

SEND Backpacks for Centre of the Cell

Biochemical Society's Diversity in Science Grant 2024

Overview

Centre of the Cell was recently awarded a £500 grant from the Biochemical Society to help us to launch a set of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) backpacks with the intention of boosting the engagement of SEND students that visit our spaces. The backpacks are a simple and easy way to provide additional tools and resources to visitors who may benefit from them to allow them to get more out of our informal science learning offer. The funding was used to purchase an array of items for within the backpacks. These can be seen in Figure 1 below.

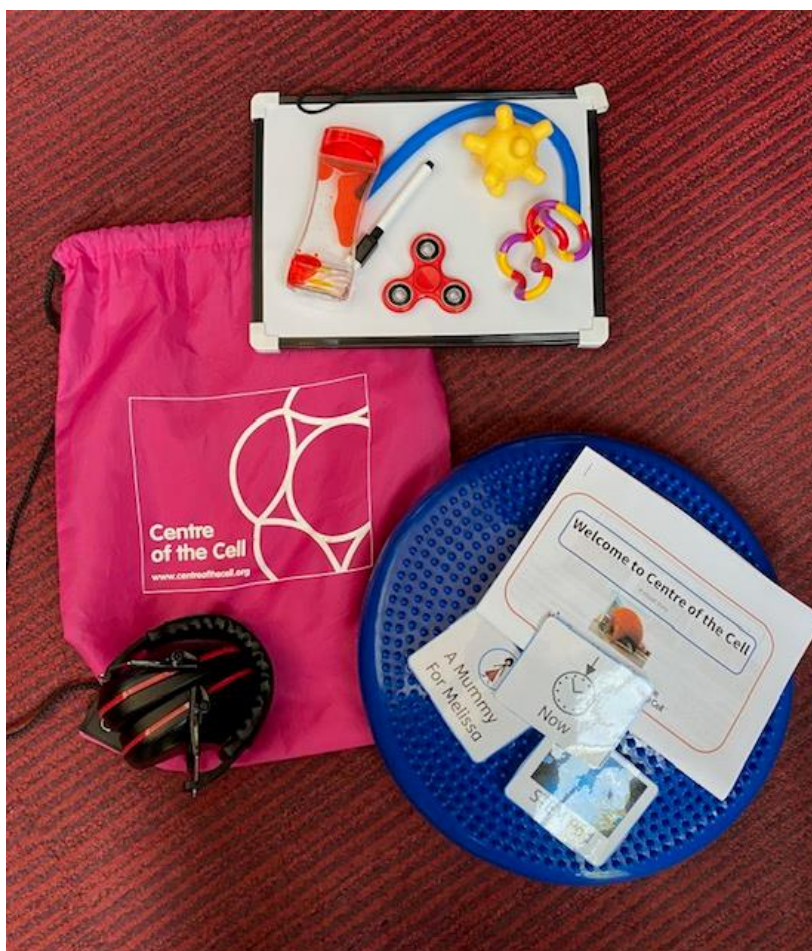


Figure 1. An SEND backpack includes a pair of ear defenders, a magnetic whiteboard and pen, a set of magnetic timetabling cards, a copy of our visual story, and a collection of fidget toys. A blue wobble cushion for feet is also available on request.

These items were chosen based on feedback from a questionnaire sent out to SEND teachers at the start of the project and have since been tested with SEND audiences as part of a specially run trial session and in ad-hoc instances during our summer public program. The feedback from these trials can be seen in the following section. As well as the purchased items, the backpacks also include a copy of our visual story so that visitors have easy access to it, and Figure 2 shows a magnetic timetable that can be personalised for each visitor, which was made in-house for our particular set of shows.



Figure 2. The magnetic timetabling cards can be used on the magnetic whiteboard to display a plan for the day ahead.

Outcomes & Feedback

The backpacks were officially trialed with a group of 15 invited guests with a variety of SEND requirements and experience on 27th August 2024. The session involved a first look at our upcoming SEND tailored workshop titled 'Journey Through the Senses', and the visitors were given the opportunity to try out the activities from the workshop while also investigating the new SEND backpacks. Feedback was collected verbally, through comments written on sticky notes throughout the session, and in an electronic feedback form provided at the end of the session.

The key points from the gathered feedback were that our set of items was very good, but that some additional ones (namely poppers and a soft plush toy) would make them even better. A suggestion was made to remove the long stretchy toy, as while the material and flexibility of it was great, it ran the risk of being flicked into someone's eye if used incorrectly. Additional feedback relating to the visual story included in the pack was also provided, such as including photographs of the staff members in it and sending the file out with the booking confirmation email.

One visitor liked the backpack so much that they wanted to replicate it themselves for home use, and asked where each item had come from so that they could do so. They also suggested we sell some of the items from it in our shop to allow visitors to do just that.

Future Plans

Perfecting these backpacks is a constantly ongoing process, and so next steps will involve gathering further feedback after carrying out the suggestions from the trial session to add and remove certain items. In the long run, this may lead to us creating several different backpacks containing items for more specific needs, or possibly a tick list to be filled in by the visitor at the beginning of the session to allow the content to be tailored to each individual for each visit.

Alongside this, we will continue to work on the SEND-friendly workshop mentioned above to be delivered at Centre of the Cell. This has been designed with the feedback from our initial questionnaire for this project in mind and is being developed alongside the backpacks as an additional offer for our SEND audiences.

In particular, the intention is for this workshop to be very flexible, with activities, timings, and general delivery style being easily changed based on discussions with the groups that attend. Once this has been developed, SEND visitors who would not be comfortable attending general public or school shows will be able to have a more personalised experience with us that is individually tailored to their needs wherever possible. The backpacks with their tools and resources will be an integral part of making this new workshop accessible to all. This will also help to highlight the existence of the backpacks to allow knowledge of them to spread further through word of mouth, potentially increasing the number of SEND visitors who feel comfortable visiting us in the future.