

Tagung Museumsverband Baden-Württemberg e.V.
„Dialog auf Augenhöhe - Partizipation als Chance?“
21.-22. Oktober 2016, Ludwigsburg

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Small Voice Big Ideas

Through this presentation I will share with you why we, as a museum, feel it is valuable to consult with children, show you how the children support our exhibition development/programming and offer up some helpful tips.

I would like to think that we've come a long way since the phrase "Children should be seen and not heard" was first uttered around the 15th century (applied to young women).

Listening to children encourages and supports them to express what they're thinking and feeling but it can also have a profound impact on us as adults and in the wider society. At Eureka! we listen to and learn from children. We value their right to have a voice, to share ideas and opinions and to share their expertise with us. Listening is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships with the children we work with and is central to the learning process.

Deborah Ruiz-Dove, Childcare Development Officer in the UK said "Children and young people have views, experiences and knowledge that are unique to their own situation within society and which must be acknowledged. They have the ability to make important decisions and it is our responsibility to engage them in the consultation process and empower them to make choices in matters affecting them. What they are asking for is respect, dialogue and action. Some of the changes children and young people want are difficult to achieve, cost a great deal and take time to implement, however this does not invalidate the relevance."

Eureka! is a museum for children, therefore consults with children to find out what they need, enjoy and understand in order to make our exhibitions as good as they can be. Children from a range of local schools have been involved over the years, reviewing gallery designs, giving feedback on specific exhibits and coming up with their own ideas about what the gallery should look like.

We have also consulted with adults – parents, carers, teachers and experts – but the children's voices are most important in helping us to understand which exhibits will work, which won't and which will be the most fun!

Consulting children supports our development as a children's museum, gives us insights from a child's perspective that we could not gain any other way and brings out children's innate curiosity.

It also gives our exhibitions and programmes credibility because we are so responsive to what our target audience wants.

Even before Eureka! was built, children were consulted to help shape what it would look like and what would go inside and this has continued throughout our 20 years of being open.

Case Study: The Wonder Walk

Part of Eureka!'s ongoing plans were to revitalise the outdoor space and to transform it into a natural environment to explore and engage with nature – a sensory trail which the children called the Wonder Walk.

We began discussions with a construction company Marshalls and landscape architects who would also provide the materials. From the start they wanted to make sure that this was an area that was inspired by children's expertise and ideas through an on-going consultation process.

Eureka!'s objectives for the Wonder Walk were:

- To create a sensory trail where visitors are encouraged to play freely and where their imaginations take them on a range of adventures and stories;
- To make a section fully accessible for wheelchair users and those with buggies;
- To involve children in the design process;
- To creatively incorporate a range of Marshalls products as well as other natural products and planting
- To regularly review the completed trail.

In the first session, children engaged their senses with a range of Marshalls products and other sensory elements, such as lavender and mint, which they could taste and smell. Children investigated these products outside in a natural environment and were encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings, for example what do they look like and feel like, are they soft, hard, heavy, light and what do they sound like when you bang them together.

The Wonder Walk project brief was then introduced and it was explained to the children how they could help with its development. The children shared a range of visual materials such as product catalogues, and natural images of flowers, meadows etc, to provide them with inspiration. Children were encouraged to refer back to the materials they had been exploring and to think imaginatively about how they could be used as part of the Wonder Walk.

Once the children's ideas were flowing, a large roll of paper was unrolled for the children to visually construct their path, a 'mood board', using their own drawings and photographs. This

was photographed and their ideas captured for further research and incorporated into the next design stage which included image sheets to present at

In the second session children were encouraged to continue thinking about the Wonder Walk after the session had ended and add more ideas during the day.

After re-capping session one, image sheets and initial designs were shared. These evidenced how different products, resources and the children's ideas had been used.

It was stressed that this was an initial design which could change many times. They were asked for their feedback on the design and what they would change, in particular the layout of the path. The children then worked in small groups suggesting further improvements and recorded their ideas again using pictures and photographs.

Throughout the consultation process, feedback was extremely important to show why only certain ideas had been used and why others hadn't, including:

<i>Children's Ideas</i>	<i>Follow-Up</i>
Pipes that you can shout down	Did try to source some recycled pipe, but unfortunately couldn't. Considering for second stage development.
Lemon grass to smell and feel	There are lots of herbs to smell and feel, but not lemon grass as it is hard to grow in the UK climate.
Sprinkle smelly plants around the trail	Lots of smelly plants and herbs dotted around the trail
Areas to attract worms, ants and centipedes	Didn't create a dedicated area, but will be doing so with the Halifax Scientific Society
Mirrors	Found to be unsafe, as birds often fly into them.
Stepping stones, cracked paving, thick grass to sink your feet into, wind chimes, tipi's, different shaped willow huts to eat and hide in, flowers for colour and smell	All in the final design.
Didn't like the idea of coloured acrylics	Not used.
Liked the idea of experiencing mud with their bare feet.	Used but on a smaller scale than wanted due to operational considerations.

What worked well:

- Experiencing the Marshalls products and plants first hand.
- That the tasks were hands-on, minds-on and bodies-on.
- Encouraging children to think about their senses and materials first.
- The input and support of adults from the different organisations and professions meant that they had experts at hand as well as their 'familiar' adult from the holiday club.
- Smaller group work helps children focus.
- Allowing time for discussion, thinking and reflection, with breaks in between.
- Investigating materials outdoors as well as inside.

Improving the consultation process:

Presenting the children with a 2D plan of the Wonder Walk was quite abstract. Providing them with a basic model and walking them through the area may have been more beneficial and would have helped to support the different learning styles in the group.

Helpful Tips

1. Find the best consultation model for your project or organisation: There is no 'one size fits all' approach so talk to as many people as possible who have carried out consultation to find the best fit for your organisation.
2. Be flexible – children's thoughts can alter the direction of a project and they may come up with ideas which you would never have expected, so leave room in your plan for new ways of thinking.
3. Start the consultation with a basic framework that children can construct their ideas around: You should also define the expectations of everyone involved and be realistic and open in what you think can be achieved. If you clarify what is expected of everyone at the beginning, the children will be clear about how they are helping and be more motivated to get involved.
4. Agree the rules of the consultation from the start – including having fun! It is when they are having fun that you will get the best insights into what interests them.
5. Give the children ownership of the project: Using the same group of children throughout the consultation helps give some continuity to the process and gives them a feeling of satisfaction at the end as they see their ideas come to life. Once the framework and rules have been agreed, give the children ownership by letting them decide their own group name for example.

6. Treat children as you would professional consultants. Provide them with agenda's and minutes of previous meetings, show them your business plan, write a job description for them and a contract for example.
7. Be aware of shepherds and sheep – more confident children can dominate discussions: Working in large groups will mean that some children's voices get lost. Plan for small group work to encourage quieter, less confident children to contribute and give them individual tasks to present back to the other children.
8. Children have similar skills to adult professionals such as scientists, engineers etc in that they love to test out ideas, think creatively, try and try again, investigate, apply logic, hypothesize and more importantly as experts in play they have endless creativity and work outside parameters which may affect open ended free thinking.
9. The power of a child's imagination is immense and they are not cluttered by the constraints that we often feel as adults which means they can give us honest and insightful feedback
10. Sometimes as adults we need to get back to basics and see the world through a child's eyes - this is vitally important when we are designing new exhibitions or products for them.
11. Children are also great critical friends, are honest and can show understanding if an idea isn't able to be carried out due to cost or the fact that we haven't invented time travel yet.
12. Of course, when consulting with children there are no hard and fast rules – other than to expect the unexpected!