Top Tips for Engaging Families with Children with Autism

Through a series of evaluations, we have identified the wants, needs and expectations of this audience when engaging with the Museum. We have collected a list of tips based on what we have discovered through: observations and interviews at Dinosaur, our early morning opening event for neuro-diverse families; a survey of parents with autistic children; and focus group consultations with parents about how they engage with the outdoors.

Top Tips

1. **Prepare families for the experience:** Providing information before the visit on your website or via email is important to manage expectations and help the family to plan their time. This could include: a map indicating where strong sensory elements, such as overpowering smells or sounds might be, as well as showing quieter / calm areas, breakdown of what activities will be on offer at what times, an indication of what the process for entering the Museum will look like, photographs of key aspects of the Museum e.g. the entrances, key exhibits and staff.

2. **Recognise that not all families are the same:** Gathering feedback has led us to consider how every family has slightly different needs, wants, expectations, worries and general interests and it is important to understand this and cater to it to the best of our ability. Some families are regulars to Dawnosaurs or similar programmes at other museums or galleries and some are visiting for the first time so will be less sure of what is on, what to do and what to expect. It is important to ensure that the information and programme caters for all visitor types.
3. **Train your staff:** It is vital to ensure training is incorporated into the induction process for staff to deepen the understanding of this audience’s needs, wants and expectations and to increase their confidence in doing so and to reassure families that their needs will be met. Not only will this help staff during *Dawnosaurs* events, but also more widely in their day to day roles at the museum. Families who engaged with trained staff during *Dawnosaurs* really appreciated the expertise and skill of the staff and felt reassured that their needs will be met if they also came back during usual opening hours.

4. **Provide events specifically for this audience:** There are many barriers for visitors with autism attending museums during opening hours due to high numbers of visitors creating queues, crowding, noise etc.

> “*My daughter loved Investigate, I had real trouble getting her to leave! The quiet of the halls was wonderful, my last visit was a nightmare as she kept running off and with so many people about it was really difficult to keep up with her*”

 *(Dawnosaurs attendee)*

Opening the museum specifically for this audience, such as early morning viewings, offers families a chance to visit the museum in a calm and relaxed atmosphere. At *Dawnosaurs*, families were very appreciative of the quiet of the morning and the relaxed atmosphere created by limiting numbers and spacing out activities to stop crowds forming. This event offered adults a chance to relax as they felt free from judgement and, as a result, these types of programme are highly valued by the audience.

> “*You really do see the parents relax*”

 *(Focus group/Dawnosaurs attendee)*

5. **Avoid queues:** Queues cause families to bunch together and create crowds which can be very uncomfortable for those attending; therefore, it is important to ensure that queues are kept to a minimum and regularly monitored for any issues.

6. **Stick to advertised schedules:** Parents will often prepare their child before a visit to give their child structure and manage their expectations. This includes what the child can expect to see or do. Parents find it difficult when activities are cancelled, changed or do not stick to time as this can be difficult for their child to comprehend.
Advertised activities should have a back up plan in case they need to change in some way, for example, ‘rainy day’ alternatives for outdoor activities. Keeping to time is essential. If an event is advertised to start at a specific time and it starts even a few minutes late this has a negative impact on the day for some families. As well as causing stress, starting late can cause extra queueing and crowds.

“If a child has been told ‘you are going to be doing this activity’ and then come the day they can’t because it rains, they still want to do that”

(Focus group/Dawnosaurs attendee)

7. **Activities need to be well structured:** During the focus groups, parents agreed that structure is extremely important when taking their children out, particularly in an outdoor setting. They explained that, without structured activities or an understanding of what the child could expect to do in a space, engagement and experiences often fall apart. In further support of this finding, a survey of attendees of a *Dawnosaur* event showed that one of the biggest challenges for parents when visiting spaces like Museums is long or complicated activities. Activities which have a clear structure are better received by parents.

“When we go outside there has to be a kind of framework, like a kind of structure to it...otherwise it would break down.”

(Focus group/Dawnosaurs attendee)

8. **Activities need to be suitable for siblings too:** Families attending Dawnosaurs usually bring at least one sibling with them. Activities need to be suitable for the siblings and also provide means for siblings to get involved. Parents in our focus groups were passionate about the fact that their other children know how to best engage their autistic sibling with activities and wanted an experience which allowed their children the chance to do something together and bond.

9. **Activities should have a strong sensory component, particularly touch:** As with any audience, using the senses is a preferable way to engage with content. Parents want things which their children can clearly touch to eliminate any fear of ‘breaking rules’- something particularly prevalent in a museum environment, which the parents associate with ‘do not touch’. However, be aware that some autistic children do not like strong smells, loud noises or strange textures so make these activities optional and clearly signposted.
10. **Avoid the use of digital technology in an outdoor setting:** Parents were overwhelmingly in favour of having as minimal screens as possible when engaging with the outdoors. They explained that their children spend enough time on screens indoors and want them to experience nature first-hand.

**BONUS TIP: Evaluate and gather feedback regularly:** No programme is perfect and it can constantly be improved. Therefore, try to gather feedback in a structured way regularly to monitor, iterate and improve the programme. We found that families with children with autism were pleased to be asked about their needs and keen to contribute to our research.

*For further information about Dawnosaurs or its evaluation please email:*
*Dawnosaurs – dawnosaurs@nhm.ac.uk*
*Evaluation – audienceresearch@nhm.ac.uk*
*General access and inclusion – jsamuels@nhm.ac.uk*