

Chapter 9

'I can sing a rainbow': parents and children under three at Tate Britain, London

Roger Hancock with Alison Cox

Museums and their visitors

In recent years many museums and galleries have endeavoured to become more inviting to a wider group of visitors, including families (West 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1999; Cox *et al.* 2000). A cluster of factors has contributed to this change.

For instance, along with other publicly funded institutions, museums now need to demonstrate 'value for money'. Equal opportunities legislation has led to an increased awareness of the need to promote access for people with disabilities, but also those who feel that museums are not for them. There are now many more education posts in museums and those who interpret these posts are tending to work across audiences, rather than focus mainly on school groups. Museums are also being asked to support the policy objective of 'life-long' learning (Jones 1999; Anderson 1999; Aspin 2000). A report on the role of museums 'in the learning age' states:

If museums are to be effective as educational institutions, they must provide opportunities for all who might use them to learn at every stage of their educational development from early childhood to old age.

(Anderson 1999: 69)

With regard to teaching and learning, the methods for helping people to engage with art works are much more varied. Formal lectures are less common and interactive approaches are more in evidence. There is encouragement too for visitors to express their own thoughts and ideas and to develop personalised ways of looking and understanding (see Baldwin 1997).

Tate Britain and families

Tate Britain has, for many years, been very active in the area of educational projects for schools and community groups. Recently, Tate's Interpretation and Education Department has promoted family activities and events and developed ways of helping very young children to engage with what the gallery has to

offer. Accommodating to the needs of this specific group of users in a gallery environment has been a challenging brief.

It was in 1996 that Tate Britain first explored the idea of running workshops for parents and children under three – sessions that would enable both children and adults to enjoy and learn from being in a gallery. These were run in conjunction with Pimlico Family Workshop, a local community project with experience of promoting family learning and working with very young children. Following the success the 1996 pilot session, further parent and child workshops were run during 1997 and 1998. It was in 1999 that ‘Big and Small; Short and Tall’, a series of eight Friday morning workshops, was conceived and well received by the 46 parents and children who attended (Hancock and Cox 2001).

These eight workshops drew upon a format that had been evolving over time. Each of the ‘Big and Small’ workshops had a two-part structure whereby music and movement activities in an art room would precede a group visit to the gallery. This served to help parents and children feel welcomed and relaxed, and also enabled the workshop leaders to introduce a theme that would relate to the selected gallery exhibits. Once in the gallery, parents and children would look at the art works and, sitting on the gallery floor, work on a practical activity linked to an exhibit. The distinctive nature of the workshops lay with the fact that they involved parents and children learning together but also aimed to promote parent interest in art and artists.

Parent feedback suggested that this dual intention was, to a considerable extent, achieved. Although parents were asked to stay close to their children and work collaboratively with them, many felt they were also able to engage with the gallery as adult learners.

The set of workshops that comprised Big and Small was evaluated through end-of-session parent questionnaires and telephone interviews with a number of parents. Further details on the evaluation and, particularly, parents’ experiences and views about the workshops, are to be found in Hancock and Cox (2002).

Much arises from the workshops that is of interest to early education practice. For instance, there are issues related to:

- the structures, interactions and experiences that enable children to learn;
- children’s engagement with art works, ways of looking and ‘meaning-making’ in a gallery;
- the nature and purposes of children’s artistic achievements;
- the most effective ways of helping children and parents to ‘learn in tandem’;
- the inclusion of very young children in public places;
- the selection and presentation of art materials for children.

The main focus of this chapter, however, is the nature of the partnership that was established between the workshop leaders and the parents and carers who attended with their children. This is revealed in the following portrayal of the first of the eight Big and Small workshops. The portrayal invites the reader into the ‘inner life’ of ‘I can sing a rainbow’, so named because it focused on the themes of colour, line, and shape.

'I can sing a rainbow'

It's Friday morning. The art room has been prepared to receive parents and children. There are paints, coloured papers, pencils and scissors. In one corner there's tea, coffee and lemonade. A mother and her son are the first to come. She looks relaxed. She knows roughly what will happen during the morning. She and Mirak attended a previous programme. He walks around on his own, looking, touching and exploring.

Annie Smuts, a workshop leader from Pimlico Family Workshop, passes Mirak's mother a clear plastic bag that comes from the gallery shop. The mother works with her son to cut out armholes so that it can be used as a protective smock when he does some painting. Kate Bagnall, another workshop leader, also from Pimlico Family Workshop, stands nearby talking to Mirak.

Four other parents have just arrived. One carries a baby, two walk in with toddlers and one pushes a buggy with her sleeping daughter. They are welcomed by Kate and Annie who offer white stickers and felt pens for names. Kate talks to the newcomers whilst Annie works with Alison Cox, Education Curator, to lay out materials and make finishing touches to the resource trays that will be needed later in the gallery itself.

It's now ten o'clock, the time when the workshop is scheduled to start, but parents and children are still arriving. The session has already begun for a number of parents and children. There's a lot of excited talk, questions, movement and greetings. All the children are under three years old, the oldest, Mirak, is 2 years and 10 months.

Emma, undisturbed, continues sleeping in her buggy. Other children stay close to their parents. Two children walk around the room with confidence – they have their own ideas about what they want to do. Many of the parents don't know each other. Mainly they stay close to their children attending to their needs. They help them remove their coats, answer their questions, provide drinks from bags and rucksacks, point to things in the room, write out names and stick the labels on their chests – which some children immediately peel off!

After ten minutes or so Annie and Kate ask everyone to sit on the floor in a circle. Most children are with their parents. The sleeping child, Emma, has woken up and joins her mother. The two 'independent' children, Mirak and Susie, continue with their own activities, occasionally looking to see what the larger group is doing.

Annie welcomes everyone to the first of a series of eight Friday workshops for parents and children under three. Today's workshop is called, 'I can sing a rainbow'. Kate asks the parents to introduce the adult and child to their left. It's a good way of interacting and learning some names. Kate introduces the morning's theme and talks briefly about the many different sorts of shapes and colours. She then leads the group into an action song that gets everyone thinking about shapes as they sit on the floor. Some children are a little taken aback, somewhat surprised at the way in which most of the group is singing in unison. The youngest, Timothy, who is just a few months old, is a member of this

audience. His gaze reveals an engagement and his attention is held for the complete duration of the song.

This is followed by an activity involving movement around the room and then some music and movement with everyone dancing and trailing coloured chiffon scarves in the air. By this time, most of the children are participating with the adults. There's much fun and laughter.

Jane Elliott, a workshop leader and artist, talks about the next stage of the morning. She briefly mentions how the selected works of art will relate to the workshop 'rainbow' theme. She also talks to parents about safety in the gallery and their responsibility for their own children. She explains that if a child becomes unsettled or unhappy parents are free to take them for a walk or return to the art room for a while.

Kate and Annie lead everyone out of the room through a number of gallery areas and then to the first chosen exhibit, Eileen Agar's 'The Autobiography of an Embryo'. The group sits on the floor facing the painting. Jane quickly captures parent and child interest by talking with them about circles and making links to Agar's painting. By asking questions, and encouraging the group to notice, select and point at various elements, she focuses their attention and encourages participation. To reinforce what has been discovered in the painting, she invites the group to produce circle pictures from brightly coloured paper. Within minutes the parents and children are busily talking, cutting, tearing and sticking circles onto pastel coloured sheets of paper.



Figure 9.1 Parents were essential to the success of the workshop

Sometimes it's the parents who are cutting and children who are placing and sticking the circles – a division of labour. Sometimes there's an overlap of involvement with, for instance, parents holding the paper while children use the scissors to begin to cut the shape which is completed by the parent. Whatever the arrangement, there's clearly value in all forms of collaboration. In particular, there's much discussion about what is being done.

The buzz of activity, the chattering children, and the novel nature of the group, attract the interest of other gallery visitors who pass by. Their faces show delight at seeing such young visitors engaged in an activity that is related to a celebrated exhibit. Secondary pupils file past. They too are surprised to see the busy young visitors.

Jane announces that it's time to move on. Parents and children gather up their pictures and materials, put them into the red trays that have been provided and make their way further into the gallery.

They arrive in a room with a high ceiling where larger art works are displayed. Jane encourages the group to stand close together in a semi-circle so that they can hear her voice. She is in front of 'The Snail' by Henri Matisse. The children stand by their parents. Jane suggests that they point to the black rectangular shape at the top of the picture. 'Move your finger anti-clockwise to the next colour, then to the next, and the next,' she says. Most of the parents follow her suggestion. Some children are doing it too; others prefer to watch the actions of others, made curious by some unexpected adult behaviour. Susie prefers to explore a corner of the room. Most of the group is now making a circular 'shell-like' movement in the air with their fingers.

The activity reveals the way Matisse has unusually chosen to evoke a snail – through the arrangement of a small number of angular, coloured shapes which don't, at first sight, appear to suggest a snail at all. Some of the parents are intrigued by Jane's demonstration. They enjoy the element of adult education that has just been introduced.

Once it becomes clear that there is a pattern to being in the gallery, i.e. finding an art work, looking at it, sitting down and talking about it together, the children find it easier to respond and settle.

Following Jane, the group moves to another room. She asks everyone to sit in front of 'Pompeii' by Hans Hofmann. 'Pompeii' encourages exploration of square and rectangular shapes. This work has been chosen to contrast with 'The Snail'. Here the shapes are brick-like, vertical and horizontal, the paint heavily textured. In the second activity, parents and children quickly get down to work – selecting colours, cutting and sticking. Annie and Kate take it in turns to hold baby Timothy. This enables his mother to spend time looking at 'Pompeii' and work on a picture herself.

One or two children decide they want to do other things. Susie paces along a ventilation floor grille that spans most of the room – she likes the feeling of the metal on her feet. Gerry is rolling on his back looking at the small halogen spotlights on the ceiling. Suresh is sucking his thumb as he sits beneath a sculpture plinth displaying Picasso's 'Head of a Woman (Fernande)'. Jemma is weepy – perhaps she needs the refreshments that await her in the art room.

Jane indicates that it's time to return to the art room. The group makes its way back through the gallery rooms looking at art works as they go. It's just after 11.00 and Tate is beginning to get busy. The crocodile of parents, children and workshop leaders attracts glances and smiles from others in the gallery.



Figure 9.2 A moment of 'spontaneous looking' when moving through the gallery

Gradually, the group arrives at the art room and Annie and Kate offer drinks and biscuits. Alison has laid out tables and paints for a final picture-making activity which is linked to the shapes and colours that have been explored in the gallery. Parents and children sit at the tables together and soon enjoy using the thick, deeply coloured mixes for their final creation. This activity lasts some twenty minutes. Most of the children are very engaged and many are wearing their makeshift 'Tate Shop bag' aprons.

It's approaching 12.00 noon. The parents and children begin to finish off their paintings and respond to the workshop leaders' invitation to form a circle on the carpet. It's time for a closing activity. Annie and Kate lead them through two action songs. The last one is the tried and tested 'Ring a Ring o' Roses' and it's a resounding success with everyone.

Some children are ready to go home; some would like to stay longer. As they leave a number of parents call out 'see you next week'.

Discussion and conclusion

On the face of it, the nature of the practitioner–parent partnership between the workshop leaders and the parents and carers who accompanied the children, could be seen as fairly straightforward. Parents brought their children to the eight workshops and joined in with them. However, at another level, it was apparent that something significant took place in terms of the way in which parents participated.

The workshop leaders had a range of experience and professional skills to bring to their work. One was an artist-educator. Another was an education curator responsible for setting up family and school programmes at Tate Britain. And two were used to running Pimlico Family Workshop activities for pre-school children and parents. However, despite this, it was clear that the success of 'I can sing a rainbow' (and the other seven workshops that were provided) depended, to a considerable extent, on parental willingness to work closely with the leaders and their own children.

Parents were thus essential 'workshop assistants' who took on the responsibility of drawing children into the collective activities of the larger group. Parents sang, danced, painted, sat on the gallery floor, and made things in collaboration with their children. In many ways, they acted as though they were older children taking the lead – 'interpreting' the workshop leaders' suggestions where necessary, and fostering children's participation when this was needed.

Although the leaders encouraged this parental support through the inclusive way in which they ran the workshops, this partnership role was not made explicit. Most parents found they could enter intuitively into it because the situation required it, and there was a strong sense that children would benefit much more if they did this.

With such a young group of children – the oldest were not yet three and the youngest were only a few months old – it would not have been possible for the leaders to run the workshops, in the way they did, without establishing this form of partnership. Parents were therefore vital 'intermediaries' in terms of enabling young children to be in a public gallery, and in terms of increasing the likelihood that children would enjoy it and learn from it.

The structure of the workshops, and particularly the parental involvement dimension, thus provided a supportive and productive milieu for the children. The workshops enabled an unusual group of gallery visitors to be in a place where many would not normally have been – 'a temple built for the worship of art' (Newhouse 1998). *Big and Small; Short and Tall* therefore serves to give salient messages about what can be achieved when practitioners and parents work in interdependent ways to promote children's early education.

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