

Some everyday stories about play and daily happenings with the visitor assistants, collected by Jennie, Visitor Team Assistant, April-May 2015

Playful stories – setting the atmosphere from point of entry and beyond

On Desk- Ways of giving the map away: Pretend it costs money – saying some extortionate pretend amount to the child, then say, ‘You can have one, but don’t tell anybody else! ‘

Money gallery:

While the adults are looking at the money in cases which jut out and over-hang the floor, children often use this make-do story tunnel to crawl along on their hands and knees or try to stay hidden beneath. VTA team can jovially play peak-a-boo when they reach their location, or just pull playful surprised faces at what they are doing, which makes them giggle.

Much joy is created by the central display cases create two islands around which small toddlers perceive as a mini maze that allows a figure of 8 pathway for them to run between constantly appearing and reappearing to the an older sibling or adult with them.

This does not disrupt the others enjoying the gallery as the kids are often too small to be outlandish, and other gallery visitors are often seen enjoying that the child is having fun while the rest are free to concentrate on the cases around the outside of the gallery. NB If it so happens that other visitors are being disrupted the kids can be distracted by asking them if they want to see the Pirate money and/or the treasure (not pirate treasure but either are always a winner for their attention) – or by having a game of “shop”.

The middle island display cases have a shape which unwittingly is the perfect pretend shop counter. Children play in pairs through these and often, if a child is alone and looking like they recognise the potential of the pretend shop, VTAs can encourage them by saying ‘ooh, are you the shop keeper and pretend to buy something – the display cases either side are perfect to double up as their shop windows to which one can pretend to point to an item to buy, and the child goes ahead with the pretend transaction automatically. Very appropriate that the money gallery lends itself to this kind of play, and it can then be used as a spring board for engaging the children in what money is and was, referring them to the different representations present in the case fronted by the picture of a cow.

Just outside the money gallery there is bench seating which extends the length of the corridor. Kids love to slide along it alone or in groups while seated or smaller kids go on their hands and needs and “caterpillar” along. Adults push them along too.

Many of the galleries inspire spontaneous play, like this:-

The Manchester gallery has two large laminate circles in the carpet representing puddles speckled with rain drops. Once they are recognised as puddles kids will jump from one to the other and pretend to jump straight up and down creating a big splash!

The Living Worlds gallery has transparent glass cases, and filled with objects can offer youngsters a good hide and seek mechanism – not the full game necessarily, but one where kids often enjoy hiding and dividing out to their group.

Whale skeleton game – To play when the most asked question in the Living Worlds Gallery is asked by kids, or adults on behalf of the kids, “What is that?” series of questions that inspire learning with play:

Do you think it lived on land or sea?

Do you think its alive today or pre-historic?

It’s a mammal so what does that mean? Breathes air so it has lungs.

How long can you hold your breath for? Let’s try ... well the whale can hold its breath for an hour or More!!! And that is so it can dive very deep, in fact it dives where there sunlight doesn’t even reach through the water, etc etc....

Also, kids can Kids measure the whale’s length with their footsteps to show their friends who haven’t visited yet.

In the Temporary Exhibition Gallery (TEG), (Currently Rapa Nui Exhibit)

The curtains are a feature that brings pleasure to many kids including those in prams – because it’s the surprise – they enjoying that feeling of going through to a surprise the other side and the curtains sliding over the pram brings a smile. Many want to do it again and again. It is also a good prop for another hide and seek game involving going round and round through the two curtained gallery entrance/exits and trying to catch each other.

They also enjoy, “shhh”-ing each other in TEG. There is usually a bossy one who has seen the preventative signs who enjoys telling the others including the adults, not to touch. (Refers to signs asking people not to touch the polystyrene models of the Rapa nui statues.)

I’ve observed children sitting while their parents read, playing ‘spot the difference’ between two statues. They kinda run out after the Top knot and the eyes but no harm in trying.

Some VTAs wearing scarves encourage the kids to use them as a mock example of how the Maori statues where “walked” by pulling each side.

Sometimes a VTA standing behind the central sign stand that says “do not touch” in TEG is a good one, because kids tend to walk over just to read the sign but haven’t noticed we are there, so we can say ‘Boo!’ which makes them beam or laugh.

TEG projector – kids are making shapes while parents are looking on thinking should they be doing that – VTA joined in to – give them permission.

Giving an Irish dancer permission to dance!

A girl of 11 or 12 years was sulking on one of the benches because her parents had told her the museum isn't an appropriate place to dance. She loves Irish dancing and had been learning for a while but her parents told the VTA it makes too much noise. The VTA said 'of course she can dance and advised her to go to the Living Worlds gallery where the acoustics are much better as is the flooring for dancing, instead of the carpet', thus giving her permission.

Front desk. A child asks where the dinosaur footprints are to the dinosaur. VTA 'we haven't got any, but the one's in your imagination are far better than any we could place'. The child went off walking like a dinosaur.

As many of us are of a playful disposition, the spontaneity of the moment unless it is repeated means many interactions are lost to the blurred passages of memory, yet these moments are one of the reasons all VTAs love their jobs – enjoying seeing, interacting and engaging with kids and families and creating a joyful place to be.