

Storytelling Through the Young Child's Eyes

Children ages 2 through 5 years old can be a great audience for a storyteller. They are used to picture books and being read to by parents and teachers. However, storytelling is an all together different experience for them. There's no book for them to look at. There is no artwork depicting the story. They must rely on their imagination. Many years ago I began "telling" stories as a teacher, all because my students kept complaining, "I can't see the pictures!" It opened my eyes to a wonderful art form that has a profound affect on the lives of young children.

The storyteller must be able to grab and hold the attention of a young audience. Therefore you must establish a rapport with this often wiggling group. This can be done with various audience management techniques such as a simple clapping game. Experienced teachers and performers have a routine. "Ok children, sit criss cross apple sauce, zip your lips, open your ears, we are going to have a story now!' The power of suggestion to a young audience works wonders. "OK boys and girls, time to sit still and be very quiet, it's story time!" Each school or library may have a particular mechanism for getting the attention of the group. Sometimes it a particular clapping pattern, or it

could be a song, or even a hand motion. Knowing this ahead of time helps. Recently I was at a school. The teacher asked the children to put a bubble in their mouth. This worked!

Once you have their attention, then the fun begins. Start by telling short folk tales or nature stories that include familiar animals. You know stories about bears, turtles, farm animals rabbits, etc. They need be brief at first, but not because a child has a short attention span. Young children are learning to be good listeners. They need practice. They are new to this art form. Give them a little taste of the experience and their love for stories will grow. You can add longer stories later in the program. Tales 1-3 minutes work well. Stories that are 5-8 minutes long, may be too long. It all depends on the group and their experience with this art.

Endear yourself to an audience by telling a story about yourself. Share a short antidotal tale about when you were a little child. i.e. “When I was a little boy, my friend Billy and I went to the playground. While we were swinging, we noticed a cotton tail rabbit hiding in the grass. We crept over closer and she ran away. We looked where she was sitting, and noticed a nest full of the tiny baby rabbits. They were so cute. We didn’t dare touch them. We went back to playing. Later we saw that mother rabbit take those baby rabbits one by one to

another secret nest. She didn't like it that we knew where her babies were hidden. So if you ever find a nest don't touch!"

Telling stories to children requires of the teller an increased awareness of the needs of the audience. Intersperse your tales with simple finger plays or movement of some type. Young children will sit still and listen to your stories, as long as you are attentive to their needs. They need to move often! Nature is whispering in their ears, "move!" If you think they will just sit still and listen, you are fighting nature. Therefore, you must bring along with you a bag of audience participation tricks and a large dose of grand motherly patience. My teachers always had us do the activity song, "Heads shoulders knees and toes!" If you have an action for them to act out during the story, that can alleviate their need to move and keep them with you. Participation in storytelling with young children is also very important. Before you start a story give the children something to do. When I tell a story that has the wind in it. They get to be the wind and make the sound of the wind. They can also make animal sounds, noises or sound effects.

Watch the eyes of young listeners closely. Eye contact is important to keep their attention, but it also reveals much about the young listener's experience. The child's eyes dilate when they are intently listening to a story. They are visualizing the images you are describing. They see themselves as the characters in the tales you tell. They are living the story. Thousands of years of storytelling have made the human mind hungry for stories. Your words create pictures in the mind of the child, stimulating a part of the brain not always in use. Often at the end of a story, children will say, "Do it again!" The storyteller has taken them to a wonderful place and they want to go back.

All stories have a lesson or underlying purpose. The wisdom of the ages is revealed to the listener of stories. Good and evil are also portrayed in various forms. Children almost always gravitate to the good characters. The knowledge that children emulate with characters in the story, gives the storyteller an opportunity for teaching and healing. You can weave typical childhood behavior problems into your stories. You can paint pictures of life with your words. This will enable children to see the difference between good and evil.

The stories you choose or create can affect the emotions of a young child. A child takes the stories home with them. Sometimes they talk about them for

days. A young child might have fears of particular animals. Through stories the child becomes more familiar with the animal and hopefully these fears can be put to rest. In building up a repertoire of stories for young children, storytellers must also keep in mind cultural and religious issues as well.

Simple scary stories have their place in early childhood. It is not the blood and gore that makes a story scary to young children. It's not monsters and evil characters with super natural powers. It is the suspense! The idea is not to scare your audience but to take them through a suspenseful experience. In this manner the young child learns to deal with the feeling of being scared. No matter how many times, they hear Goldilocks and the Three Bears, it still has the suspense. Jack and the Beanstalk can be very scary to young children. Keeping children from scary stories may keep them from learning to deal with the emotion of fear. At the same time one must be sensitive enough not to really scare them.

Successful storytelling with young children requires the teller to engage the audience. Bring them into the story. Know their needs and level of experience. Find or create age appropriate material. You can inspire a child to a life time love of stories. This alone is a great reward for

telling stories to this age group. Then there's the look in their eyes.

Finding Your Own Stories Go to the Library! Every storyteller has to find their very own stories unique to them. Sure you can tell classic tales, but it is also important that you find stories that you can relate to, and that you really like! Finding stories that you loved yourself as a child is one great source. Once I found a book at a garage sale, it was the very one I had read as a child. I recognized the pictures and of course the stories. I learned some of these right away. The book was called , *Stories that Never Grow Old* by Watty Piper.

Another one I found that had many wonderful stories that I still use is, *Favorite Stories For the Children's Hour* edited by Carolyn Sherwin Bailey and Clara M. Lewis. There are many other wonderful books with story collections. Sherry Lewis has one out with 101 1 minute stories! Think of the process of finding your stories to be like a treasure hunt. Every time you look through a collection of stories, you just might find one that suits you. Remember you have to like or even better, love story before you can really tell it well. Surely you can find one that fits who you are, and your cultural background.

Teaching Stories

Sometimes it is necessary to teach a particular lesson to children. I.E. Maybe there's been someone who bites another child no matter how many times you tell them not to it continues. So make up a story, using animals who are acting just as the children have been to each other. Because it is in a story form, the children relate to the characters that are good. They want to be like the animals that are nice to each other. The animal that bites has no friends. No one will play with the one who bites. Be sure to avoid putting the child's name in the story. Don't point out or let the other children point out the child who is like the biting animal. Just tell the story and have a happy ending, where the animal learns the lesson and stops biting!

How to Learn a Story First of all a storyteller never memorizes a story. The idea is to get the gist of a story into your mind and then tell it in your own words. This takes a little practice. Read a story a few times and then try telling it to a friend. Use hand gestures and character voices if you feel comfortable doing this theatrical technique. At least change your voice a little when you are speaking as one of the characters. Each time you tell the story it will get better. Go back and read the story

again. See if there are any important parts you missed. Every time you tell a story it comes out slightly different. That's O.K. Allow yourself the freedom to create and make the story fit the audience. You can adjust the story to take out an offensive part. You can make it your own story! If children are familiar with the story, they might say, "that's not the way it goes!" Just tell them this is your version!

Interactive Stories As you learn stories look for parts for the listener. Traditional Native American Storytellers often stop at intervals and expect the audience to acknowledge that they are listening. With young children any hand motions or gestures or sounds that they can make add greatly to their involvement in the tale. So a little acting out comes in handy for telling stories. I often tell the story from Aesop about the lion who gets a thorn stuck in his paw. The other animals are afraid to come near the lion and they run away. Every time the animals run away in the story I make a whoosh sound and move my hand across from left to right. The children are soon doing this with me. Animal sounds, noises, sound effects etc. get them involved.

What is the Underlying Purpose of Stories? Sure stories are fun and children like them, but there is more to it than that. Bruno Bettelheim a well known child psychologist wrote an entire book, (The Uses of

Enchantment) on the value of fairy tales. Many of the stories have deeper meaning than one might suspect. Many fairy tales have a step mother. One of most children's sub-conscious fears is that of losing their mother. This element in a story, helps a child get over that fear. There is so much more on this topic. Check out Bettelheims book! He explains the deeper meaning in some very common stories.

Scary Stories These type of stories have an important part in a child's development. They help a child learn how to deal with being scarred. Most fairy tales are a little scary. Even the word scary is frightening to a young child. So go slow with the scary stories. What makes a story scary is suspense. The apprehension that someday bad might happen. Goldilocks and the Three Bears might be considered scary. Jack and the Bean Stalk can be scary. So when you tell stories to young children don't start out with the scary ones.

When to Tell Which Kind of Stories When you work in a school or day care center, You get to know the children quite well. At the beginning of the year, start out with nature stories and animal folk tales. These are the children's favorites anyway. I especially like Turtle Stories. Every culture around the world has one of these.. Keep these stories short, as the children are not yet used to listening to stories. As they get better as

focusing, then you can tell longer ones. A short story for young children is one that is 1-3 minutes long. A long story might be one that is 5 - 7 minutes long. Longer stories than that would be called really long stories!

Be aware of cultural diversity in your classroom. Find out what stories the parents are telling or reading to the children. Remember a scary story is not for scaring children. It's to help them learn to get over fear. You'll have parent's calling you up in the middle of the night if you tell a story that really scares them. It is important to have a disclaimer. That is, there are no such things as monsters ghosts etc. Tell the children, "it's just a story".