

‘I THINK MUSEUMS AREN’T SO BORING ANY MORE’



REPORT INTO CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF TAKEOVER DAY

An ever-increasing number of museums, galleries, historic home and science centres are choosing to take part in Takeover Day and each year thousands of children have an amazing opportunity to be in charge for the day. The emphasis is on giving children powerful, meaningful and decision-making roles. Funded by Arts Council England and working in partnership with the Children's Commissioner for England, Kids in Museums supports and encourages heritage organisations to take part.

Museums have told us of the many benefits they have experienced from involving children and young people in this way; for this report we wanted to know more about what impression the experience had left on the children.

HOW DID TAKEOVER DAY CHANGE WHAT CHILDREN THOUGHT ABOUT MUSEUMS?

The museum worked with two classes of Year 6 pupils in the lead-up to Takeover Day to train them as gallery hosts, researching gallery stories and presenting them to visitors on the day. Mind maps were used to ask the children what they thought about visiting museums before and after the event to see if the experience had influenced their opinion of museums.

Before Takeover Day, although most children were positive about museums, there were plenty of negative comments, mainly that museums were 'boring'. After Takeover Day, not only had the number of positive comments almost doubled, but the ratio of positive to negative significantly increased from 2:1 to 14:1. The number of children who had anything negative to say about museums was more than halved after taking part and 100% of children had something positive to say. Before their involvement with the museum, the children's responses were quite varied, from talking about what kinds of artefacts there are in museums, to which kind of museums they prefer. After Takeover Day there were hardly any of these kind of comments, with the children much more interested in expressing how great they thought museums were – 'amazing, really fun, interesting, inspiring'. Several children made comments that they wanted to visit more museums and specifically the Museum of London Docklands again.

'I want to visit more museums but mostly this one.'

'If I could choose what museum to go to again I will choose this one.'

Before their involvement with MoLD, lots of children had clearly made up their mind about certain types of museums being interesting or boring and some volunteered quite detailed explanations for why that was. Sometimes this was linked to the collection – statues and Science interactives are cool, rocks are not. However, often the children offered a traditional view of museums being passive places, with a focus on being shown and told things rather than doing. There was no feeling of ownership, that they could do and discover things for themselves.

'It's boring because sometimes you just sit there'

'I also think museums are not enjoyable because all you do is listen to people giving lectures'

After their Takeover Day experience, no children made these kind of comments and the focus was much more on what they could do in a museum e.g. filming, working in the workshop, talking to visitors, acting. There were several comments about people, highlighting the importance of human interaction in their experience.

'It was fun acting. My best part was exploring'

'Looking after a piece of the museum'

'You have nice staff'

What was a common element of both the pre-visit and post-visit mind maps was that the children had a clear idea that the purpose of museums was to learn about new things. What was slightly different between the two sets of data was the way they talked about learning. Before Takeover Day lots of children tended to see museums as something slightly abstract, provided for the benefit of others – ‘Museums are good when you want to learn stuff’, whereas afterwards they tended to put themselves at the centre and talk much more about their own learning – ‘I learnt a lot about history’. Although the aim of Takeover Day is not necessarily for children to learn about collections, this does seem to have become an outcome, and moreover it is seen as something valuable and enjoyable by the children.

Another slight difference was in the children’s view of what learning means. Before Takeover Day many said that museums were for learning ‘historical facts’, afterwards their responses were much broader, even including things that they had learned about themselves.

Before Takeover Day there was little indication from the children that they would visit a museum for any reason other than to learn something. Afterwards they talked less about what a museum is for and more about their own enjoyment of visiting museums. The Takeover Day experience was clearly a surprise to some children and not what they were expecting from their visit. This change in their perception of museums could explain their increased enjoyment of the visit.

‘It is fun because you learn lots of information’

‘I really enjoyed the museum because I got to learn different things’

‘Can change your opinion about a lot of stuff’

‘At first (I) wasn’t confident but now I’m really (confident) with your help.’

‘I learned about history but also I learned about if you join along it will be fun’

‘It was much more fun than I thought it would be’

‘Before I came to the museum I wasn’t looking forward to it but I did find it fun’

WHAT MADE TAKEOVER DAY SPECIAL FOR CHILDREN?

Over 60 children from a local primary school were invited to take over a variety of tasks for the day. Some gave guided tours, others filmed and interviewed visitors about their experience. Some worked in the shop and in front of house jobs, others prepared information for the press. Afterwards they were asked to write about what they had done on Takeover Day and about their 'best bits'.

All of the children were positive about their experience and found it easy to describe what they had done and the tasks they had enjoyed most. When asked to describe their roles on Takeover Day, many of the children went beyond simple reporting of the facts and talked about how the experience had made them feel. Fun, exciting, enjoyable, busy, nervous, were all words used.

The most significant element to emerge from the children's comments was how much they had enjoyed human interaction, from interviewing and observing visitors to conversations with members of the Wallace Collection's team. More children said that one of their favourite parts of the day was working with the museum staff and visitors than any other task assigned to them.

Even those who did not get the chance to lead a tour themselves commented that they had enjoyed watching their friends leading a tour. Perhaps related to this is another finding; a fairly high number of children said one of their favourite parts of the day was seeing specific artworks and galleries. Given that this is not necessarily an intended outcome of Takeover Day it does say something about how inviting young people to take the lead in museums can bring the collection to life not just for them but for their peers too.

The fact that the museum was prepared to hand over a degree of responsibility, no matter how seemingly small to an adult, clearly had a big impact on the children. Even fairly unchallenging jobs like unwrapping stock or holding a door open for visitors took on a whole new meaning when asked to do this in a new environment. They especially liked it when they felt they had been chosen to do a particular job and ones which were perceived to be adults' jobs normally. The children's comments showed that they had taken this responsibility seriously and were prepared to give their commitment to the museum in return.

'I handed out floorplans and quizzes. Doing it was really fun. I was thrilled and nervous when I did an announcement with my friends. I also opened the door, I was happy because they were satisfied.'

'I had a special job to interview the public. I asked them what their views were on this special day for kids. They all thought it was brilliant. I interviewed the Director of the museum. How great is that.'

*(What were the best bits?)
'Seeing the turn up of people',
'Listening to the cheer at the end',
'Making a friend or two in the public',
'Getting to meet people'*

'When they called me to do the pricing job I felt more grown up.'

'On Takeover Day it was the best thing I ever done in my life because me, Rome and Alessandro put on the price tag. After Rome went to hold the door, while he was doing that we wrote an announcement to speak and I felt nervous.'

The children clearly enjoyed the practical tasks, the most popular being pricing items in the shop, making announcements and writing information for the press. However, their comments indicated that they also enjoyed the mental challenges associated with the museum, from persuading the press to come and visit to analysing visitors' comments and behaviour to see what they liked and didn't like. Many children showed they really cared about what visitors thought of the museum. By exposing the children to these type of challenges they are starting to build a deeper connection and empathy with the work of the museum.

'On museum Takeover Day I felt excited because it was like I had a real job.'

'We had to say our lines loudly and clearly so that everyone could hear in the audience. It was great fun because you get to learn from other people.'

(What were the best bits?) 'Watching how they browse the museum.'

SUMMARY

Children and young people's participation in heritage organisations is gathering steam and Takeover Day provides a focussed campaign to encourage, support and celebrate this. Although a very small study, the findings in this report echo what museums all over the country are finding: that working alongside children and giving them meaningful roles and responsibilities results in a tremendously positive, personal experience and a lasting connection with the museum. The fantastic organisations that take part in Takeover Day are creating a generation of children who value their heritage, understand and appreciate the work of the museum. Most importantly, they see museums as a place for them and want to come back.



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