

Don't stop toddlers running around museums – it could help them learn

July 21 2014, by Abigail Hackett



Grandpa, I want to touch the Dalek! Credit: Danny Lawson/PA Archive

As the school summer holidays beckon, families will be seeking out places to visit with their children, including museums, art galleries and science centres. It may be a way of keeping older children occupied, but for toddlers who prefer running from room to room in a museum instead of looking at the exhibits, parents are often left wondering whether their children are actually learning anything.

But [my research](#) into the way children under three years-old move around in museums found that zooming around is a good way for kids to learn.

While [older children](#) might complete a worksheet or follow an activity trail if they visit a museum, [young children](#) have a different experience. Be prepared for a lot of running around, perhaps some climbing, jumping or dancing. Depending on how family-friendly a museum is, parents may feel unsure about whether their children's behaviour is acceptable or welcomed.

Getting to know the place

My research aimed to understand, from the children's perspectives, what they made of the museum and what, if anything, they were [learning](#). The study involved making repeat visits to museums for a year with eight families with young children. Each family made between four and ten repeat visits to the same museum in total. The museums were free entry local museums, with collections including social history, archaeology, natural history and art.

The children in my study were deeply engaged in the museum. As well as being interested in some of the exhibits, the children liked jumping on the lights embedded in the floor, climbing on benches, and touching the grates in the floor. They were much more likely to engage in these exploratory activities if they were with friends of the same age.



The bear in question.

As the children got to know the museum over the course of the year, they became more confident to explore. They began to learn routes around the museum, so they could run ahead to places they wanted to get to. After a year, the children had favourite places and locations in the museum, which they wanted to return to every time. When they returned to these places, they often did similar repeated actions.

In one example, the children became fascinated with a large stuffed bear. After being a little afraid of it on their first visit, the bear became a favourite exhibit. The children learnt the route through the museum to get to the bear.

When they got to the bear, the children always played the same game, pretending that the bear was tickling them. They would creep near to the bear, touch his "tickly" fur, then jump away from him again. The

children were creating their own traditions which they liked to do each time they visited.

A different kind of learning

My observations indicate a different kind of learning is going on for these young children. Rather than learning facts about the exhibits in the museum, they were learning with their bodies. They were learning how to develop ways of interacting with new places.

This study fits with [wider research](#) about the importance of movement in children's learning. It also supports [other studies](#) which highlight the potential role regular trips to museums can play in young children's learning.

Despite this, having young children in [museums](#) can still sometimes be seen as controversial. It depends on the museum as to how open they are to young children running around the rooms. But when children are exploring and learning about a place with their bodies, even if that involves running, jumping and dancing around, they are developing a particular way of knowing about and being in that place.

In particular, my study suggests that returning to the same museum, gallery or science centre regularly may be particularly valuable for young children. Over time and over subsequent visits, young [children](#) develop knowledge about places by moving around them.

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