



Reclaiming the space

CASE STUDY: Providing creative adventures for Early Years children & families in libraries during times of social distancing

As we know, we are in a moment of time where we are surrounded by uncertainty. We have restrictions everywhere and sometimes this can feel suffocating.

When we think about coming into a place like our local library, we have to work out how we move around it, how we abide by the social distance rules. The space once familiar and open can now feel empty and sterile, as if it is not really your space at all.

During September and October - between lockdowns - artists Dave 'Stickman' Higgins and Sian Taylor Watson returned to Pork Pie Library and Community Centre and St Barnabas Library in Leicester, taking up their posts again as Artists in Residence. It remained in principle the same as it was when they left in March, a constant collaboration of ideas between library staff and families, only there were physical restrictions and codes of safe practice to adhere to for the safety of everyone. We remain after all in the midst of a pandemic and as such there are detailed procedures to follow.



A place for adventure and curiosity

So how do we re-imagine the offer and reclaim the library space as a place for adventure and curiosity in this strange time.

With Early Years areas limited to a group size of just six children and adults, Sian and Dave became aware of the importance of "gifting" each family their own space – a family shaped space for them to create and call their own whilst they were visiting the Library.



With Sian, the first thing she does is to invite families to measure their own 2 metre area, and whilst they are bending down, and stretching to unfold the tape, parent and child sharing the task, they begin to mark out their space and connect with it. Standing in the centre and looking at the lines the space becomes a stage, a canvas, a page of a book. 2 metres is a good size and it's waiting to be filled with imagination, laughter, movement. There are no limits to how high it travels; it can reach past the clouds and stretch the whole world over.



Dave prepares a 2 metre square, and this becomes an invitation for families – a new landscape of endless possibilities. Each family is given their own cardboard box containing simple resources for the session, which runs for 15 minutes maximum. Inside each box is something visual to construct; a paper plate that becomes the moon, a piece of paper to scrunch and shape into a puppet, or stickers to make eyes for a 'coat monster'. There is also musical play. Without singing we hum, we speak, we tell a story that corresponds to the visual activity.

During the 7 week period of opening we worked with 50 families over the 2 sites.

Empowering children - playing with the limitations



It is all about playing with the limitations. The children and families create their own stage and it can be empowering, the child as director, their family as the crew. They are writers, actors and costume designers – yes the children have been walking home in decorated paper suits, characters from the pages of the books on a journey home to continue the story.

What is equally exciting is the impact this approach is having on service delivery – the artists have delivered socially distanced training to the city-wide Toddler Time team. Sharing ideas and resources with 24 early years & toddler time practitioners now armed with tape and boxes ready to become architects of their own space and stages.



Practitioners respond with a palpable sense of joy, and a welcome relief, to be creating their own story characters inspired by the artists, the library books and materials in the boxes. “Restrictions are not really restrictive” comments one practitioner, “just embrace the space and don’t see social distancing as a barrier”.

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Toddler Time practitioner

Renewed confidence



The city of Leicester has experienced a longer and more extensive period of restrictions than any other area since the start of the pandemic and, understandably, venturing out of the house again can bring a sense of worry and anxiety. As one practitioner noted;

“I was very nervous when I came in the morning – I’m going home with confidence that I can do it - I feel very confident now - can’t wait to get back to work”.

The artists in residence are looking forward to the library doors opening again and placing Artist pedagogy at the heart of social responsibility. They will again tread carefully and work diligently, with risk assessments signed off by Health and Safety and Public Health, but their imaginations know no bounds. Inspired by a love of art and fiction they will create 2 metre stages where anything can happen, you can go anywhere and be anything - inviting children and families to reclaim their space, its where the adventure and stories begin.

Dave Stickman Higgins and Sian Watson Taylor are Artists In Residence, The Spark Arts for Children working with Leicester City Council’s Neighbourhood Services.

Read Dave and Sian’s blogs at thesparkarts.co.uk/small-wonders-blog
For more information about The Spark Arts for Children visit thesparkarts.co.uk or contact liza@thesparkarts.co.uk