



## MK Gallery and Collar & Cuffs Co

Commended – Family Learning in the  
Early Years Award

[MK Gallery](#) is a contemporary visual arts gallery hosting exhibitions, creative workshops and events in Milton Keynes. Their mission is to provide access to high-quality, innovative cultural programmes that bring people and communities together to create, participate, and debate. Since its major redevelopment in 2019, the gallery has expanded its exhibitions and social spaces, creating more opportunities for public engagement.

A flagship strand of its work is the Inclusive Practice in the Arts (IPA) programme, developed through a long-standing partnership with Project Art Works. This programme provides inclusive workshops, tours, and partnerships for adults, young people, and families – particularly those with additional and complex support needs. Supported by a dedicated inclusion team and an accessible building, MK Gallery works to ensure its offer is relevant and open to all.

The organisation also embeds sustainability into its family learning practice, reusing materials from local partners and waste streams to create resources and reduce environmental impact.

### Family Learning in the Early Years: Toddle Exhibition Tours

Toddle Exhibition Tours are part of a wider sensory tour programme at MK Gallery designed and delivered in collaboration with sensory practitioner [Collar & Cuffs Co](#), addressing barriers that prevent families, particularly those with very young children and additional needs, from fully engaging with gallery spaces.

The programme responded to a clear challenge: traditional gallery environments can feel inaccessible, both physically and culturally, especially for early years audiences. Preconceptions of galleries as quiet, formal spaces can exclude families who need more flexible, interactive experiences. Toddle Tours provide a welcoming and engaging introduction to art from a young age, helping families feel that galleries are places for play, connection, and exploration.

Long-term collaborator Collar & Cuffs Co expertly brings exhibitions to life through imaginative, multisensory experiences. Families are guided through selected artworks using hands-on materials, movement, and storytelling.

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Activities have included dressing up to step into a portrait, exploring textures inspired by sculpture, travelling through immersive installations, and drawing or performing in response to artworks. This approach breaks down barriers between audience and artwork, encouraging children to engage actively and on their own terms.

Inclusivity is central to the programme, and Collar & Cuffs Co's practice. The tours are carefully designed to support a wide range of access needs, with thoughtful adaptations such as tactile resources, sensory-friendly materials, and alternative formats. The introduction of Bitesize Sensory Tours has provided a more personalised, low-pressure entry point for families who benefit from smaller, tailored experiences. Social stories and preparatory communications further support families to feel confident and prepared in advance.

Toddle Tours also reimagines the gallery space itself. By welcoming movement, sound and play, they challenge traditional expectations and demonstrate, both to participants and the wider public, that there is no single "correct" way to experience art.

*"It was really cool because I was in the gallery being me and no one minded.  
Collar & Cuffs Co is really fun."* – Child participant



Photography: Chris Henley, 2022

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### Impact and next steps

Toddle Tours have reached around 500 participants and are consistently in high demand, often fully booked shortly after release. The programme has had a clear impact on families' confidence and sense of belonging in cultural spaces, particularly for those who may not have previously engaged.

Feedback highlights how the tours foster joy, curiosity, and meaningful connections – helping children develop early relationships with art while supporting wellbeing and social interaction for the whole family. For many, the experience has reshaped perceptions of what galleries can be.

The programme continues to evolve through strong partnerships, including with local disability organisations, and through ongoing feedback from families. New sensory tour kits now allow visitors to extend their experience independently, supporting continued engagement beyond the sessions.

Looking ahead, MK Gallery aims to build on this success by expanding provision and exploring further opportunities to deepen creative engagement for early years audiences.



*"There is joy in being able to use the space to play, dance, make noise, lie on the floor, and do so without self-consciousness or the risk of being shushed." – Collar & Cuffs Co*