

Chapter 12

Creating Unique Workshops and Events for Children: The Case of Birdhouse Studio

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Abstract

This chapter tells the story of an intense but rewarding five years of running events for children in Hampshire in the south of England, UK, from 2015 to 2020. Whilst there will be a wealth of theory and academic models presented within this book, here the focus is primarily practical with lessons learnt from direct, and sometimes hard-earned experience. There are of course many formal options for becoming a primary school teacher or trained event host, for example, but we took a more lean and pragmatic approach to designing our off-curriculum activities and events.

Keywords: Workshop; events for children; unique selling point; case study; Birdhouse Studio; entrepreneurship

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an account of what happened, to share lessons learnt and provide guidelines for setting up and running a business for children. The business discussed here was based in Winchester, Hampshire. Winchester is a prosperous and designated heritage city that is situated within a district covering 250 square miles, with more than 39,000 of the 118,000 district residents living within the town itself ([Winchester City Council, 2022](#)). House prices are among the highest in the region and there are over 46 primary schools in the district of Winchester ([Snobe.co.uk, 2022](#)) and hence a large amount of children in this age group. Organised after-school activities have been muted as having positive outcomes, both academically and in terms of well-being ([Simpkins, 2015](#)). Whilst such programmes appear to be a financial challenge for families on poorer incomes, they are seen as a confidence booster and a clear requirement for parents with professional jobs ([BBC.co.uk, 2010](#)) which encompasses much of Winchester's demographic ([Winchester City Council, 2022](#)).

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From a methodological point of view, this chapter takes an interpretive approach, based on ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) where the aim is to describe minute details and descriptions of happenings in terms of the context and the behaviours that took place, as observed directly by the researcher. In other words, the accounts that follow help to paint a picture of realities on which conclusions and guidelines might be based.

The chapter is structured by first providing an overview of the business, its audience, how the business was initially formed and how it developed over time into a children’s events and education business. Then the significance of different locations and the pros and cons of venue types are discussed. Finally, lessons learnt are presented before recommendations for planning children’s events are outlined.

Birdhouse Studio

The Birdhouse Studio was situated within the somewhat affluent community of Winchester in the south of England. The concept was to bring a fresh approach to design for a broad audience and to bring together learning from arts and crafts, commercial advertising and brand design. To some extent this was a passion project, as I had always wanted a shop and studio and felt I had a lot of design knowledge to share. It provided a platform for experimentation and for me to create things that people had not seen before, whether that was prints, greetings cards, jewellery or the formulation of unique workshops.

The satisfaction gained from creating something and then someone walk in off the street to then purchase it was very fulfilling. Customers would come back frequently, often to request for something to be personalised, or would send their relatives in to purchase things from their birthday wish list, often bringing their young children who loved all the colours and visual imagery.

The business offering consisted of several strands including a brand consultancy (design studio), a retail offering featuring design work by myself and affiliated brands/artists, homewares and curated vintage items by brands with a similar aesthetic and a series of related educational workshops for adults and children. All of these were established within the core brand values of the company: to be original and fun, to brighten someone’s day, to show how everyone can be creative, to be friendly and approachable and to inspire. These goals align well with the overall benefits of children’s clubs being noted as learning, socialising, interacting with others and creating memories and souvenirs.

Initially the setting for these events was a self-contained and owner-managed creative design studio and shop (more about that to follow), but as the business grew, this expanded into events taking place at 12 primary schools within the region as well as frequent parties at children’s own homes and other rented venues such as church halls/theatre venues/libraries.

The retail venue was designed to be a place where people could come and essentially hang out, have a coffee and browse and chat about all things design. In

terms of productivity, this sometimes backfired as people would stay for a long time telling their stories. Making the design studio open and visible, as opposed to a hidden office, was also a popular move with visitors wanting to peek at work in progress. This work included brand design work for small businesses and freelancers, as such commissioned work was in demand in an area that was dense with over 90 thousand businesses ([Hampshire 2050 State of the Economy, 2020](#)).

The Format of Workshop Events

Some workshops were one-offs: jewellery/floristry/crochet for both adults and children and took place in the space at the rear of the premises. To enable these events involved creating bespoke promotional adverts and managing bookings as well as arranging for any external class leaders and even refreshments on the day.

Many of the workshops for children had three stages, a warm-up activity, the main event and then an extra option, with fun art and design activities throughout. All were designed exclusively for this purpose with an aim of being totally original and sometimes aligning with cultural events such as the London Marathon, Easter or Diwali. These lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and were mostly in classes of a maximum of 15 children, as smaller classes are known to increase engagement and attention [Blatchford, Bassett, and Brown \(2011\)](#).

The Relevance of Venue

The original plan was not to take such children's events 'on the road' but to host everything in the shop and studio space. This worked well for the adult workshops where the attendees were pleased to be out and about and could make their own way there but presented different challenges with children. The workshop space at the rear was fairly limited to comfortably accommodate approximately 14 persons, so anything larger than this required a different venue. Parking was problematic as the space was on a main road so even dropping off and particularly picking up young children could be a challenge at busy times, and this was therefore not ideal.

Another key factor was that many of our workshops for children needed to be at a time and place to involve minimal travel. Had we decided to try and run weekday workshops in the studio, this would have meant arranging transport for the children, thus taking up valuable time and resource, aside from the health and safety issues. The key reason for this is because many parents were working and could not interrupt their day to shuffle children around, so the logical approach on weekdays was to offer this in the school settings so children could simply leave their class and arrive at our hired classroom. This came with benefits and challenges as outlined below.

The exception was birthday parties and Christmas parties, with the former taking place sometimes at the studio, sometimes at the child's home and sometimes at a hired venue by the parent, and the latter involving bringing together a

fairly large number of children – approximately 100 at a venue we hired for the purpose.

The Pros and Cons of Venue Type

We found that no venue is perfect and that you must be flexible in the way you organise events depending on the venue. The [Table 1](#) below shows some of the pros and cons of each type of venue that we experienced.

There were various benefits and challenges of each venue choice.

Using Your Own (Studio) Space

Since our brand was all about a clear aesthetic proposition of fun and colour, it was important for us to be able to create spaces that reflected this as much as possible. We could really go to town on decoration and customising for workshops or parties with examples of work hanging from the ceilings, sketches on the walls and appropriate lighting settings. In rented venues this was much more difficult as these were sometimes shabby, very neutral in decor and palette and had other elements such as a heavy black curtain, piles of wooden box props or other non-moveable equipment in the environs. This was particularly the case with some church hall type of venues.

It was also a real benefit to be able to set the space up the night before and sometimes not fully clear it until the following day.

Bringing the parents and children into the environment through the front shop area also meant they would have sight of fun-related items that were for sale, and this was a temptation for both parents waiting and children excitedly arriving and leaving, providing us with frequent cross-selling opportunities – essentially, they could take a part of the experience home with them.

It was comforting to know what we could and could not do in terms of making noise, as we had used the venue so many times before often several times per week.

The downsides of using our space were that it was quite small, so we had to restrict numbers for workshops and parties; a shame when we were charging per child. Likewise, there was little space for children to burn off energy, which is much recommended when planning any children's event!

A somewhat unexpected challenge was that we often had trouble getting families to leave. They enjoyed the environs so much (as catching up with each other) that they tended to stay way past the event finishing time, which meant we were obliged at times to politely ask them to leave – a particular challenge when another workshop was happening on the same day.

Above all we found the children really enjoyed our setting and were fairly respectful and well-mannered as they were coming into somewhere exciting and new with plenty of precious looking things around.

Table 1. A Table of Pros and Cons of Each Type of Venue.

Venue	Pros	Cons	Notes
Owned studio space	The look and feel (branding) is under your total control.	Size – always the same limitations on capacity.	Behaviour tends to be quite good as new environs.
	No time limitations to exit other than your own.	Tidying up – all down to you.	
	‘Free’ to rent (other than usual rental) They visit your space, so you have a sense of control.	Need to be strict with exit times as cannot use venue hire time as a reason.	
	Chances to upsell other services.	Parking issues and not outdoor space (in this example).	
	Noise etc could be easier to manage as you know the venue well.		
(After) school classroom	Very convenient for the children.	Tended to be cluttered classrooms.	Behaviour could be difficult as children excitable after the long day and in school mode.
	No travel worries.	No set-up time.	
	Almost guaranteed audience.	Little chance to brand the space.	
	Additional support from venue	Rushed tidy up time.	
		Interference from school staff.	
Child’s home (parties)	Lovely environments that are familiar to the children.	Tired children as no gap between the workshop and their school day.	
		The power dynamic – you are in the parent’s home, and they would affect the timings etc.	Behaviour variable as children very comfortable in own home and more timings etc.

Table 1. (Continued)

Venue	Pros	Cons	Notes
Hired venue	Venue at no cost to us.	Often eating at same table as the artwork and more food involved.	scope to run in and out.
	Parents tended to handle toileting etc.		
	Health and safety primarily down to the parents.	Other family members distracting the children.	
	Parent tidies much up.		
	Outdoor space.		
	Scale can match attendees.	Timing tends to be very strict.	Equal playing field – a ‘neutral’ venue for us and the parents.
	Less cleaning.	So you are paying for set-up/set-down time.	Children excitable as all new.
	Flexible according to workshop theme.	Little chance to create brand impact unless considerable time spent.	
	Outdoor space.		
	Often with a kitchen area and other facilities such as a lobby.	More health and safety concerns.	
		Tends to be expensive.	
		More work to plan the use of that particular space: (Electricity, tables etc).	

Source: The Author.

Using School Classrooms

The main benefits of workshops taking place at the school venue related to convenience. As mentioned, there was no need for travel, and we had an almost guaranteed list of attendees for each workshop. Pick-ups by parents were usually prompt as they had other places to be, and we could therefore tidy up and exit usually within 15 minutes of the workshop ending.

There were, however, more challenges at these settings. We would have little to no set-up time as the classroom would just have been vacated of other children. The rooms could be stuffy and dirty after a day's use. These rooms were typically cluttered with other school items and there was little to no opportunity to brand the space to look and feel like our brand.

Some school class teachers were quick to vacate the space for us, whilst others remained, or came and went and this would at times be quite a distraction when we were trying to create a different experience for the children.

As the children had literally just dashed from their school day, we found them to be either extremely energetic after having to behave all day, or weary and hungry so we had to 'reset' them which we did manage to do. Since they knew the environment extremely well, and to some extent we were the visitor, the behaviour of the children would vary.

At the Child's Home

Parties or events at the child's home were a whole different ball game. The environments were typically lovely, very creative and comfortable homes, and often the parent(s) had gone to considerable effort to set the table and the whole scene on the same theme we had agreed. The 'venue' did not cost us anything and certain practical aspects such as use of the bathroom were not our responsibility so we could concentrate on our topics.

However, the typical immediate access to outdoor space (the garden) was both a benefit and also a challenge, in that the children were more inclined to jump down as they saw fit and the group was more dispersed during an activity. We also found the parents friends and family tended to stay for the duration (sometimes with a beer or two!) and at times we politely had to ask them to be quieter so we could work with the children!

Perhaps the most curious part was a subtle change in power dynamic – you were at the mercy of the parent, in their environment and they would sometimes switch the order of activities at their whim, or indeed completely ignore our class leaders all together. Since families tended to stay on, it could be difficult to exit these events at times as there was no official ending apparently.

Using a Hired Venue

A more 'official' route for running your children's event can be through hiring a venue designed for the purpose. For us these varied from somewhat old and tatty church halls to community centres, to theatre venues and more state-of-the-art

modern facilities such as purpose-built events rooms in our contemporary library wing. All of these come with a price of course, and it can vary greatly.

The good news is that you can select the size of venue to suit your event, so when we had a small summer holiday workshop, we hired a classroom at the library fit for 20 children, but when we held a Christmas party for over 100 children, we managed to upscale to theatre space. The important thing here was not too have too much space, as the atmosphere can be compromised, and it is not safe to have children wandering around a large area. We also found that venues with 'safe' outdoor space were useful in summer and those with plenty of cloakroom options were really needed in the winter. It is amazing how much space a pile of children's coats can take up!

Hired venues usually need to be left exactly as you leave them, but this is good practice anyway when running a children's event – although it can eat onto your hire time considerably, so make a tidy-up plan.

There is certainly less option to customise the space however, and for most themes you need to 'go big' and decorate broadly to make any kind of an impact. For our Christmas disco in a large venue (and a tower with a high ceiling), we bought metres of snow scene wall hangings which took some time to assemble but did have an impact. Placing a foil curtain over the main internal door and a red-carpet offcut leading up to the entrance did however help to create the festive atmosphere we were looking for.

Venue Hire Checklist

For us, the checklist when choosing a venue to hire included:

- (1) General location – close to the community?
- (2) Outdoor space – if needed and does it have boundaries?
- (3) Size in relation to expected number of attendees
- (4) Price per hour (remember set-up and set-down time)
- (5) Parking and safe dispatch of children
- (6) Lobby area (very useful for keeping buggies and chattering parents out of main event)
- (7) Kitchen area (especially if attached to main room)
- (8) Bathrooms
- (9) Lighting – does it provide options?
- (10) Light/windows – can these be covered if necessary?
- (11) Other clutter – is this an issue?
- (12) Seating and tables – where needed
- (13) Noise – any limitations?
- (14) Arrivals and entry/key issues
- (15) Coats storage area
- (16) Breakout space, should it be needed?

There are benefits to reviewing ‘what works’ and taking a pragmatist approach to understanding experiences can shed light on the meanings of our actions (Dewey, 2008). Whilst every single situation in our business taught us a lot about how to successfully manage a children’s event and the necessary factors such as venue size and location, budgeting, risk assessment and health and safety; some other key factors that we discovered/implemented are summarised in the table below as five key realities.

- Parents/carers will compare your offering directly with previous experiences
- Treat the children like mini adults
- Manage the time closely
- It’s not the children, it’s the parents!
- Make it personal

Parents/Carers Will Compare Your Offering Directly With Previous Experiences

It may seem obvious that when choosing whether to send their child to your event, parents/carers will weigh this up directly against previous events their children have attended. Putting it bluntly, they will primarily be thinking about time versus price. If your business is anything like mine, we really think we had something special to offer over and above a ‘typical’ event such as chains of activity centres/swimming parties/after school clubs. This meant we charged a little more for our activities (approx. 15–20%) than the typical offering. This was problematic for the parents to some extent in that, until they (and their child) had experienced our event, it was hard to know what was coming and why it was better. Additionally, they would always compare their spend with other perhaps inferior activities and even babysitting services, as this was certainly seen as a childcare option for many.

This is where the marketing materials and the initial communications with the parent/carer are so important. It is necessary to detail all the special features of the event you are offering as well as presenting this in a way that will be attractive to both parent and child. The old advertising adage of ‘pester power’ rings true here, as children will see the vision and not worry about the cost. So, all communications were designed to charm the young recipient. These were typically created initially as a teaser piece to gain interest and awareness and then followed up with more detail about the event offered. The wording was simple to appeal to the child and ‘calls to action’ (next steps for the viewer to take such as booking) were clear.

I have seen many parents/carers initially seem to object, or be unsure about, the more premium level of offering (and price point), but later the same parents/carers raving to us and other families, and anyone who will listen about the experience and how much their child loved it.

The plus side of this is that I have also had parents/carers phoning, desperate to book an event before any of their peers, so that they can be the first and original.

HOT TIP: Do not underestimate the apparent importance of being the first parent to do something new and exciting for their child before other children in the class/peer group!

Treat the Children like Mini Adults

This does not mean to provide alcohol or late nights, but through experience, we found that children engage well when they think a topic or theme is something usually only reserved for adults. It is known that children should be empowered and included in the shaping of offerings (Seraphin & Green, 2019) rather than simply being on the receiving end.

Through our style of communications, they also felt that we respected them and appreciated a more equal relationship with us than they were used to perhaps at school or elsewhere. If you try to think for a moment back to perhaps a school trip or other special event when you were young, you too may remember these boundaries shifting at that time and you may hold those memories dear. A simple example is that I remember we were allowed to address the activity leaders by their first names on school camp. So in essence, it is about trying to communicate with them on their level.

Some examples of how we implemented this are below:

- (1) Party Invitations: we created these for children to hand to their friends – these were delivered to the birthday child's home with the child's name on the front of the envelope rather than the parent/carer and included stickers saying, 'private and confidential', 'not for grown-ups' etc.
- (2) Enabling the child to make a choice: within workshops, each child had a varied choice of materials rather than simply being treated all the same.
- (3) Workshop topics: there are numerous examples of where a workshop topic was formulated that might usually be the domain of adults – for example:
 - Tattoo creation
 - Street art
 - Mobile phone case design
 - Logo/brand design
 - 'Mocktail' creation
 - Architecture
 - Branding projects

These are topics that might be considered in the domain of the adult and the children relished this. Any staff at events were addressed by their first names and other features at events themselves helped to provide a more aspirational mature vibe and were extremely well received. Examples include:

- A VIP area for older children at the Christmas parties where they could have table service and wristband-only entry. This was still visible as part of the main event but made the older children feel special.
- A red carpet and rope barriers on approaching the parties.
- Nail bars and ‘tattoo’ bars (usually the reserve of teenagers or adults)

HOT TIP: If you are choosing more grown-up themes, be prepared to justify these to the parents and ensure themes are still treated in a light-hearted way – you are not trying to turn the children into adults or poison their young minds.

Manage the Time Really Closely

- Juggling arrivals

Children will invariably arrive to your workshop at slightly different times and in different moods. There will also possibly be a time of trying to organise coats, bags and snacks, so be wary of this by having a plan to implement during this potentially chaotic time. We found some children arrived promptly and smoothly and were ready to be occupied whilst others ran in energetically later and fussed with their coats and therefore this dual situation required managing. Our solution was a ten-minute arrivals window (as from experience this worked for workshops which were primarily after-school and on-site) during which the children may undertake a simple but fun worksheet activity. This was not a critical part of the workshop and therefore was not a problem if missed or partially completed by the latecomers. This was also the munching window so that children could focus on their snack. We found the children could not wait to see what was on the sheet each week!

- Keeping pace and focus

In our workshops, the children sometimes worked at different paces – some would impatiently or skilfully whizz through an activity whilst others worked at a detailed level very slowly. It is up to you to manage the pace of this as they will not! After introducing a topic (they will only pay attention for a few minutes) and kicking it off, we checked the clock continuously. We always gave a five-minute warning that they needed to add any final parts and rang a bell/beeper at the end. For us a selection of coloured musical bells worked brilliantly and each week a child was chosen to ring it. They found this incredibly exciting.

Another important aspect of keeping pace was staying ahead of material needs. In essence this meant putting the right number of materials in front of the child just in time, so they neither raced ahead nor ran out of resources and became preoccupied with the task of find more. Naturally in this context we mean craft materials, but for you this could simply mean organising your sports or musical equipment to align with your workshop plan. A small challenge here related to choice (as mentioned above), as letting the children choose their own colours and types of materials can add substantial time to your workshop.

Getting Around Early Finishers/Bored Children

Invariably there will be children at any activity or workshop who finish their task/game early.

For this, we had two solutions:

- (1) We always had a simpler second optional activity on the same theme lined-up (and for those who did not complete they could take this home).
- (2) We engaged the children with a small organisational activity in relation to tidying up – for example, collecting up materials. This always worked and saved us some effort too!

Wrapping Up

The time it takes to close an event should not be underestimated. For us, working with children as young as 5, this could sometimes be a hefty task. Depending on the nature and location of your event, there may be very little to tidy up and organise or a great deal.

Running an arts and crafts business meant this aspect could be quite a burden due to the wealth of materials used during a workshop/party. At venues we rented this that came with the added pressure of leaving the venue before your rental time was up, and ensuring you left it exactly as you found it (see venue types above).

Children are messy. The quicker you accept that the quicker you can put in place plans to facilitate a smooth exit process. If I am honest this was never easy, and the burden was always a challenge. However, some of the ways we approached this part of time management was as follows:

- (1) Give the children plenty of warning that the session is wrapping up
- (2) Support those children who are reluctant to cease their activity by distracting them
- (3) Tidy as you go (essential!)
- (4) Engage the children in tidying as much as possible – they love an individual responsibility – but police this so that they are not snatching materials from other children, for example
- (5) Organise coats and bags by intervening and holding them up if necessary to save the scrummage
- (6) For larger events label/colour code coats and bags
- (7) Involve the parents where applicable as they can spot their own child's baggage easily
- (8) Decide how to manage children whose parents are late and be prepared for this as there will always be at least one!
- (9) Decide on your plan for parents who don't wish to leave

It's Not the Children, It's the Parents!

Naturally events for children are centred around the children first, after all they are the audience, but we found that the parents frequently also needed to be considered. We did find that the greater the event, the higher the parent expectations, so for each party (where children would often return a second or third time), we had to ensure we invented something new and fresh to ensure the parents felt they were getting a 'special' level of service.

As aforementioned, in certain environments, particularly at their homes, or a venue they had rented, the parents sometimes liked to try and take charge, so our staff became adept at gently managing the timings and activities to stay on task and on time.

Another feature we felt was important for our business was that the children should be free to experiment with their creativity and maybe even 'go wrong' as the experience was as important as the outcome. As the parents were not in the workshops, they did not always see it that way, and judged value for money on the completion and finishing of the items the children had made and brought home. We sometimes had a child who had a great time exploring ideas in class, only for the parent to say, 'is that all you did?'. Similarly with goody bags, should you choose to offer these after your event, the parents are measuring these against the quality of the event so be wary of your approach to these. Goody bags tend to be expensive to produce but leave a lasting impact on perceptions of your event from the parent perspective.

Be prepared for all eventualities when it comes to parents staying for the whole event or leaving and picking up later. We tended to see either, parents who would not leave (and literally some would sit beside their child undertaking the activity for them!) and those who arrived late and picked up late. If you know parents are going to be staying, you may want to consider providing refreshments – you could of course charge for this.

In every workshop there would typically be one parent who was late, sometimes by as much as 30 minutes, for example. So be prepared to cover your bases here with reference to good and ethical management of parent contact data and you may also like to put in place a late pick-up policy of some kind. Of course, it goes without saying that your recording and management of all contact data should comply with GDPR (data protection) rules. It is also very wise to check that data are up to date if you have reoccurring events, as parents do not always inform you of changes.

Finally, be wary of children being taken home by other parents when you have not been informed. This can cause confusion and leave you needing to cross-check, which can somewhat spoil the happy end to your fun event.

Make It Personal

One of the key strengths of our business, that all our customers loved, was personalisation. Children love to see their own name or other features at their event,

and parents love to see their children featured in this way. Some of the ways we undertook this for our events included:

Personalising every name (including those of attendees and child host) on the event invites

Letting the child host choose the invite colour and imagery

Offering a good choice of workshop activity/theme

In workshops – personalising the names and design of place mats

Personalising any paper templates, the children used (e.g. ‘Mimi’s self-portrait’)

Letting children choose from a range of different skin tones for their self-portrait collages

Providing a very large choice of craft materials so they could individualise their work

Providing a range of colours of paper wristband to choose from (these were useful for arrivals, queue management and groupings).

Customising goody bags

Conclusion

Whilst it is essential to ensure you cover the practical aspects of events for children including health and safety/safeguarding, GDPR, risk assessment, parking and venue location/size, we found other factors really made a difference to a successful and memorable event. These included being able to customise the space, pre-empting the needs and behaviours of parents/carers, treating the children more like mini-adults (where appropriate) and personalising the offering as much as possible.

We found that it is essential to stay one step ahead of the children when managing a party or workshop, to recognise that children have different attention spans and being able to accommodate this in various ways. Staying true to your brand values and ensuring these are communicated in every aspect of your event also helps the customer to understand your offering, to want to come again and to recommend you to others.

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