).

USING SCREENS PLAYFULLY

Digital technologies are part of everyday life and can support young children's learning when used appropriately. Children learn both about technology and through it. It is great for offering exciting multi-sensory experiences, for having immediate feedback mechanisms and can be a lot of fun. The greatest benefits come, however, when technology is used to enhance a wider learning experience.



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

There has recently been much discussion about what is a healthy level of screen use for young children with the UK Government publishing [guidance](#) that offers strong guard rails. They recommend no unsupervised screen time for children under 2 and, at most, one hour per day for children from two to five. Whilst families often enjoy using screens in museums, what they most value is real world, physical and sensory experiences, especially when it comes to play. So, if museums can include screen based or digital elements that will be used by the youngest visitors it's sensible to consider creating:

- Experiences that support **interaction and family togetherness**, both in the content and the interface.
- Experiences that extend or **contextualise a real-world encounter**, e.g. images or footage that helps children see how animals move or how an object is used.
- Experiences that offer **choice and interaction**, avoiding passivity.
- Open-ended experiences that allow children and their caregivers to **create together** and **express themselves**.
- Experiences that **prompt physical responses**.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF DIGITAL RESOURCES

As well as the need to prioritise real world and human encounters over digital ones, there are some practical considerations in offering digital resources as part of play for under 5s.

- **Technical frustrations:** Poor connections, delays, or device problems can interrupt play and potentially cause frustration.
- **Interface frustrations:** Use needs to be totally intuitive, with cause and effect very clear.
- **Physical access:** Fixed screens and exhibits are often not at a good height for young children. Consider adding seating or using carry-round resources like digital cameras.
- **Turn taking:** Young children are not good at waiting to access resources. Design digital activities for multiple users, for example an interactive 'wall' or a dance floor where children can do their own thing or play together.
- **Online safety and privacy:** Adults need to ensure children are using age-appropriate platforms, and that personal information is protected.

Example:

This [Fitzwilliam Museum blog](#) explores their Toddlers go digital programme, which was developed to offer a new way for families with very young children to respond to their collections.

Additional information

[Kids in Museums](#) have published this useful guide if you're thinking of using playful digital resources.



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

TAKING THE PLAY OUTDOORS

Offering playful opportunities in shared public spaces can be challenging and museums and galleries often need to think creatively when they plan playful provision.

Surprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic enabled many museums to strengthen their early years provision. For example, museums and galleries contributed significantly to the Scottish Government's Get into the Summer Programme (2021), which focused strongly on supporting children from low-income households. In the resulting Summer of Play projects many museums discovered the value of outdoor spaces and offered playful programmes for families with children under 5 for the first time, (Case study d).

If you are thinking of offering play opportunities outdoors some things to consider include:

- **Unpredictable weather:** Consider the weather and offer shelter, or somewhere to dry off/warm up.
- **Safety:** Manage risks through design, planning and training rather than removing them entirely. Risk is a valuable part of children's play, so take a balanced approach.
- **Mess:** The outdoors is a great place for messy play. Children and their grown-ups may feel more comfortable with mess if you can offer protective clothing and/or the chance to get clean again.
- **Cost:** Use natural materials and simple resources. These keep costs down but also encourage nature play and enable loose parts play.
- **Space:** While some play fixtures might be permanent, you can make more of your space by having extra resources you can bring out.
- **Storage:** Invest in space-saving storage to protect equipment.
- **Secure play space:** Caregivers are often concerned about children wandering away so, if possible, make sure your play space is enclosed.
- **Staff motivation:** Involve staff in planning and provide training to build confidence.

Case study (d)

Summer of Play project - 2020-21

National Mining Museum Scotland - Accessible workshops

Victoria Brown

Learning & Access Manager

During the 2021 summer holidays, the National Mining Museum Scotland (NMMS) designed its programme to be safe, inclusive, and enjoyable for children of all ages and abilities. The museum made improvements to its outdoor play park, including a sensory board and wheelchair-accessible equipment, reflecting its commitment to



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

accessibility. Sessions ranged from energetic activities such as bubble soccer to music and movement workshops for babies and toddlers.

Activities for babies, toddlers, and older children included themed picnics, kite flying, obstacle courses, bubble soccer, treasure hunts, and music and movement workshops. The programme also prioritised children with additional support needs by providing quiet, sensory-friendly spaces. Activity choices were informed by community requests for more outdoor play opportunities. All activities were free of charge, and free snacks of fruit were provided as well.

Four of the five activities were suitable for children under 5, with two specifically targeting this age group. Demand was particularly high for the Jo Jingles sessions for children aged five months to four years, requiring an additional workshop due to popularity. Parents responded positively to the programme.

Scottish Maritime Museum - Family-friendly STEAM activities

Claire Jones
Deputy Director
Learning, Engagement and Volunteer Manager

Scottish Maritime Museum (SMM) delivered free, family-friendly STEAM activities shaped by community feedback and designed to be inclusive and child-led. Programming was linked to the museum's maritime collections and the Into the Maelstrom exhibition, including six maritime-themed story sessions for under 5s and their families, and 12 free Arts Award Discover sessions combining art and collection exploration.

The museum successfully engaged lower-income families, with most participants coming from areas of high deprivation. A total of 20 children under 5 and 18 adult caregivers took part in the early years' activities. These sessions proved popular, with parents requesting their continuation. Subject to staffing capacity, the museum plans to introduce regular toddler sessions in the future.

An evaluation report conducted, showed the under 5 programme was successful and popular, with visitors calling for it to become a permanent museum programme

Next step:

Scottish Maritime Museum continues to deliver a range of early years activities, including holiday programmes, regular sessions and workshops for early years settings.

A key lesson has been the value of involving families in shaping programmes. The most successful sessions include play, sensory experiences, choice and food, while a familiar structure helps children and their grown-ups feel confident and engaged.



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

Early years work benefits the museum by introducing young children to the collection, inspiring curiosity and imagination, and bringing fresh perspectives that have influenced how we interpret and share our stories across the wider family programme.

Additional information

To get an idea of all the ways that early year's provision can look like in museums, [check out this Museums of London early years toolkit](#).

Questions to challenge your thinking

- Is it clear to parents and caregivers that your museum values play to engage with collections either indoors or outdoors?
- Have you considered all the different ways that playful learning could look in your museum?
- How can you ensure that you embed playful experiences into the mainstream of your interpretation?

5. Planning for play

'Children in the earliest years become competent through engagement with their environment, the people within it, and the experiences that they provide.'

- Bredikyte, 2017

Children under 5 learn through meaningful first-hand experiences. These might include:

- Imitating or being shown how to do something, like how to stir something or use scissors.
- Repeating and practicing, like throwing and catching a ball.
- Conversations and listening, like sharing a picture story book with a grown up.
- Joining in group activities, like singing action songs or nursery rhymes or cooking with a grown up.
- Playing, including exploring how things work, imagining with toy cars and figures or running and climbing.

Whilst all of these have their place, active learning and play are the most important for children under 5. In play-based learning, children are in control and have agency. They can make choices, decisions, and follow their own interests. So, how should you plan playful cultural experiences that engage young children in this way?

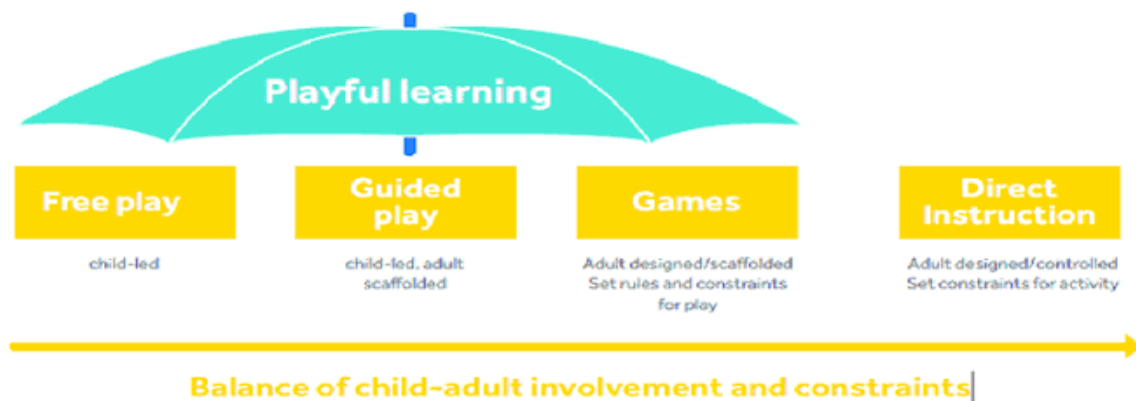
Play-based learning is child-led and adult supported. It is usually open-ended and not too restricted in terms of start and end times or expecting children to sit still for very long. All of this can be challenging for museums and means that under 5s



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

sessions need to look quite different to traditional family friendly workshops. One way to approach this is to think about planning opportunities to play and offering playful materials, rather than planning a led session.

The diagram below from the LEGO Foundation White paper: [Learning through play](#) p.13 might be helpful in thinking about how your role as session leader might become less of a leader from the front and more of a facilitator. You can then plan for children to have free play experiences, for example through a pop-up play space with toys and resources, guided play, for example where you bring out extra resources following children's interests or games where families join in playfully with their own actions to songs or play simple games with rules.



Playful learning diagram, from the LEGO Foundation White Paper

Whether you opt for programmes, or playful interpretation, carry round resources, or a mix of them all, your role is to plan opportunities to play that are as open-ended as possible so that children and their caregivers can bring their own lived experiences to them and play in a way that suits them. This is subtly different to the way we often plan learning experiences for an older audience, with explicit learning outcomes, often based on new knowledge. For example, in a ceramics gallery you might provide different tea sets for families to choose between and play with. They might make connections to the shape and function of objects on display. By pouring and drinking 'tea' they might use movement to explore the objects they cannot touch. They might notice that you have put out a wooden, metal and plastic set and use those words, or wonder why there is not a China set to play with. Or they might simply make a connection between their time in the gallery and having 'tea' at home. All are relevant and impactful possible outcomes from an open-ended play opportunity.

When you plan for play:

- Think about the space you have and what kind of resources would work



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

there.

- Make sure the space and resources are safe to use.
- Think about your role. Do you need to lead from the front at all, or for part of a session?
- Think about how you can support the children and their adults as a unit.
- Try to create experiences that need as few instructions as possible - give families things to do and decisions to make.
- Think about the different developmental stages – can you cater for all of them? (See [Appendix B](#) on developmental play).
- Try to focus any resources, stories or activities on specific objects that families can see for themselves, choosing something familiar as a starting point.
- Keep it simple - often less is more.
- Consider buggies and where they can be stored.
- Keep it as open-ended as possible – your provision will be more inclusive, work for families with a range of children, and encourage repeat visits because the resources can be used differently each time.

Additional information

Play Scotland have produced this practical guide to play-based learning: [Playful Pedagogy: a guide to getting started](#)

The Highland Council's [Getting started with Play Pedagogy in P1: things to consider](#) provides lots of useful examples of how teachers have prioritised play pedagogies in P1 class contexts.

[Group for Education in Museum](#) (GEM) has an early years themed case study publication with examples that may inspire you as you plan for play in your own venue.

Questions to challenge your thinking

- Does your planning meet the needs of all children and their individual needs?
- Do you know when to support and when to step back to encourage independence?
- Have you considered how consulting with families could contribute to your planning?

6. Barriers to access and participation

Access for all is fundamental to museums. In addition to physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional, cultural, and socio-economic barriers, children and families may face challenges such as limited buggy storage, baby-changing and feeding facilities, visiting



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

times, and a lack of perceived welcome or relevance.

The [Equality Act 2010](#) protects everyone including children and young people from discrimination and to advance equality and opportunity for all. Museums should actively promote equity, diversity, inclusion, and participation by removing barriers and embedding equitable access in their policies, programmes, and practice. Addressing discrimination and anti-racism is essential to ensure all children, regardless of background or disability, can learn, belong, and thrive.

By celebrating diversity and creating welcoming, inclusive environments, museums can support learning, creativity, confidence, and a sense of belonging for all children and young people. [Article 31, 1-2 of the UNCRC](#)

One of the biggest barriers for young children in museums is not having enough space or resources to play and explore the collections. Although it can be hard for museums to find the space and money, many have found creative solutions. For example, during the Summer of Play Programme 2021, the [National Mining Museum Scotland](#) (NMMS) made improvements to their outdoor playpark and designed it to be safe, inclusive, and accessible for children of all ages and abilities. Activities for babies, toddlers, and older children included themed picnics, kite flying, obstacle courses, bubble soccer, treasure hunts, and music and movement workshops. See case study (d).

COMMON BARRIERS

Physical

- Long travel distances or expensive entry costs
- Poor transport links or limited access to rural museums
- Buildings with stairs, narrow spaces, or hard-to-find entrances
- Lack of child-friendly facilities (e.g. buggy space, toilets, seating and feeding areas)
- Cost, ticket structures, time, and access issues that limit regular visits

Sensory

- Displays mainly designed to be looked at (not touched or interacted with)
- Small labels or exhibits placed too high for children to see
- Lack of audio, tactile, or multi-sensory experiences
- Overwhelming environments (noise, crowds, lighting), which can affect younger children and children with autism

Intellectual

- Information that is too complex or text-heavy



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- Lack of interactive or hands-on activities
- Content not linked to children's familiar lived experiences
- Limited support for different learning styles or abilities
- Overly structured activities restricting child-led free-play
- Content not linked to the collections, displays or buildings
- Emphasis on formal learning rather than exploration and creativity

Social and emotional

- Museums seen by adult/caregiver as boring, irrelevant, or not for them and their children
- Limited representation or connection to diverse backgrounds
- Concern over breaking rules and young children not being welcome (e.g. 'don't touch' culture). Family adults need to feel that children have permission to play.'
- Adults/caregivers feeling unsure how to support play in the museum

Environmental

- Spaces designed for adults discourage play
- Object-heavy galleries with few interactive or hands-on elements
- Limited space for movement or any type of exploration beyond just looking
- A reluctance to provide "loose parts", which are central to meaningful play

Cultural

- Collections, displays, interpretation and events not culturally appropriate and responsive
- Inappropriate or lack of cultural programmes and audience engagement policies, practices, and principles

7. Practical solutions to overcoming early years play barriers in museums

Improve the environment

- Create dedicated play areas within galleries (e.g. soft spaces, messy play or role play zones)



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- Provide space for movement and exploration (not just “look only” displays)
- Design child-height displays and interactive elements

Increase sensory and play opportunities

- Add hands-on, multi-sensory activities (touch, sound, movement)
- Offer play sessions (e.g. storytelling, music, messy play)
- Include open-ended materials (loose parts, creative play resources) to encourage exploration

Support child-led play

- Allow free, unstructured play instead of only adult-led activities
- Encourage children to explore objects in their own way and at their own pace
- Provide simple prompts rather than instructions

Support family adults and caregivers

- Give guidance and prompts to help adults feel confident facilitating play
- Run family-focused sessions that model playful interaction
- Encourage shared parent–child activities to build confidence and make your museum more welcoming
- Use clear messaging that play is allowed (give clear permissions and invitations to play)
- Design spaces that feel friendly, informal, and inclusive

Improve learning design

- Link activities to familiar, everyday experiences as starting points for young children - moving from the familiar to the novel
- Use simple language and visual prompts instead of text-heavy information

Address practical access

- Provide buggy-friendly spaces, toilets, feeding areas
- Offer low-cost or free entry options for families that encourage repeat visits
- Improve visibility of family-friendly facilities and activities

Improve inclusion

Think about:

- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities/Additional Support Needs (SEND/ASN)
- English as Additional Language (EAL)



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- Cultural diversity

Key features include:

- Flexible spaces that adapt to children's needs and interests.
- Visual cues, symbols, and multilingual labels.
- Sensory-friendly areas for neurodiverse children.
- Accessible resources and pathways.
- Displays that reflect diverse cultures, languages, and identities.

Why not try:

- Offering relaxed sessions or quieter dedicated times for young children and families
- Working with families and caregivers to understand the complexities, diversities and cultural differences of individual families and how this can impact each child
- Working with the Education Scotland Anti-Racism in Education Programme taking inspiration from the [Anti-Racist Curriculum Principles](#) 'Breaking the Mould' practical guidance and suggestions for ways to facilitate, spaces, experiences, and interactions
- Incorporating dual-language signs and storybooks into the environment.
- Displaying key vocabulary with accompanying images and icons
- Providing opportunities to use and value home languages, through songs, greetings and communication with families

Examples:

- Relaxed Magic Carpets / Curiosity Clubs – [National Museums Scotland](#) adapted early years sessions offering calmer, accessible play environments for families with additional needs.
- Quiet rooms are always available at The Burrell Collection and Kelvin Hall during museum hours including autism friendly sessions for autistic people, people with additional needs, neurodivergent people or people with sensory needs as well as their families, friends, and carers. You can find out [more information about Glasgow Life Museum's work to be autism-friendly on their website](#), including their [Autism Friendly sessions for Clip n' Climb and Soft Play](#).

Additional information

[Kids in Museums' Playful Prompts Training in partnership with Museums Galleries Scotland](#) explored the power of play to transform museum spaces and programming.

Early Level: Exploring Anti-Racist Curriculum Principles, Scottish Government's Anti-racism in Education Programme <https://www.antiracisted.scot/early-level/are-principles>



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

References

You can download [Highland One World's Seeds for Change – Developing Global Citizens through Play at Early Level](#) resource [here](#).

Questions to challenge your thinking

- How can you ensure you have removed the basic barriers to access that families with young children might face in your museum?
- How can you improve your learning space to create an inclusive enabling environment in your museum?
- What challenges or barriers might you face in doing this?

8. Suggestions for building partnerships

Working in partnership can help museums create meaningful, play-based experiences that really work for children and families.

Identifying and building relationships with local early learning and care (ELC) providers, including nursery, schools, and early years experts, is a great way to tap into a pool of knowledge and experience that can be directly helpful to your planning. You can work together to:

- Make sure you understand any barriers to access and inclusion.
- Identify the most interesting and relevant parts of your collections and buildings.
- Maximise the playfulness of your provision.
- Ensure you are meeting the learning needs of all the developmental stages from babies to early primary.
- Maximise your provision's relevance to the curriculum.
- Future proof your provision by keeping up to date with new thinking and government priorities around early years.

If you're relatively new to early years learning, early years settings can be a good opportunity for observing children learning through play. In addition, ELC providers can be fantastic gateways to reaching families so that you can try out ideas and test programmes and resources. They are also well connected to their communities, so can act as a link to priority families and groups.

Additional information

Museums Galleries Scotland has information on [Working with schools](#) on its website.



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

Read this blog from [Nesta](#) on Supporting parents and families through playful museum interventions.

9. Reflective practice and professional development

Reflective practice is an important part of being an early year's learning practitioner. It helps you think about your values, actions, and decisions so you can improve your work and provide the best experiences for children.

Through reflection, supervision, and continuous professional development (CPD), you can build your confidence, skills, and understanding. Reflective practice is an ongoing process that helps you recognise what works well and identify areas for improvement. By thinking about your daily interactions, activities, and how you respond to challenges, you can improve your practice and the quality of care and learning you provide for children and their families.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is all about ongoing learning that helps professionals keep their knowledge and skills up to date and continue to grow in their roles. In museum early years settings, CPD helps improve outcomes for children, ensures practice stays in line with current policies and requirements, and encourages the use of effective, research-informed approaches.

By taking part in activities such as training, reading and discussing research, and connecting with other professionals, CPD can:

- Strengthen your day-to-day practice,
- Build your confidence and support collaboration with others
- Help create a culture of continuous improvement and high-quality practice within your museum and across the wider museum sector.

EXAMPLES OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND CPD

Applying reflective practice:

- Journaling key insights from practice
- Reviewing planning to assess what worked and why
- Considering the impact of your interactions on the children's experiences
- Seeking feedback from colleagues

Types of CPD

- Online courses
- Attending training and events including conferences, workshops and networking



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

- Peer-to-peer learning, sharing best practice and research projects

Examples:

Models of reflective practice and CPD - [Appendix D](#)

- [Kolb's Experiential learning Cycle](#) - Helpful for ongoing development and promotes continuous development process
- Driscoll's Model (What? - So what? - Now what?) provides a clear and accessible aid to guide your reflection. [There is information on the NHS England website on this model which you may find useful](#)

Additional information

- Kids in Museums work with museums, heritage sites, and cultural organisations to make them more welcoming for children and families. Its [Manifesto](#) provides a framework for improvements, and its website has useful information and case study examples relevant to play.
- [Group for Education in Museums](#) (GEM) provides networking and learning opportunities for everyone interested in learning through museums, heritage, and cultural settings. Its website contains resources including publications, training, and events.
- The [Museums Association](#) offers a continuous development framework for the museum sector workforce including [Associateship of the Museums Association \(AMA\)](#)
- [Education Scotland's](#) website contains resources on professional learning and other resources.

Questions to challenge your thinking

- How can reflective practice help you address challenges and improve the quality of your early years provision?
- How can you use feedback to enhance practice and support continuous improvement?
- How can you strengthen your reflective practice and CPD to build confidence and improve relationships with children, families, and colleagues?

10. Support for early years

[Museums Galleries Scotland](#) (MGS) is the national development body for Scotland's museum sector. MGS supports museums and galleries through strategic investment, advice, workforce development and advocacy. It provides funding distributed via grants



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

directly to the museums and galleries sector. One of the six grant outcomes is relevant to early years learning - Outcome six: [Museums will enhance quality of life for people by improving wellbeing, supporting learning or contributing to place-making.](#)

MGS also works in partnership with other organisations such as [The National Lottery Heritage Fund](#) and [Art Fund](#) to distribute funding for specific activity.

11. Appendices

APPENDIX A: ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS FROM MGS LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN SCOTLAND'S MUSEUMS PROJECTS CONDUCTED BY UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW.

Key findings

- Few museums initially planned activities for children under five: only 3 of 8 proposals explicitly targeted this age group, rising to 5 when five-year-olds were included.
- Only two museums explicitly used the term “learning through play,” although all incorporated play-based activities and emphasized physical activity and engagement.
- Several reports highlighted that additional planning time would have improved programme delivery. Organisations linked limited preparation time to staffing shortages, cancelled activities, and reduced engagement with local groups.
- Despite these challenges, most project goals were achieved. Seven organisations ultimately offered activities accessible to under 5s, though only three had specifically planned programming for this age group.
- The remaining five organisations either did not provide activities for under 5s or did not report participant ages.
- Activities for under 5s ranged from self-directed play, such as colouring, play dough, and sensory toys, to structured programmes, including music workshops for toddlers and caregivers.
- Reports consistently indicated strong participation from under 5s, with some museums expanding sessions in response to demand.

Annette Yauger, University of Glasgow, 2022



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS

APPENDIX B: DEVELOPMENTAL PLAY IN MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Different types of play provision can be more effective at different developmental stages. All rely on family-friendly facilities.

Babies (0–12 Months)

- **The Focus:** Sensory stimulation, physical comfort, and caregiver bonding.
- **Museum Features:** High-contrast visual displays or building features, soft flooring to allow them out of buggies, handling toys and materials for in-buggy use.
- **Activity Style:** Tummy-time mats near artworks, gentle object and texture exploration, explorer guides or musical sessions.

Type of play: Exploratory play

Toddlers (1–3 Years)

- **The Focus:** Gross motor skills, cause-and-effect, and early language development.
- **Museum Features:** Low-level interactive walls, sturdy objects to push or pull, and dedicated "messy play" zones
- **Activity Style:** Object-handling boxes, short interactive storytelling walks through galleries, and simple sorting games
- **Type of play:** Exploratory play, Pretend play, physical play

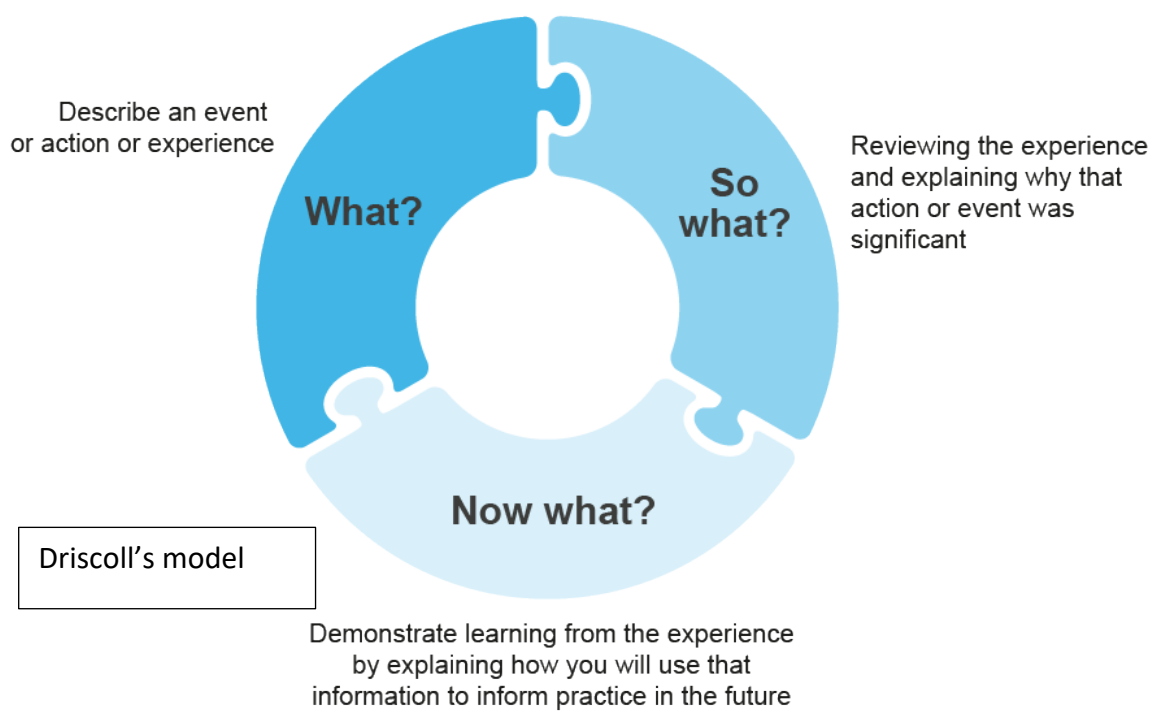
Preschoolers (3–5 Years)

- **The Focus:** Imagination, social play, independence, and basic problem-solving.
- **Museum Features:** Dress-up areas, complex building blocks, and activity trails.
- **Activity Style:** Role-playing historical characters, hunting for specific shapes or animals in paintings, and basic crafting workshops
- **Type of play:** Exploratory play, pretend play, physical play, construction play and games with rules.

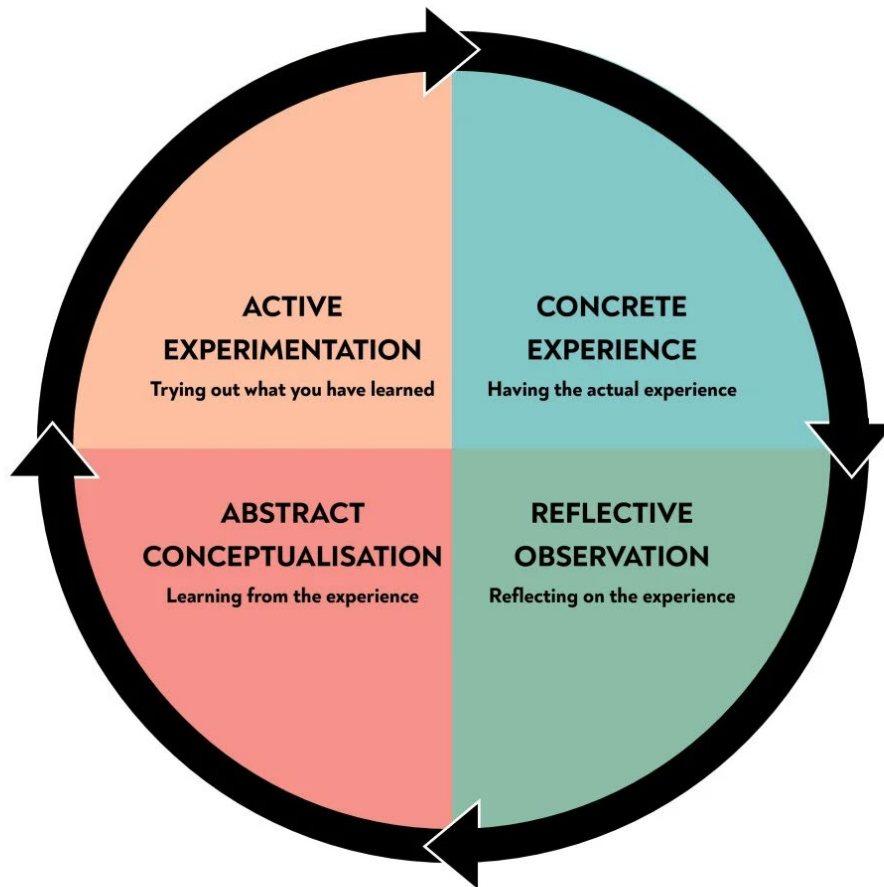
APPENDIX D: HELPFUL MODELS FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND CPD



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS



DEVELOPING PROVISION IN MUSEUMS FOR EARLY YEARS



Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is a four-stage model showing how people learn through experience. Four stages make up the loop. It moves through **Concrete Experience** (doing/having an experience), **Reflective Observation** (reviewing the experience), **Abstract** (concluding/learning from the experience), and **Active Experimentation** (planning/trying out what you've learned).



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