



Museum of the Order of St John

Highly Commended – Family Learning
in the Early Years Award

[The Museum of the Order of St John](#) is the heritage arm of St John Ambulance, a charity founded in 1877 to save lives and build healthier communities. Based in Clerkenwell, Central London, the Museum cares for a historic estate including St John's Gate and the Priory Church and gardens. It delivers inclusive cultural programmes that connect health, wellbeing and heritage.

Its work focuses on widening access and reducing inequalities in Islington and surrounding boroughs. Programmes support children under five and their caregivers, neurodiverse families, and local residents on low incomes – with accessibility embedded through sensory-friendly approaches, BSL interpretation, and strong community partnerships.

Delivery focuses on environmental sustainability, using gardens as outdoor classrooms for nature-based learning. Sessions incorporate low-waste materials, reuse practices, and themes of environmental care and wellbeing.



Family Learning in the Early Years: Growing Stories

Growing Stories is a free, long-term family learning programme for children under five and their caregivers, developed to expand access to early years cultural provision in Islington. Building on an existing programme established in 2022, it responds to local need, including high levels of child poverty.

The programme offers monthly workshops for under 3s and under 5s, combining storytelling, music, movement, and sensory exploration inspired by the Museum's collections. It also introduces innovative formats such as 'Rhymes and Relics' – where families explore historic spaces using discovery kits with prompts and tools to encourage independent exploration – and 'Bring Your Baby' tours designed specifically for non-walkers and their caregivers.



Museum of the Order of St John

Highly Commended – Family Learning
in the Early Years Award

A key feature is its balance of guided learning and self-directed discovery. Activities are designed around the EYFS Characteristics of Effective Learning. These are playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically, which encourages children to investigate, persist, and develop their own ideas while parents learn how to continue these experiences at home.

Co-production is crucial to the programme. A once-a-term Family Forum enables local families to shape content, accessibility, and delivery, ensuring sessions respond directly to lived experience. This approach is in partnership with museums, libraries, children's centres, and community organisations, which connect families to wider local support.

Through this combination of creativity, collaboration, and accessibility, Growing Stories transforms heritage spaces into welcoming environments where families can learn, explore, and build confidence together.



"[Your] storytelling sessions are consistently highlighted as delightful, engaging, and pitched perfectly. The workshops have been an absolute joy and offer so much learning, insight, and creativity." – Senior Practitioner, Family Support and Safeguarding, Islington Council

Museum of the Order of St John

Highly Commended – Family Learning
in the Early Years Award

Impact and next steps

Growing Stories has achieved good participation and sustained engagement, with attendance rising from 347 in 2024 to 487 in 2025. Sessions are consistently oversubscribed. Repeat attendance is strong, with 68% of families returning – demonstrating ongoing relationships and continued learning.

The programme supports children's communication, creativity, and problem-solving skills while strengthening parental confidence and encouraging families to explore cultural spaces independently. 38% of families reported visiting another cultural venue following participation, indicating a shift in behaviour and increased cultural engagement.

Families also benefit from reduced isolation through stronger social networks.

These findings are shaping future delivery, including plans to expand provision for younger children, increase session capacity, and strengthen outreach to underrepresented communities. The programme will continue to evolve in response to family feedback while maintaining its focus on access and engagement.

"It's great to explore individually. We were made to feel so comfortable in this incredible space." – Parent

