

Playtime!

Where children are concerned, playing is central to their learning and development. What implication does this have for interpretation? Here we present an Interpret Britain Award winning project from the Museum of London.

The Dig at the Museum of London was a reconstructed archaeological excavation for families which ran from August to October 2001. The excavation was supported by a small interactive display that introduced visitors to archaeology and the work of archaeologists in London.

The Dig aimed to give children a taste of what it is like to be an archaeologist through play. The excavation consisted of 24 sand-filled trenches, each designed for a family of four. One set of 12 trenches was re-set while the other was excavated, so ensuring back-to-back 60-minute sessions each accommodating up to 50 people. Each trench contained a reconstructed Roman wall and mosaic floor, a reconstructed medieval wall, and 20 or so original Roman fragments of pottery and bone. Following a short safety briefing, families worked alongside two real archaeologists to excavate the trenches using authentic equipment and to identify, date and record their finds on a record sheet and site plan. Each trench was unique – when all the trench plans were put together in a de-briefing session at the end of the activity they formed a larger site plan, revealing both Roman and medieval buildings.

The team of 20 or so archaeologists recruited to work on the project, many from the Museum's archaeology service, were selected for their enthusiasm for communicating the excitement and value of their work, and were given training in both presentation skills and family learning. Their main job as 'Site Supervisors' was to support families' learning through questioning, helping to identify finds, and demonstrating excavation techniques.

Central to the concept of *The Dig* was the idea that adults and children should work together in their family groups – this was not an activity where parents or carers could stand on the sidelines and watch their children, they were actively involved. Early versions of the trenches were tested with families to ensure that they were the right size, that the excavation could be completed safely in the available time, that the activity would engage and inspire both children and adults, and that it would be fun.

An understanding of play was an important part of the development of *The Dig*. The activity mainly involved two types of play – exploratory play and dramatic play. Exploratory play involves exploration, investigation and problem solving, all essential elements in the excavation – digging in the sand, discovering objects and trying to work out what they were. Dramatic play can involve taking on the role of someone else, in this case archaeologists – children were given hard hats, trowels, shovels and brushes and were shown how to excavate, like archaeologists, in a careful and systematic way. They were encouraged to become archaeologists for an hour.

The dynamics of family learning was also an important consideration. Observing families during formative evaluation revealed that all families used the trenches in the same way – the children got in the trench and did the digging and finding of objects, while the adults remained outside the trench and took responsibility for removing the sand and working through the record sheet, which provided step-by-step instructions. Adults would often use the record sheet to direct the children's digging, while the children would ask questions about the finds. In this way both adults and children had a positive role in the activity, and the record sheet gave the adults the confidence to support their children's learning. Completing the activity as a team gave families a sense of shared achievement.

The Dig proved to be a great success – it attracted over 7,500 people and was overall winner of the 2002 Interpret Britain Awards. Our summative evaluation was very positive – digging was the most popular aspect of the activity; visitors valued the opportunity to handle original Roman objects and work with archaeologists; and 80% of families gave it an enjoyment rating of 8 or more out of ten.

The success of the project was the result of a number of factors – careful planning, thorough front-end and formative evaluation, using original objects, and involving archaeologists. But perhaps most important was the commitment to encouraging and facilitating family learning through play.

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"Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten"

B.F. Skinner, psychologist, (1904–1990)