

**The slow museum: the affordances of a
university art museum as a nurturing and
caring space for young children and their
families**

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**The Slow Museum: The Affordances of a University Art Museum as a
Nurturing and Caring Space for Young Children and their Families**

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Abstract

Museums are increasingly considering civic responsibilities towards the communities of which they are a part. In this study, a group of families with children aged between two and four years visited a university art museum for multiple facilitated sessions within a participatory research project. Drawing on Morse's (2020) work on caring museum practices, this article explores the potential of museums to support young families through key affordances: time, connection, and exploration. We demonstrate how, by offering opportunities to slow down, build relationships, and take risks, the museum can become a nurturing space of care and connectedness. We contrast this care-centred approach with the pressure exerted on both the museum and early years sectors of target-setting approaches with easily measurable outcomes demanding a singular focus on rapid linear progress. The analysis presented here resists this model, offering instead an approach rooted in gentle attention and openness.

Keywords: museums, families, young children, participatory research, care, slowness

Introduction

This paper reports on a residency project at a UK university art museum exploring how families from a local Child and Family Centre experienced the museum across a range of modalities. Having initially conceived the project as a study of literacy development, thematic analysis of the data revealed a complex network of encounters reaching beyond even our broad definition of literacy.

The paper explores the affordances of the museum environment as a place for developing caring connections between children, adults, and objects. The key characteristics the museum offers as a space of care are affordances of time, connection, and exploration. We consider the nurturing and supportive role of museum spaces when families are given time to explore, when the personal connections they make are recognised and valued, and when they feel free to look and linger. Our findings are positioned in contrast to previous research which has focused on measurable learning outcomes evidenced by spoken language. We present an alternative, more care-centred approach which supports and celebrates affective and embodied response by slowing down to observe, respond, and feel our way through museum spaces. We reflect on how this shift might inform approaches to creating nurturing experiences for families.

Context and background

Our research took place at a university museum where we work as practitioner researchers within the learning team. It houses artworks, masterpiece paintings and historical artefacts from antiquity to the present day. With its grand neo-Classical façade

and austere architecture, the museum does not appear to have been designed with children in mind. The varied collection is displayed ‘country house’ style with paintings and applied arts alongside each other, with smaller objects in vitrines. Our enquiry is situated within our well-established learning programme and builds on long-founded partnerships that seek to make visible the lived experience of people who have previously been side-lined in museum research, including young children and families who do not regularly visit museums.

Previous Scholarship

An ethics of care and the social responsibility of museums

Care is fundamental to the function of the museum. Morse explores how a *logic of care* might apply to museum practice (Morse and Munro 2018; Munro 2013a). She critiques the dominance of a *logic of contribution*, which underpins much participatory work in museums, where audience contributions such as co-curated exhibitions, programmes, or interpretation, are employed primarily as routes to improving the institution. Morse argues for a more equitable and dialogic relationship with communities based on mutuality where,

‘the ethics of care is a counterpoint to an uncaring world as well as a proposal for a better society.’ (Morse 2022, 213)

Through seemingly small acts of care, museums can remain relevant and connected to their communities even in the wake of increasingly exposed inequalities since the COVID-19 pandemic (Morse 2022a). While Morse’s work centres around museum outreach programmes supporting health and wellbeing for adults, we consider how a logic of care might apply to museum work with families with young children.

Our project builds on previous scholarship examining the potential of extended engagement with museums for young children (Dewitt et al. 2018; Wallis and Noble 2022), and work on museums' civic responsibilities (Bada 2022; Sandell 1998; Charette, Delgado, and Kozak 2018; Mai and Gibson 2011), particularly towards the youngest members of the community. Knutson and Crowley (2022), for example, describe how, through community-led partnerships, museums can support family learning for those marginalised by more formal education settings. By challenging deficit views of those facing disadvantage due to structural inequalities, and focusing instead on the rich social and cultural competencies of family learners, the Informal Learning Initiative in Philadelphia is showing promising results in sustaining relationships with families in the area:

'Giving caregivers meaningful roles and treating them as learners in their own right helped them stay interested and engaged enough to return for multiple sessions.' (Knutson and Crowley 2022, 26)

Participants built trust with the cultural organisations over multiple visits and became more confident to engage. This approach recognises the active role played by parents within family learning encounters.

Slow pedagogies in the art museum

Care-focused approaches require time to be attentive, listen and respond effectively. A slow approach allows space for creative possibility: time to muse and imagine rather than rushing to pin down meanings. Honoré (Honoré 2004) cites the unifying characteristic across the slow movement (influencing disciplines as diverse as technology, food, medicine, art, and of course pedagogy) as a commitment to devoting one's time and attention to something more fully. This in turn leads to deeper connections between people. Clark (2020, 2022) demonstrates the connection between

slow pedagogy and the capacity for listening to children. Opportunities to repeat and reconsider offer an alternative to the pressure to find quick solutions and demonstrate immediate impact. Clark's vision of slow pedagogy suggests that sustained exploration of the material world, through open-ended creative activities such as those described by Kind (2010), Barron et al. (2020), and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2017), or extended periods of time coming to know particular places (Waller, Hallborg, and Benedetti 2018) might support children to gain control over how they use their time and for what purposes.

Millei and Rautio (2017) examine the value of slowness from the perspective of researchers, highlighting the importance of revisiting micro-moments collected during the data gathering process to open new discoveries. Likewise, Tishman (2017) suggests it is through slow looking that we move beyond first impressions towards deeper, more nuanced understandings of people, places, and objects. Slow approaches also support wellbeing (Love 2018) and attachment to place (Payne and Wattachow 2009; Rooney 2019). This resonates with ongoing research into children's growing sense of belonging during museum residency programmes (Wallis and Noble 2022).

Adult:Child relationships and interactions in the museum

The distinct dynamic of visiting a museum as a family, rather than focusing solely on experiences of children, is of interest to researchers and practitioners (USS Constitution Museum 2022; Wood and Wolf 2008; Falk and Dierking 2018). Studies have examined the interactions between adults and children visiting museums in family groups, focusing on how these lead to effective learning. The majority explore the nature and quality of talk during family visits (To, Tenenbaum, and Wormald 2016; Massarani et al. 2021) and interventions to support families to engage in the kind of talk that is most

likely to lead to intended learning outcomes. Often happening in children's museums or scientific displays, these interventions are based on the assumption that certain types of adult-child interaction are more effective for achieving learning outcomes (Hein 1998; Callanan et al. 2017). Scaffolding, support, and training is provided for parents with the aim of changing the way they interact with their children in the museum to focus more explicitly on developing conceptual understandings and articulating these verbally. This might involve asking questions, commenting on children's play to extend their ideas, and modelling scientific and logical thinking processes (Vandermaas-Peeler, Massey, and Kendall 2016; Wolf and Wood 2012; Wood and Wolf 2010; Willard et al. 2019; Callanan et al. 2020; Eberbach and Crowley 2017). Tison Povis and Crowley (2015) opened out from this focus on language to consider the role of joint attention in museum family visits, but again this with an emphasis on learning rather than relationships.

Degotardi et al. (2019) also focused on the importance of joint attention for learning, and examined the design features of museums supporting this. Many studies have focused on shared parent-child experiences (Lifschitz-Grant 2018; Shine and Acosta 2000; Benjamin, Haden, and Wilkerson 2010; Briseño-Garzón 2013; Knutson et al. 2016; Eardley et al. 2018). These generally prioritise intended learning outcomes rather than care and shared intimacy.

In our study, specific learning outcomes were less important than the affordances of the building and artworks to develop relationships. Shifting the role of parent from teacher/guide/facilitator to co-investigator was fundamental. Encountering objects and ideas that are new to both children and adults supports this model of co-inquiry, as explored at the innovative Children's Art Museum of Taipei (Lee 2020)

where each interactive exhibit is an immersive contemporary artwork, designed with open-ended learning possibilities in mind, into which adults and children enter as playful collaborators.

An alternative to the focus on directing behaviours towards those most likely to result in learning outcomes is to concentrate instead on the quality of relationships, not just between parents and children, but between all people, and connecting with the more-than-human world. This acknowledges that meanings and connections are not only made through language, but through movement, gesture, and repetitive actions. Children are wayfarers, not just learners (Hackett 2016). Instead of conceptualising interactions as a simple back-and-forth between adults and children, it is possible to envision an enmeshment of objects, spaces, time, sensation, affect, and language in which agency and power are distributed, rather than held by individuals (Hackett, Holmes, and Macrae 2020; Hackett 2015). This is extended by Cliffe and Solvason (2022) who emphasise the importance of relationships to learning and community building. In this way, nourishing connections between parents and children is linked with care and the museum's civic responsibility.

Museums, discovery, and thresholds

Previous studies (Anderson et al. 2002; Bell et al. 2018; Birch 2018; Olsson 2009; Piscitelli and Penfold 2015; Yates et al. 2022) have shown the exciting potential of museum spaces to offer children and families an experience of exploration and discovery. By choosing their own paths, making their own meanings, and encountering

new things, museum visitors can feel both a sense of individual agency and connected to the experiences, cultural practices, and emotional worlds of others.

The features of a place that suggest, enable, or constrict particular actions, or ways of coming to know it, have been conceptualised as *affordances* (Gibson 1986). These affordances are multi-layered, encompassing the area surrounding the museum, its architectural features, and the exhibit design (Tröndle 2014). Achiam et al. (2014) explored how different types of exhibits elicited different forms of interaction and meaning making from visitors. Inspired by researchers such as Jones et al. (2016), who assert that children's bodies do not simply respond to affordances but rather *produce space* (1130) through their interactions, we are interested in how children and families shape the affordances of the museum for themselves and others. While previous researchers have focused on the affordances of exhibition design to achieve desired outcomes for visitors, we have taken a broader approach following Winstanley (2015) and Hackett et al. (2018) who urge an attention not just to exhibits, but also the affordances of the sonic environment, the dwelling spaces, the 'in-between' of museums.

Museums are meeting points, where thresholds may be crossed from one world into another (Mulcahy 2017). These thresholds become liminal spaces which can be used flexibly – offering comfort, familiarity, and recognition on the one hand, and novelty and surprise on the other. Hood et al. (2022) explore this idea by focusing on how families gravitate towards liminal spaces in the museum itself. Here, they make themselves at home through routine activities such as playing or sharing food, while also benefiting from the potential of the museum to escape everyday domestic roles and habits. This is relevant to the points above regarding the positioning of parent-child relationships: in addition to sensory and cognitive explorations in museums, there can

be a loosening of family hierarchies which in turn results in a sense of rejuvenation and reconnection.

Threshold spaces are intriguing because they are places of potential and as such hold multiple meanings and interpretations. The spaces between are both *gateways and barriers*, *invitations and obstructions*. The museum affords an opportunity to remain rooted in what is known and familiar while simultaneously reaching out to new possibilities and experiences. It is at once both *comforting and challenging*, *cosy and expansive*, offering the possibility of occupying a space in between, where meanings are fluid. Hood et al.'s study also recognised the importance of rugs and carpeting areas to families' use and understanding of spaces, as we discuss in our vignette below. In addition to the furnishings usually available in the galleries, museum educators regularly use floor coverings to create warm, welcoming spaces signalling to families that this is a space for them. Rugs create micro-spaces when families can feel at home and enact everyday behaviours, within a space that is quite different to their normal surroundings.

Materials & Methods

Our project was devised within a critical constructivist paradigm. We situate meaning making as a product of shared interactions, which are themselves shaped by broader external political and social forces. As practitioner-researchers (Pringle 2018), our work sits within a praxeological framework (Pascal and Bertram 2012), marrying experiential and theoretical knowledge with the ability to enact change through continued reflexive development of practice.

We reached beyond our experience as museum educators to professionals with backgrounds in curation, research facilitation, art, early childhood, and

psychology, to create a multi-disciplinary Action Research Group. Their expertise shaped the research design. We applied an action research methodology (MacNaughton and Hughes 2008), spiralling through cycles of planning, observation, delivery, and reflection within each visit and across the whole project. Our methods were inspired by the Mosaic Approach (Clark 2017; Clark and Moss 2011; Rogers and Boyd 2020), generating a range of data: observations, photographs, children's drawings, fieldnotes and reflections, enabling participants to express themselves multimodally.

Recruitment of participants & ethical considerations

Fifteen families agreed to take part by invitation from the Child & Family Workers, who wanted to include families who were experiencing disadvantage, or facing barriers to accessing arts and cultural activities independently in the community. Many of the families had not visited the Museum before the project. This was an important to our methodology which situated child and adult as co-learners exploring the Museum alongside one another.

The project followed the EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al. 2015) and was approved by the Fitzwilliam Museum Ethics Committee. We took a rights-respecting approach, working from an understanding that all participants can contribute, and are competent to make decisions for themselves when given appropriate and accessible information. Families received clear written and visual information about what taking part would involve, accompanied by conversations with Child & Family Centre Workers who explained that participation was voluntary, and withdrawing was possible at any time. The sharing of images was discussed in

detail with all families. Some agreed to take part in the research on the condition that their images were not shared, and others gave consent for photographs to be included in publications relating to the project. All activities during the Museum visits were presented as invitations, and adults were encouraged to observe children closely, offering alternative suggestions or breaks if they seemed unhappy or uncomfortable.

Data gathering

Detailed fieldnotes were taken by the two museum-based practitioner researchers independently. The team took photographs to record details such as body language and facial expressions. Other data was created by the participants themselves, with children making drawings and taking photographs using a museum-owned children's camera and sometimes on parents' mobile phones.

The group created a large scrapbook which incorporated children's drawings, photographs and key words and phrases. In line with Rogers and Boyd (2020), we found that although initially conceived as a way of listening to children by circumnavigating adult-child power imbalances, the Mosaic Approach is also an effective way of enabling adults' participation. The museum context creates a complex web of power relations, in which some individuals may feel less confident to communicate their views than others. The use of visual data such as drawings, photographs & collage provided adults as well as children with an alternative to spoken English.

Figure 1 shows the variety of data generated, and the overlapping, iterative process of reflection and analysis.

[Figure 1]

Data analysis

Collaborative reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data. The idea of ‘being with’ and ‘being in’ the data was key to our approach as practitioner researchers (Xu and Zammit 2020). Being attached to the data was viewed positively at the analysis stage too, with our experience as practitioner researchers valued as an important factor in meaning making:

‘In reflexive thematic analysis...meanings and knowledge are understood as situated and contextual, and researcher subjectivity is conceptualised as a resource for knowledge production, which inevitably sculpts the knowledge produced, rather than a must-be-contained threat to credibility.’ (Braun & Clarke, 2021: 334/5)

However, it was important that the themes created were also meaningful and relevant to others. With this in mind, we invited the Action Research Group to work with us on data analysis using a sample of photographs.

This process identified thirty-three key ideas organised into six broad themes, which were used as lenses through which to revisit the data. In contrast to methodologies emphasising coding reliability, our approach was not to search the data to find evidence for the themes, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of the data (Braun and Clarke 2020). This article focuses on the theme we described as *affordances of the museum environment*. By this, we mean how the physical, emotional, and social space of the museum enables particular responses and interactions from visitors. The affordances of the museum are both structural (incorporating the buildings, displays, furniture, interpretation, and social context of the space) and individual (deriving from self-perception and understanding):

'When opportunities are available to children, and when children recognise the potential for agency inherent in them, opportunities become affordances'

(Manyukhina et al. 2023, 3)

Results

Our analysis showed that despite its imposing architecture and traditional design, the Museum nevertheless afforded opportunities to nurture families in respectful ways. We have approached these affordances from three different perspectives: time, connection, and exploration, offering illustrative examples of how these were experienced and developed by families during the project.

Time: The Museum as a Space to Be

A staircase might seem like a metaphor for linear progress, with a clear goal in mind. However, we observed children using the Museum staircases in unexpected and interesting ways. The Courtauld Staircase (Image 1) is a large 1930s stone stairwell with a huge balcony window which seems an unlikely nurturing space for young families. However, it offered the children a chance to slow the pace, to interrupt the intended flow through the Museum, and it became a place where families felt a sense of freedom: time just to be. The participants featured below are: Noah, Kristina, Luna and Tommy (all aged two), and Tommy's mum Maria.

The use of the staircase as a place to be, rather than a place to take you to somewhere else, was established on the first two visits when the upper floor was closed for re-display. This was communicated by a temporary barrier across the stairs, which

the children seemed to understand, sitting themselves on the bottom steps without attempting to climb up further.

[Image 1]

By the third visit, the staircase was open. However:

‘On arriving at the Courtauld stairs, Noah sat down on the second step as he had done before when the barrier was in place, even though it was now possible to go all the way up.’

(Practitioner Researcher Fieldnotes V3:5)

The stairs were a site of repetition: even though he was now free to climb the stairs, Noah took time to pause and revisit his previous experience of the staircase before going up.

However, each child’s encounter with the stairs was not an exact repetition of their previous experience. The way they moved their bodies, the other people present, and the ambient sounds, all changed their experiences subtly. Even the stairs themselves changed, as vinyl lettering was added to advertise a new exhibition and the stone warmed on sunnier days. The examples below show different ways the children engaged with the staircase.

‘Luna moved particularly slowly both up and down the staircase, taking her time, and bumping down each step on her bottom.’

‘Tommy enjoyed pointing out the white letter shapes on the steps, and Maria told him the name of the letters he spotted. He bounced up and down and Maria said, ‘ah, you’re dancing on the stairs! Dance, dance, dance!’

(Practitioner Researcher Fieldnotes V3:6-8)

'Most of the children were very interested to explore the Courtauld staircase again – Kristina went hopping straight up it ahead of the group and twirled around in the gallery at the top before coming down again jumping one step at a time.'

(Practitioner Researcher Fieldnotes V4:8-10)

Previous writers have highlighted the capacity of the museum to slow visitors down, either to enable learning and engagement with faraway times and places (Jørgenson et al. 2022) or as a “safe haven” from accelerating urban environments which facilitates

'the slowing of movements, lowering of the voice, and concentration of the gaze'
(Prior 2011, 201).

In the above examples, however, we noticed that the slowness of the staircase was not always characterised by slow ponderous movements, or prolonged engagement with an exhibit. Rather, slowness meant the opportunity to dwell in an in-between space. With no ‘next step’ to hurry to, the families had a freedom to explore the staircase in ways that took time: dancing, twirling, retracing steps. This time is valuable:

'There is something special that can happen when walking and talking with young children but it is not necessarily part of everyday ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care] practice. It can be one of the 'in between' moments where conversations happen and relationships can deepen.' (Clark 2022, 138)

Connection: The Museum as a Space to be with Others

Over the course of the project, we observed children and adults connecting with each other through their interactions with museum objects. Certain objects acted as catalysts for conversation, play, and bringing people together. This section features Riley (2) and mum Yaz.

The following images show Riley engaging with museum objects by pointing, gazing, and naming them. He spent most of the time in the galleries moving slowly, pausing at objects that caught his attention, focusing on them independently but also vocalising to share them with Yaz. The child-height displays invited Riley to discover them at an unhurried pace, and this afforded time for Yaz and other adults to notice his interest and to join in his steady focus.

[Image 2]

[Image 3]

[Image 4]

[Image 5]

Riley's interest in particular objects was not something he wanted to keep to himself. Despite some initial shyness, Riley used his voice and eye gaze to share the things he enjoyed with others:

'Riley continued to enjoy pointing at interesting objects but turned his face away to invite others to join in now.'

Through the displays, Riley was able to initiate interactions without putting himself at the centre of attention. He was able to draw others in non-verbally and direct them to what he had noticed.

When reflecting on key memories of the visits a few weeks later, Yaz explained:
'He loved the figurines, and little different animals. And plates 'cause they all had different pictures on. I feel like – especially the crockery – the benefit for the little ones is, it's almost like the art gallery, but at his own level.'

Parent comment from follow-up meeting

Exploration: The Museum as a Space to be Something New

Our data and analysis highlighted several interactions that children and families had with what we might think of as liminal spaces or experiences – encounters with staircases (described above), corridors and doorways; exploring barriers around objects; peeping into, tapping on, and even wrapping arms around glass display cases.

Encountering, staying in, and moving through, these border spaces offer the possibility of transformation. As museum educators, we often look for the transformative potential of museum spaces and objects on visitors, but this process is bi-directional: visitors transform spaces too. In the example below, Silvia (2) and mum Melania respond to the museum environment by creating their own 'space within a space,'

In a crowded gallery with many adults engaging with a diverse display of both Renaissance and contemporary paintings, films, and interactive viewing tools Silvia notices a colourful rug on the floor and makes her way to it and sits down. Mum Melania quickly follows and crouches alongside her, using her phone to show Silvia pictures she has taken of her earlier in the visit.

[Image 6]

The rug affords Melania and Silvia an opportunity to create space for themselves in the Museum. This is not a Family Area or Children's Corner in any traditional sense, but neither is it being used as might be expected: a place to stand and quietly look at the artworks and read nearby labels. Instead, Melania and Silvia create, just for a few short moments, a space for themselves that is neither wholly 'theirs' nor wholly 'the Museum's', but rather a space of interdependence and care. This interaction was not planned for as part of the exhibition design and flow, but it speaks to the potential of liminal spaces in galleries to be developed in new ways by young visitors and their families. The materiality of the soft rug on the hard wooden floorboards was an invitation to Melania and Silvia to feel comfortable within the space, but in order for the rug's invitation to be realised, Melania and Silvia had to offer something of themselves, using their bodies to take up space on the rug. The encounter was thus one of connection and interdependence.

When museums invite visitors to 'make yourselves at home' through spaces that recall more familiar environments – in this case with the use of soft floor coverings -

agency and autonomy is implicitly invoked. Feeling comfortable to make one's own decisions about where to go, what to do, how to be is an important aspect of making families feel noticed and cared for. Not only is it respectful of diverse interests and abilities, but also helps to dissolve barriers between adults and children: while parents still feel responsible for their children, the museum offers an opportunity for them to step out of their role purely as carers and be cared for themselves. Equally, the children can exercise their agency and identity separately from their adults.

Discussion

The above vignettes offer tiny windows into the potential of museum spaces to be nurturing for families by affording time, offering new ways to relate to each other, and acknowledging the power of undefined spaces for exploration and placemaking.

Taking Time & Space Together

Rather than simply a transitory space through which to access a new floor, we observed children lingering on the staircase. They engaged with it as a destination in its own right, somewhere worth spending time, and returning to. The importance of the opportunity to repeat and reprise actions has been recognized in previous scholarship (Macrae et al. 2018), and was found to be a key affordance of the museum to enable and nurture family visitors. Through this repetition families shaped the time and pace of their visits, balancing familiar activities and places with new experiences.

What is noticeable about the interactions with the staircase is that it offers an opportunity to move differently and at a different pace than in the gallery. The children seem less motivated by where the stairs lead, than by taking their time to explore being

held in the staircase itself. Often, they did not reach the top of the stairs in a single trip but turned around mid stairway. This may have appeared aimless, even risky, to others in the Museum.

As Museum Educators, we felt a degree of anxiety: how much longer would we be on this staircase; what about the plans we had made to give the families a great experience of the Museum? This anxiety was unfounded – the children and families were competent to make their own decisions about how to spend their time in ways that were meaningful – but our concerns are a result of existing within a system where success is measured by outcome. Time must be “spent” wisely in exchange for progress. Some of our observations around staircases did demonstrate development in the traditional sense used by early years practitioners. One of the children was usually carried upstairs, but took the time at the Museum to build her confidence in climbing independently, with the gentle support of two adults. Another child preferred crawling but his mother remarked that since noticing the other children walking up at the Museum, he had been encouraged to do the same which she thought was very positive. Ultimately though, what was important about the staircase encounters was the opportunity to slow the pace, for children and families to be unhurried. The non-family friendly style of the staircase (partial banister, large steps, slippery surface) in fact supported this slowing down, not just physically, but also mentally, as children and families used their stair time to focus entirely on the stairs: being absorbed in the present.

Focusing on the present is vital for establishing joint attention between adults and children: a foundation for shared learning and connection which museums are well-

placed to support (Tison Povis and Crowley 2015). Through repeated visits, certain objects become meaningful points of connection in which families feel sufficiently relaxed to interact playfully with each other. Shared encounters with chosen objects drew families together, nurtured connections, and helped them to ground and centre themselves within the museum space.

Looking slowly and lingering together: the release of not knowing

Our findings demonstrate how the design and architecture of the museum building can encourage slow movement. Lingering creates a sense of space which families fill by connecting with each other. The idea of a museum visit as a leveller – a place and experience that adults and children can come to as equals – is key to its affordance of connections. In the shared experiences of noticing and looking shown above, the adults are no more expert or knowledgeable than the children. The experiences that families felt the most connected to had an element of familiarity, but also something new or remarkable to both adults and children.

The objects in museums are unusual, as communicated by the ways in which they are displayed and curated. Whereas in other contexts, adults are expected to be more knowledgeable than children about the objects they encounter, museums offer an alternative model: permission for adults not to know. Instead, they engage with objects alongside their children as peers, connecting in a shared experience of not knowing. These vignettes reveal the power of looking together, of sharing a valuable sensory encounter. Riley's laughter and facial expressions and playful dance around the museum cases demonstrate the connective power of non-verbal communication as a way of making meaning in a museum. The space and time opened up through our

project enabled us to move beyond words which can constrain, limit or reduce and instead enter into an embodied and sensory shared experience infused by spontaneous laughter and play.

Final Thoughts and Implications for Research and Practice

The edges, boundaries, and liminal spaces which drew families in over the course of our project were considered as destinations in their own right; not simply places to transition through. When the motivation is to arrive at a finishing point, liminal spaces become purely transitional – their only purpose being to connect us efficiently to our end goal. Moving into and out of them as quickly as possible is desirable. However, when this end goal is not defined, spaces of liminality hold more potential. They become spaces where we may linger, pause, and be held. While we remain in this liminal space, decisions are yet to be made, destinies are yet to be fulfilled: anything could happen. The distinction between liminality as transitional, and liminality as possibility is important:

‘a transitional conception of liminality can be considered to make for a restrictive geography of learning and education. In privileging a given end state, effecting social change is a challenge.’ (Mulcahy 2017, 111)

This has an impact on how family visitors are situated by museums, and how the potential of spaces is conceptualised.

‘The museum is inviting families to inhabit the museum in ways that divulge [sic] from what is traditionally seen as acceptable visitor behaviour. Yet it is not apparent that the museum sector is fully aware of the specific benefits accruing from this less formal family provision that, importantly, gives greater agency to the visitor.’ (Hood et al. 2022, 19)

The 'specific benefits' referenced above come from the museum being positioned as an invitation. It has the potential to be a learning space distinct from a formal environment with no clear linear trajectory for development or expected curriculum model against which to measure progress.

The museum is thus a site of potential, an in-between space where meanings are not yet fixed, and minds are not made up. It can support growth and nurture development in a way that is unpredictable, non-linear, and that acknowledges that adults as well as just children can learn, develop, and change. This offers an alternative model to the colonising discourse of an increasingly instrumentalised approach in Early Childhood Education and Care, with its emphasis on linear progress towards to an idealised white, adult, male, able-bodied archetype (Hackett 2022; Hackett, MacLure, and MacMahon 2020; Truman et al. 2021). Museums can offer an alternative, although they must continue to be mindful of their legacies regarding unequal power relations and the suppression of challenging narratives moving towards a more open attitude, embracing ambiguity and difference.

Our findings can be held in opposition to the performance-driven metrics within formal learning contexts. A careful and nurturing approach to programming for families, children and young people acknowledges them as experts in their own learning and is thus audience-led, participatory, and flexible. It recognises the potential of time and space away from the everyday and the already-decided, to nurture caring relationships and connections. By shifting our focus from learning towards care (recognising that the two are always intertwined) we share in Morse's (2022) hope that we can activate the power of museums as hospitable and caring community institutions.

To be truly transformational this approach must inform the whole museum. We recognise the expertise held by front of house teams who support visitors to feel welcome while maintaining a safe and secure environment. We understand concerns that some of the encounters described above might appear disruptive or purposeless at first glance. By raising awareness of how families use spaces like the staircases and rugs to slow down and build connections, we hope that such encounters might be better understood and supported. Curatorial colleagues may also benefit from these insights when considering how their objects and displays might be used by children and families. We also urge museum managers and curators to attend to our findings by considering how institutional systems and hierarchies might adapt to enable a more care-centred practice across the whole museum (Morse 2021; 203).

We recognise the limitations of our study focused on one museum and a small group of families. However, we believe our close analysis will resonate with museum and gallery colleagues who are interested in how children and families connect with buildings and displays. By providing a nurturing environment rooted in gentle attention, care, and openness, our hope is that the museum can become a community space of support in which families with young children are able to slow down, make connections, and explore together.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Figure Captions

Image 1 – Sitting on the bottom step

Image 2 – Riley with St George

Image 3 – Cat! Cat!

Image 4 – Riley shares his interest in ceramics

Image 5 – Riley & Yaz laughing together

Image 6 – Silvia and Melania creating their own space