All About Me: Making Sense of Health Messages in a Hands-On Exhibition Space

Hannah Fairbrother & Abi Hackett
**About the project**

Our aim was to explore how children engage with health messages and learn about the body in All About Me, Eureka!'s interactive, hands-on gallery.

We worked with 12 children (aged two to four) attending Eureka's on-site nursery. Our ethnographic fieldwork took place in the nursery, in the gallery itself (over 7 visits) and during a nursery trip to a nearby dentist over a period of 6 months. Our fieldwork was collaborative: university researchers, museum staff and nursery practitioners all made field notes, and collected video data and still images of the children's meaning making. Rebecca Caswell also carried out interviews with the children's parents.

The study addressed three key research questions:

1. How do children engage with the exhibition and how does this inform their understandings of health and their own and others' bodies?

2. What do children take from the museum into other spaces and contexts?

3. To what extent is the meaning children make from the exhibition collective or influenced by the context of children's visits (with family / friends)?

**Project team**

University researchers: Hannah Fairbrother, Abi Hackett, Masoud Rajabi,

Nursery researchers: Yvette Brown, Sarah Cahill, Rebecca Caswell, Claire Fahey, Melissa Hall, Laura Metcalf, Zoe Reid, Fiona Young.

Museum researchers: Dan Blamires, Rebecca Caswell, Jenny Goodall, Claire Graham.
Our key findings

1. Children engaged with different areas of the gallery in very different ways. The most popular parts of the gallery were those with which children could engage with their whole bodies and which provided opportunities to play together without prior instruction. Aspects of the gallery which feature very strongly in our data set include the dentist’s chair and baby care areas, Zoom the robot, the giant body parts and the digestion interactive.

2. There is very little evidence of children making connections between nursery prompts or everyday engagements with health and the body at home and ideas from the gallery. However, the dentist’s chair does offer a very clear example of children using their everyday experiences to inform their role play and the gallery prompting discussions regarding visiting the dentist ‘in real life’.

3. Visits to the gallery with nursery friends and staff were generally fast-paced, noisy and punctuated by laughter and running and dancing around. Interactions were mostly between the children, who tended to move around the exhibition with their friends. During the family visit, in contrast, children moved more slowly around the exhibition with their grown-ups, which seemed to produce a tighter framing, with different, more focused learning.
1. Favourite Spaces

The most popular parts of the gallery were those with which children could engage with their whole bodies and which provided opportunities to play together without prior instruction.

**Zoom**

Zoom was a real focus for the children in the gallery. They loved listening to his introductory talk, and interacting with him later on in the gallery. More than this though, he was seen as emblematic of the gallery itself, the person or thing you go to visit at the gallery, who is always waiting for the children, whether he is awake or asleep.

![Zoom](image-url)

**Giant Teeth and the Dentist**

Children loved taking it in turns to play patient and the dentist, climbing up on to the chair and using the giant dental instruments. Here was the only space where we got a real sense of children connecting the museum space with experiences from their everyday life. This included talking about brushing teeth as well as acting out playing dental appointments. So children’s own experiences informed their role play and children were also prompted to discuss their own teeth-related experiences both in the home and on visits to the dentist.

![Giant Teeth and the Dentist](image-url)
Babies

Children enjoyed role playing in the baby clinic. They spent most of their time picking the babies up, cuddling them, wrapping them up and carrying them in their nursery lanyards in order to mimic being pregnant. The babies seemed to invite interaction and investigation (Rautio, 2013, p.9).

Unlike in the dentist’s area, children tended not to talk about their own personal experiences such as people they knew being pregnant and looking after babies. Over time, and with repeated visits, it seems that the meaning and use of the dentist area (as being linked to personal experience) and the antenatal area (as about imaginary role play in which the children played as adults) became ‘sedimented’ or solidified over time (Rowsell and Pahl, 2007).

Giant body parts and From the Chew to the Poo

For the children, the body parts were like super-sized toys which they played on in a very physical way. Their ‘full body engagement’ (Weir and Piscitelli, 2003) was clear as they got underneath and looked up into the nose, clambered on and slid down the tongue. The burp noise on the From the Chew to the Poo digestive system interactive proved increasingly popular with the children throughout the study. Children ran around it giggling as they took it in turns to keep pressing the burp. Although it perhaps appeared rather ‘pointless’, in that it resisted an adult-centric logical explanation, it was nevertheless
2. Making connections?

One of the questions in our study was whether ideas about health and the body from the exhibition crossed into other contexts, including the nursery and the home. Staff placed prompt toys and resources related to health and the body in the nursery, and made notes whenever the children seemed to connect them with the exhibition. However, we have very little evidence of this kind of connection-making taking place. Children tended to return to their usual activities upon their return to nursery. The only real example we have is of a child connecting the dentist chair to her dad brushing her teeth at home and to a recent visit to the dentist.

At the end of the fieldwork, Becky also carried out four interviews with parents of children participating in the study and asked them about ways in which the children might be connecting the exhibition to everyday life. However, despite the context of the interviews (with nursery staff about the visits made to the exhibition) none of the parents offered any concrete examples of the children referring to ideas or experiences specifically from the exhibition in another context (such as the home or during any interactions with health care).

This finding contrasts with that of Carr et al. (2012) who carried out a similar study with the Te Papa Kindergarten in Wellington, which focused on the relationship between teachers, children and families at the kindergarten and some of the exhibitions at the Te Papa Museum of New Zealand. Researchers there found that boundary objects, including ‘laminated photographs of the exhibits, sketch books, learning stories and, for one exhibit, a book especially prepared’ fostered connection-making between the kindergarten and museum and promoted ‘dialogue about museum objects and exhibitions’ (p.2).
3. The importance of context

Towards the end of the study, we organized a family visit to the exhibition. One Saturday, families were invited to come to the exhibition with their child, either for the morning or for the afternoon.

One of the most striking differences in terms of the family visits, compared to the nursery visits, was the pace with which children entered and moved through the gallery. During the family visit. The children generally moved slowly, and with more reticence. The first part of the exhibition, which invited children to measure their reach, height, weight, etc. had been noticeably ignored by all the children during the nursery visits, but was given more attention during the family visit. Throughout the family visits, instead of running off with their nursery friends, all of the children stayed closely connected to their parents, and in some cases their nursery key workers, and did not interact much with their peers.

The context of the family visits, in which children moved more slowly around the exhibit with their grown-ups, seemed to create a tighter framing, in which learning was more focused. During the nursery visits, when the children moved in a faster and less structured way, primarily with their peers, learning was less tightly framed and the children came up with their own more creative and unexpected ways of interpreting and attaching meaning to the exhibits they encountered.

The importance of rituals and repeated practices, as well as very different behavior during the family visits, illustrates the significance of the notion of ‘spatiality’, with regards to the way in which the purpose and opportunities of the exhibition were constructed. By this, we mean that visiting the exhibition with family members, rather than as a nursery group, was such a different experience for the children that the exhibition could be regarded as a different kind of place.
Project Outputs So Far


In this workshop we shared our research project with participants and gave them the opportunity to become researchers by interpreting some of the data we generated. Participants worked with fieldnotes, photographs and video clips to think about their affordances and limitations in relation to our research questions.

All About Collaboration: Co-producing Impact with a Community Partner. Virtual and print publication documenting our research collaboration.

We secured supplementary funding from the Research Exchange for the Social Sciences, University of Sheffield, to create a publication documenting the process of this collaborative research project. Abi, Hannah and Rebecca worked with the artist, Rachael Hand, to tell the story of the project from inception to writing up. It is our hope that by documenting the process of the research the publication will inspire more collaborative projects between the University and its community partners.

The publication can be downloaded here: http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.521625!/file/All_About_Collaboration.pdf

All About Me Research Project 2015 Photo Book

We produced a hardback photobook for all the children who participated in the study as a memento of their involvement. The photobook, along with a display of some of the photos generated in the study, have also been displayed at the nursery open day for current and prospective parents.

How do young children take health messages from an exhibition about the body? Blog post as part of #museumsandwellbeing week.

In this blog post we share some of our initial ideas about our findings and begin to ponder the potential of museums in promoting children’s health and wellbeing. The post was well received by the sector, and we have been invited to write a blog post for the History of Education society.

The blog post can be viewed here: https://abigailhackett.wordpress.com/2016/02/28/how-do-young-children-take-health-messages-from-an-exhibition-about-the-body/
Taking seriously what takes place in the moment: young children’s learning about the body in an exhibition.

Peer-reviewed journal article.

We are in the final stages of writing up a paper to be submitted to Children and Society, an international, interdisciplinary journal focusing on childhood. We draw upon materialism studies, social studies of childhood and new literacies to explore how children engaged in markedly different ways in different areas of the All About Me gallery. We think about how we might understand children’s learning about health and the body and focus on the importance of the ‘here and now’ for children’s meaning-making and the significance of the embodied and the spatial in children’s construction of understandings.

We are also presenting this paper at the Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth International Conference 5th – 7th July 2016.

Conference details can be viewed here: https://cscyblog.wordpress.com/cscy-6th-international-conference-the-social-the-biological-and-the-material-child/

Collaborating and Creating Data: our experience of the All About Me project


In this practical masterclass on visual, participatory and innovative approaches to understanding children’s experiences of museums, we will share our experience of collaboration as well as discussing the different kinds of data we created in the project.
References


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