

Telling Stories to Young Children: Know and Respect Your Audience

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Storytelling with young children is serious business. How do we do it right? We start by knowing and respecting our audience.

“Know your audience” is the first directive in any purposeful communication. If we know a child’s developmental level (level of understanding, interests, capacity for language and focus), we will have a greater chance of choosing the right story for the right audience. We will be able to deliver it a manner that is easy to grasp.

TIP: CDC.gov is a good source for early childhood development stages. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html>

The range of development from preschool through elementary years is significant. Consider variations in learning modes, cultural and economic backgrounds, and life experiences. Location and time of day can play a significant role in how children receive and react to a story.

Early Childhood Developmental Considerations

- In general, most toddlers learn by being physically involved. They want to manipulate and participate. An oral-only story is not going to be as effective as using a felt board for visual clues or props and puppets with which they can interact.
- By age three, language and imagination are adequate to understand a simple linear story without props or visual clues if we convey enough with our face and voice.
- By ages four and five, children are ready for a more complex story line and more dimensional characters. They predict and anticipate.

As storytellers, the more we know about our audience, the better equipped we are to meet them at their level. We want to challenge them just enough to pique their curiosity without frustrating them or losing them all together. We want to avoid creating opportunity for disruption.

TRY THIS: Imagine a day in the life of a small child. What is life really like for a child? Think three feet tall, big head, short arms with very limited choices in daily life from getting out of bed in the morning to falling asleep at night. What are their familiar settings, characters, difficulties, conflicts, and choices? What are unfamiliar settings and characters — a doctor visit, new food, dog, neighborhood or kid at school? What do they see or overhear from the car seat? Kids fall, lose teeth, make mistakes, and have feelings of frustration, anxiety, anger, or fear — and might not have words to express them.

This is where we find subject matter for stories — stories of apprehension and courage, kindness and bullying, lost and found, making mistakes, forgiving, embarrassment, and redemption. If we can show them their experiences in stories they will see things from another point of view. They can find ways to talk about feelings and unfamiliar situations.

“The Three Bears” is a story of family and home, and what happens when something changes. It’s a great place to start. Try telling a story of three

dinosaurs, three princesses, or three puppies. Change the setting and something different happens. Now it's your story and their story. You have met them where they are and brought them someplace new.

TIP: We need to go into their world if we want them to come into ours.

I once put together a special program for toddlers that involved feeding pretend food to a three-foot puppet. The children squirmed with delight when they saw the bucket of props and the larger than life puppet. The kids fed. The puppet gobbled. Of course, all the children wanted to feed the puppet at the same time and there was no taking turns, not at this young age. They were so excited, too excited. The story was lost.

Once the food was gone, I stashed the stuffed puppet, put up my thumbs and introduced them to Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle. They quickly got into the comfortable rhythm of Mr. Wiggle traveling up and down, up and down. The sound effects and simple motions were imitated, a sure sign we were now on the same path. The children went from chaotic to calm in less than a minute.

The children were already familiar with the idea of going to visit a friend, greeting, a friend and saying goodbye to a friend. They listened and watched as each character met with disappointment when doors were not opened and expectations not fulfilled, until finally they met to talk.

What I Learned:

1. Working with props needs to be practiced.
2. More props, more difficulty. Less is often more.

TIP: Listen with your eyes to see what they are telling you with their bodies.

Social and Cultural Life Experiences

When we tell a story, the listeners hear our words, but they create images based on their own life experiences. This was made clear to me when I

told a series of Aesop’s fables to children at three very different locations — a child development center for underserved children (CDC), a prep school for economically gifted students (PS), and a religious school (RS). The responses to my questions reflected the life experiences of each group.

When I told “The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg” I asked, “*Why did he kill the goose?*”

1. He was hungry, and he couldn’t eat gold. CDC
2. He got tired of picking up the heavy eggs. PS
3. Feed the cow. Milk the cow. Don’t kill animals. RS

When I told “The Tortoise and the Hare” I asked the open-ended question, “*What’s that about?*”

1. There was no prize anyway, so he didn’t try hard. PS
2. Don’t fall asleep. CDC
3. Don’t race when you are tired. RS

What I learned:

We may think we are telling one story, but it is being heard through a prism of diverse life experiences.

TIP: When working with children of almost any age, consider teachers and parents as part of the audience. It’s nice to be able to offer something of interest to them as well. Layered stories can please both child and adult.

Respect begins with acknowledging our audience and accepting them for who they are. Trust and respect go hand in hand when building a relationship between teller and audience.

They need to trust us to take them on a journey and feel secure that we will bring them back safely. This is especially important when the audience is young. Children have fewer life experiences and place their trust in adults. They look to us for clues about understanding their world. They often confuse fantasy and reality. This makes them vulnerable which, magnifies our responsibility.

Each child is a whole person with limitless potential right now at the age of 2 or 4 or 8.

“A person’s a person no matter how small.”

~ Dr. Seuss

It’s up to us to start the respect cycle. Our energy is key to creating a harmonious atmosphere. Children are sensitive to nervous or aggressive voices and mannerisms.

1. Be present.
2. Be prepared and on time.
3. Be aware of tone, pacing, volume, and vocabulary.
4. Know what your face and mannerisms are saying. Is that the message you want to send?
5. Choose stories with rich content and appropriate cognitive range.
6. Look them in the eye.
7. Don’t embarrass a child. That can be profound.

TIP: Consider their point of view. Are they on the floor? Are you standing? Are they looking at your knees or up your nose? Adjust if needed.

An activity that can take a child’s attention away from outside distractions is helpful. I use toy frogs to calm their bodies and focus their minds. I tell them, *“I have been training this frog to sit and jump.”* I place the frog on my knee, put my hands up and sing *One Little Speckled Frog*. When I get to the part where the frog jumps into the pond, I jerk my knee and the frog falls to the floor. And I sing *“Now there are NO more speckled frogs.”*

Of course, they want to help me train frogs. First, they sit criss-cross-applesauce and I put a frog on each knee. I say, *“Don’t touch. Look at your frog. Tell them, no jumping.”* They take this seriously.

We put our hands up and sing. Frogs jump. We are proud of our frogs and ourselves. We try our talented frogs on our shoe as we wiggle our toes. We move to other body parts. Mission accomplished! The children are

relaxed, focused, and ready for a story.

TIP: Trust the story, trust the audience and trust yourself.

I often feel I'm holding a golden secret. A secret about how to make the world a better place. Through storytelling, we have the opportunity and responsibility to add more kindness, compassion, generosity, honesty, courage, and justice to the lives of our listeners. This should NOT be a secret. Storytelling is an awesome job and a lot of fun.

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

~Dr. Seuss



Mij Byram is a highly respected early childhood innovator with over 20 years of experience using stories to plant the seeds of literacy and love of language. Her workshops and play-shops have trained teachers, librarians, parents, and storytellers from

Maine to Florida how to build character and promote literacy through story. Mij has been a staff member of the National Storytelling Network, a board member of the Florida Storytelling Association, and president of the Palm Beach County Storytelling Guild. Mij is the founder and publisher of the monthly newsletter *South Florida Storytelling News* since 2005.

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