A dozen or so three- and four-year-olds regularly gather together. Some sit entranced, quiet and still, while others wriggle with anticipation. The story is told, and the question is posed: “What do you think will happen next?” Some children suggest ways to end the story, but others propose new characters and plot twists to keep it going. This is a magical moment, as children are transformed from listeners to participants and become storytellers themselves.

This scenario exemplifies the joy and satisfaction of storytelling – the moment when the listeners become one with the story. Story making is an interactive experience, combining the story, the teller of the tale, and the audience. When used well, this combination produces a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts – something as old and deep as the human race itself.

In preliterate cultures, storytellers were the keepers of history and traditions, serving as both newspaper of the present and link to the past. Today, in some cultures, storytellers continue to hold positions of importance and honor. In the modern, literate world, storytellers are esteemed as artists of the literary field – they still have the power to enchant (Sawyer & Comer 1996).

**Story making in the classroom**

Children not only have an innate fascination with stories, they are natural storytellers themselves. They build story frameworks to help themselves understand the world, and incorporate story scenarios into their play.

Perhaps no one states the importance of children’s stories as eloquently as Vivian Paley has. Paley is one of the foremost heralds for dramatic play and storytelling in early childhood classrooms. In *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter* she says, “A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day. I cannot remember what is real to the children without their stories to anchor fantasy and purpose” (Paley 1990, 3). She maintains that children are born knowing how to put thoughts and feelings into story form. As they play-act out their plots, it is story in action, just as storytelling is play put into narrative form.

Because of the power of storytelling to catch and hold the attention of children, there are ample reasons for incorporating it into the classroom. “The classroom that does not create its own legends (stories) has not traveled beneath the surface to where the living takes place” (Paley 1990, 5). According to McMaster (1998), drama, or story enactment, involves the child, an involved child is an interested child, and an interested child will learn. The premise looks something like this:

Drama ➔ Involvement ➔ Interest ➔ Learning

Drama takes advantage of something young children do naturally: pretend. By harnessing this natural ability, teachers can help children develop oral, listening, and comprehension skills (McMaster 1998). Story enactments in preschool and kindergarten classrooms create curiosity about literature. These experiences allow children to take on the role of a story maker long before they can read and write, as well as provide vicarious experiences they need to draw upon when learning to read.

Almost any book or story can be acted out. When incorporating dramatizations with young children, consider the following:

- Try to act out children’s original stories (individual or group), even if they have to be modified.
- Incorporate hand and body movements to create memory stations that help children remember the storyline.
- Use exaggerated vocal and facial expressions.
Professional storytellers Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss (2000) give additional reasons for providing opportunities for children to tell stories. They suggest that storytelling increases self-esteem. The greater the risk, the greater the sense of achievement. Children who find storytelling a challenge often feel a great sense of accomplishment when the audience applauds. They carry that confidence with them into other areas of life.

Hamilton and Weiss emphasize that storytelling can involve all children, regardless of ability level. Unlike some of the arts or sports, storytelling is an art form that everyone can participate in and enjoy. It can be particularly rewarding for children who seem less capable than others in some areas, allowing them to gain respect through their storytelling skills. Storytelling helps children develop a love for language and encourages them to read. Through their own and others’ stories, children develop understanding of other people and cultures and learn to appreciate diversity. Children often want to read more about the people and places they have heard about in stories. Above all, storytelling is fun! Both parents and teachers agree that their children are rarely as motivated to do a “school-type” activity as when they are using communication skills required in storytelling.

**Teachers as storytellers**

Despite a strong connection between storytelling and literacy, many teachers do not engage in telling stories to children. They may offer regular picture-book readings but neglect storytelling. However, when they listen to seasoned storytellers and practice their own stories, their ability to hold the attention of young audiences increases (Machado 1999). As teachers seek to become skilled storytellers, they can model the storytelling process while giving children opportunities for oral language development.

Story ideas may come from a variety of sources, both borrowed and original. Collections and anthologies, as well as children’s magazines, often have appropriate story ideas. Children’s films can also provide ideas, and listening to other storytellers can inspire stories of your own. Many of the best stories are original. However, remember to avoid sexism and stereotypes when creating a story (Machado 1999). As you tell children personal stories about your life, you become a model for storytelling, using gestures, body language, and variety in tone to communicate with your audience.

**Suggestions for Teachers as Storytellers**

- Choose a simple plot with strong characters.
- Learn the story well, but do not try to memorize it.
- Pay attention to the environment and audience and adapt and modify the story to fit them.
- Use props whenever possible.
- Sing when appropriate.
- Repeat key words and phrases.
- Substitute the names of children for the names of characters whenever possible.
- Learn several kinds of stories, such as chalk talks and origami, paper-plate, and flannel board stories.
- Be selective; build a repertoire of stories slowly and carefully.

**Individual and group stories**

There are two equally important aspects of classroom story making with children: individual stories and group stories. Paley’s books and videotape elaborate on the art of individual stories, including adaptations for children with special needs. Following her lead, many teachers encourage children to dictate stories to them every week or so. They then write or type them as a “published” volume for each child to take home and read with families.

For children who may not be ready or have trouble thinking of original stories, group stories can provide scaffolding, the supportive structure that children need to give meaning to new information. Group storytelling becomes a social event, one in which children learn to exchange ideas and share knowledge in a joyous, interactive context. Especially for children who
are shy, dramatizing their stories provides a vehicle for expressing themselves in a non-threatening environment.

**Tips for Individual Story Writing**

- Write children’s stories exactly as they tell them – incorrect grammar and all. (There will be other opportunities for learning grammar – the empowerment in storytelling comes when children see their words written or hear their words repeated.) Stories may be as simple as “My mamma bought me a new toy” or elaborate, multicharacter dramas, usually determined by a child’s age and experience.
- Ask for clarification as children tell their story. The children will learn that stories are intended to communicate ideas – and that if you don’t understand them, others probably won’t either.
- Plan times when the children can act out the stories after they are read. They look forward to dramatizing their stories, and it’s a great motivator for children who are reluctant to try storytelling.
- Post and/or publish the children’s stories. Send them home as classroom collections to create home-school connections and allow families to see their child’s growth over the year.

For more ideas related to the art of individual storytelling, see Paley’s books *Wally’s Stories* (1987); *Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner* (1986); and *Mollie is Three: Growing Up in School* (1988). Also the video *Far Ago and Long Away: Innovative Storytelling*, which is based on Paley’s work (available from NAEYC in English [Order #840] and Spanish [Order #840S]).

**Everybody Has a Story to Tell**

Group storytelling can be approached in many ways. Here are some examples:

1. **Round-robin or sentence stories**
   Start with a genre familiar to the children. Animal stories and fables usually work well for young children. Ask each child to add a sentence to the story, or allow the children as a group to decide what will happen next.

2. **Theme stories**
   Invite the children to choose a theme for the story. Maybe all the characters will be dinosaurs, or perhaps the story involves some magic.

3. **Descriptive stories**
   Involve the children in making up stories using plenty of descriptive words. “The lady chased the dog” becomes “The lady in the polka-dot dress chased the fuzzy yellow dog across the street.” These stories are particularly fun to illustrate.
4. **Picture stories**
Have children select photographs, pictures from magazines, or illustrations to use as springboards for their stories. Ask them to describe what they see in the picture and what they think is happening or might happen next. Then help them use their imaginations to create connections and plots.

5. **Grab bag stories**
Fill a bag (or box) with various familiar objects. Pass around the bag so everyone can select an object. Ask each child to make up an individual story about the object or add to an existing group story.

6. **Finish-the-story stories**
Begin yourself or ask a child to use a sentence or two to set up a brief plot. Have other children contribute to the story’s development and ending. The opposite approach is also fun. Ask someone to present the end of a story in a minidrama. Encourage the children to describe what took place before the end of the story.

**Conclusion**
Children’s ability to engage in storytelling varies depending on their age, developmental level, and prior experience. It is important to involve them in a variety of story making experiences that support socialization and oral language development, help children understand the world in which they live, affirm their culture, and form the foundation for literacy as children grow and develop.

Children of all ages have something to say and a variety of ways of saying it. While telling a story well may be more difficult than simply reading a text aloud, people of all ages enjoy the spell a good story can cast over an audience. With practice, both teachers and children can capture some of that magic in the classroom (Sawyer & Comer 1996). So it is that the old, old art of storytelling still has the power to charm.

**References**


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