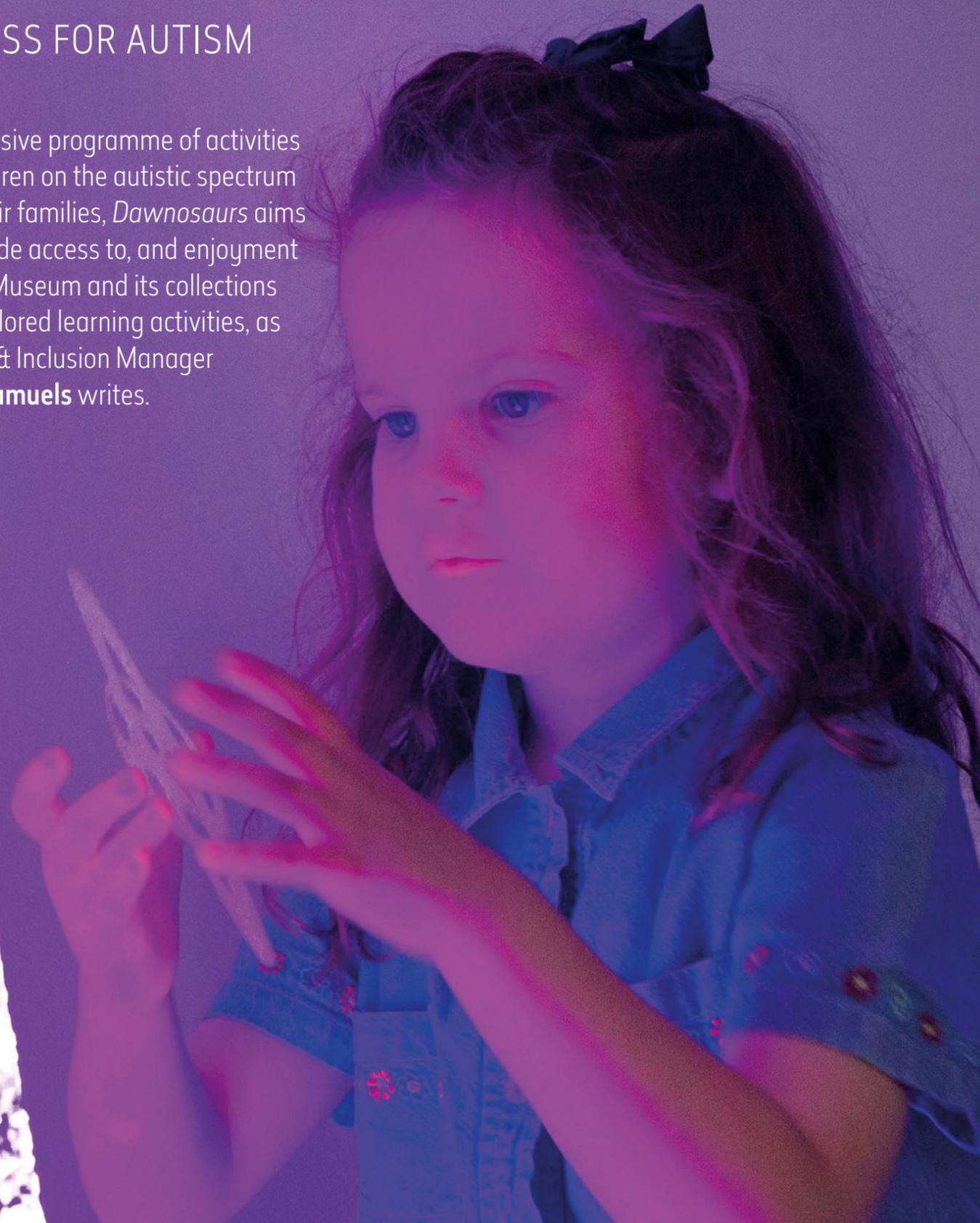


Dawnosaurs

ACCESS FOR AUTISM

An inclusive programme of activities for children on the autistic spectrum and their families, *Dawnosaurs* aims to provide access to, and enjoyment of, the Museum and its collections with tailored learning activities, as Access & Inclusion Manager **Jane Samuels** writes.



With accessibility as one of the Museum's guiding values, and natural diversity lying at the heart of our collections, challenging obstacles to visitor engagement is a key priority for the Museum.

A new Access Strategy to develop all areas of accessibility, including physical, sensory, intellectual and attitudinal, is also driving forward fresh developments for disabled visitors across the Museum. Specific target audiences are being focussed on, autism being one of them.

REMOVING OBSTACLES

For autistic children, visiting the Museum during busy crowded periods can be very challenging. As a result, many people with autistic spectrum disorders may feel reluctant to visit, and unless bespoke initiatives are programmed, they can feel excluded from the museum sector.

The Museum has, for some time, wanted to address this issue and explore how collections and resources can be made more fully accessible. Consequently, *Dawnosaurs*,

a high-quality Museum learning experience, was proposed and developed for children with autism.

WHAT IS DAWNOSAURS?

Piloted in April 2016, and currently funded by The Lord and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation, *Dawnosaurs* is an inspiring programme of events for autistic children aged five to 15 years and their families.

The programme provides a unique opportunity for the participants to interact with an exciting range of activities in a calm and well-structured Museum environment, free from the crowds, long queues and the general hustle and bustle of normal opening hours.

In recognition of how important it is for autistic children to experience cultural opportunities as a family, and how challenging this can often be, *Dawnosaurs* invites parents, grandparents and siblings to attend the event too. Groups are also welcome.

The Museum is not alone in programming focussed learning opportunities for autistic children. Other museums, including ►

← **Left** The *Dawnosaurs* sensory room provides a calm and stimulating environment for children who benefit from a quieter experience.
↑ **Above** Art activities create engagement to explore the Museum's collections.



↑ Above Trained and enthusiastic staff support and facilitate learning activities across the Museum.
→ Right Ranger Stu and his Animal Show offer opportunities for the children to interact with live animals.

Manchester Museum, the Science Museum and the London Transport Museum, are among those also reaching out to this target audience.

Data compiled from an event in May 2017 indicates that before attending *Dawnosaurs*, 55 per cent of those present had attended bespoke out-of-hours opportunities in other museums and galleries. Nevertheless, high quality events of this kind are rare, and those that are inclusive of the wider family rarer still.

Programming for autistic children ensures an accessible learning experience that is all at once calm and structured, engaging and stimulating. This careful balance is essential for children with autism, enabling them to focus and learn in a way not easily achievable when the Museum is crowded and noisy.

One enthusiastic mother said of her child during a *Dawnosaurs* event, 'I was really surprised by one of my sons. I had never seen him concentrate so much'.

ENGAGING WITH OUR AUDIENCE

Dawnosaurs allows children and their families to enjoy the Museum in a welcoming,

safe and non-judgemental environment. Well-considered learning activities are geared to suit the varied and specific needs of not only the autistic children but also their accompanying siblings. Empowering the children's confidence to enjoy and engage with the collections and the physical building lies at the heart of the initiative.

The events also provide valuable networking opportunities for families to connect, talk and share common experiences with each other.

Each event follows the same generic structure to support the expectations of the autistic children. On specified Saturdays across the year, the Museum opens its doors two hours early at 8.00. An events programme is provided on arrival to enable the families to choose activities to suit their child. The *Kitchen* also opens early to ensure food and refreshments are available.

The events are well supported by Museum staff, many of whom have prior experience of working with autism. All staff received autism awareness training from Dr James Galpin, a chartered psychologist from Bridge School,



an autistic school based in Islington, North London. So far, approximately 130 staff across the Museum have attended the training programme.

Key Museum contributors to *Dawnosaurs* include Science Educators, Visitor Assistants, Event Assistants, Security, Retail staff and last but not least, Ronel Verwoerd, *Dawnosaurs* Project Co-ordinator, who steers the content development and implementation of each event.

Activities range from animal handling, hands-on microscope activities, artistic workshops and gallery object handling. The *Investigate Centre* also remains open exclusively for *Dawnosaurs* guests until 11.00 and the Museum has developed a sensory room to cater for children who need a more tranquil and controlled environment. Funding by The Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation ensures the programme is completely free, although all attendees must book in advance to secure their places.

THE DAWNOSAURS EXPERIENCE

Dawnosaurs has been very well attended so far.

In the development stage, we began by piloting the events with much smaller numbers to allow for observation and feedback.

The first two introductory pilot *Dawnosaurs* events each invited 220 attendees, which steadily rose in year two to around 450, and more than 600 in year three. Each event increased its allocated spaces in line with demand and capacity. Those families unsuccessful in their application were placed on a reserve list, or given priority for the next event.

Comprehensive pre-visit information to help prepare and support families is sent one week in advance of each event, including detail about travel routes and Museum facilities. Attendees are alerted to other useful resources such as the free cloakroom, café, baby changing facilities, the use of a mobile hoist for severely mobility-impaired visitors, a dedicated sensory room and an approximate outline of programmed activities. MP3 clips are also sent out in advance to prepare visitors to certain sounds, such as the fire evacuation message. All these measures are essential to create a smoother, happier and less anxious experience.

Additional adjustments include anticipating and removing barriers such as crowds and queueing. Structure is important, so there is strict adherence to time schedules. Loud noises such as hand dryers, which may cause distress, are switched off during the event and lighting levels are assessed.

THE WIDER IMPACT

As well as providing an excellent resource for autistic children and their families, *Dawnosaurs* has had an impact across the Museum in other ways. The autism awareness staff training, for example, has been beneficial for other disabled audiences and has supported the Museum to become more autistic aware, not only during *Dawnosaurs* events, but in general.

Consequently, the Museum now has a greater understanding of how to support visitors with autism, along with other learning disabilities and school children with special educational needs.



← Left Museum staff support learning engagement in the *Investigate Centre*. All images © Dare & Hier Media Ltd

‘For those of us who have worked on delivering this programme, one of the most important outcomes is the cultural change to the Museum that *Dawnosaurs* has helped bring about. We are now an autism-friendly institution with a well-trained staff and a strong institutional knowledge of the issues surrounding autism. We have secured commitment for the programme across the Museum, and we are establishing ourselves as a leader in best practice for autistic provision’.

Ronel Verwoerd
Project Coordinator, *Dawnosaurs*

Participant feedback

The impact of *Dawnosaurs* for its target audience has been overall an unequivocal success. During one evaluation, 70 per cent described the event as excellent and 25 per cent as good. The remaining five per cent sample provided valuable and constructive feedback, which the Museum has used to improve the offer.

One attendee observed: ‘The children were all so enthused; they had nothing to worry about other than having a good time and taking in all of the information. The extra events were really good too. Everything was thought through very thoroughly’.

And another, ‘Our family had a great time with other parents and children of similar situations and challenges. The fewer crowds also made it a pleasurable experience for our son in a wheelchair. We could push him around and look at things without being in other people’s way. Every member of staff was approachable, incredibly helpful and friendly. Nothing was too much trouble for them. I applaud all the team for giving all the families a day to remember’.

Autistic children can be really good in the right context, and this was the right context (*Dawnosaurs* attendee, 2017)

Looking to the future

The Museum is now a more autistic-friendly environment. As we draw further into year three, our hope is *Dawnosaurs* will become a sustainable feature of the Museum’s offer for autistic audiences and their families.

For more information on *Dawnosaurs*, including dates of future events, application details and commonly asked questions, visit www.nhm.ac.uk/events/dawnosaurs. You can also email dawnosaurs@nhm.ac.uk or call *Dawnosaurs* Project Co-ordinator Ronel Verwoerd on 020 7742 5459. To find out about the Museum’s access offer and future vision, contact Access & Inclusion Manager Jane Samuels on 020 7942 6037 or email j.samuels@nhm.ac.uk.

The Natural History Museum is extremely grateful to The Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation for making *Dawnosaurs* possible.