

Arkansas Children's Week 2012
Meet Me Under the Storytelling Tree

Getting Started with Storytelling



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Getting started with storytelling

While there are countless wonderful books to share with children, the experience of listening as a storyteller weaves a tale is unique and valuable. There is something timeless about the oral tradition of passing on stories, and of telling and retelling favorite stories again and again until they become familiar, comfortable, and loved.

Below, you'll find some tips to consider as you begin telling stories with children of all ages, as well as a list of resources for finding successful stories to tell.



Suit the story to your audience.

Younger children do best with simple, shorter stories, but stories should not be oversimplified to the point that they lose their natural patterns. Instead, pick interesting stories that you will enjoy telling, with words and concepts very young children can readily understand. Stories about animals are universally popular, as are stories in which a child the age of the children in your audience is the hero. Look for stories that include frequent, recurrent lines of predictable, repetitive text. Elicit children's help in telling the story, finding ways for them to join in.

Remember that listening closely to stories told aloud is a learned skill. The youngest listeners may only be able to attend to a story for 5 – 10 minutes and only then if you have been successful in catching their attention and weaving a story that interests them. Older children usually have longer attention spans, but will still be reluctant listeners if they have not learned to love spending this time with you. Thus, the first stories you tell with children should be “sure fire” crowd pleasers – active, exciting, funny or suspenseful. In time, as children settle in to their role as listeners and begin to genuinely look forward to story time, you'll be able to try out longer and more subtle tales.

Learn the story well before you tell.

Improvisation and informal storytelling come more easily to some people than to others, but it is always a good idea to have at least a bit of a “game plan” in mind when working with young children. If you have a special story in mind, become familiar with it in its entirety. If you've never told your story before, practice while driving in the car, or try telling it to your dog or cat. Try moving around as you tell the story, considering the voices and gestures that will make the story come alive for your audience.



How will you set the tone and begin your story?
Where will you pause for suspense?
What questions can you ask to bring each listener into the tale?
Tell and retell the story until it truly flows. While it isn't necessary to memorize and recite a story in exactly the same way each time, you'll be a more confident storyteller when you know your story well.

Plan your storytelling space.

There should be room enough for everyone to see and hear well, and the space should be comfortable for the listeners. Even the most wonderful tale loses much of its magic when children grow tired of crowding together on a cold, hard floor, or when they are required to sit stiffly “criss-cross applesauce” without freedom to stretch out and relax. Remember, too, that an overly cold room will make the audience sluggish (get them up and moving before the story starts!), while an overly warm room will make the group feel cranky and irritable, especially if they are seated very near one another.

First impressions are everything; start with an opening activity.

Often, the moment is not right to begin the story until you have set the tone and have the undivided attention of the audience. You’ll want to avoid a fussy, bossy tone, though – telling everyone to sit down and hush up often has the opposite effect! Instead, try something that will invite your listeners in, in a wondrous way.

Use a chime to set the tone, or dim the lights and light a battery operated lamp to cast a glow. Try putting on a special hat to capture children’s attention, or ask them to guess about a special prop in a bag or box. Remember, too, that having to wait without activity will quickly bore children, and you may have trouble gaining their attention again later. If your group gathers gradually and you want to wait until everyone is settled in to begin the story, plan songs, rhymes, or games to entertain the group during this transition time.

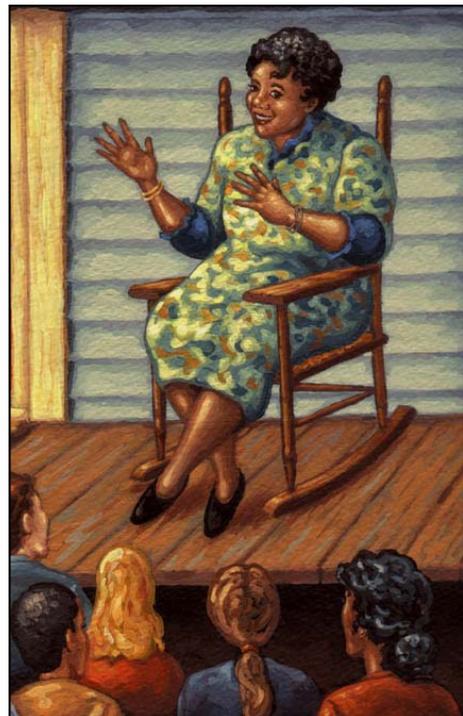
Connect with the listeners.

Make eye contact, and be aware of the body language and responses of the children and adults in your audience. As you tell the story, allow the group’s reactions to help determine the complexity and pace of the tale. As storyteller Margaret MacDonald says of storytelling with preschoolers, “Your eyes must be constantly roaming the group, touching *every* face and drawing each listener back into the story over and over again.”

Stories that allow audience participation are one of the best ways to connect with a group.

Possibilities for audience participation include:

- Songs
- Movements, such as clapping and patting knees incorporated into the story



Audience participation, continued

- Art activities, such as adding to a collective drawing or a map
- Questions for the audience, such as, “And what do you think she did next?”

The best options for participation allow every child to participate at once, and do not rely on children waiting to have a turn. Young children, especially, can become excited with participatory interactions, so you’ll have to be prepared to bring them back to the story again with a gentle touch, a well-timed pause, or an inviting question.

Consider props.

Some story tellers prefer to use words alone to weave the tale, but many find that a story bag or collection of props related to the story can spark children’s interest, increase participation, and enhance the story. Other popular props include:

- Puppets
- Flannel board
- Paper to fold or cut into shapes that relate to the story
- Chalk or whiteboard for drawing or listing while telling the story
- Drum, kazoo, or other instrument to make sound effects to accompany the story
- Suitcase or special basket with props that relate to the story

Resources for getting started

On the next few pages, you’ll find some sample stories to get you started. For more stories and tips, look for these resources online or at your local library.

Whether you’re ready to try storytelling for the first time or are an experienced storyteller looking for fresh ideas, you will find plenty of wonderful stories and prop suggestions in the following resource collections.

Resource books for storytellers

Creative Storytelling : Choosing, Inventing, and Sharing Tales for Children by Jack McGuire

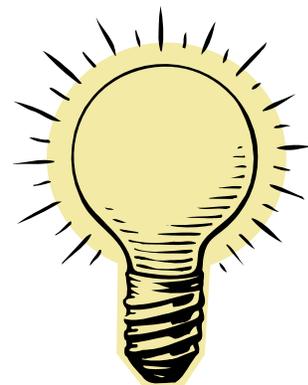
How and Why Stories by Martha Hamilton

Pete Seeger’s Storytelling Book by Pete Seeger

Ready-to-Tell Tales Ready-to-Tell Tales by David Holt and Bill Mooney

Shake It Up Tales by Margaret Read McDonald

Three Minute Tales by Margaret Read McDonald



Storybooks that translate well to telling aloud

Aesop's Fables (traditional, many versions available)

Mrs. Piggle Wiggle series by Betty McDonald

The Borrowers by Mary Norton

Peter Rabbit Tales by Beatrix Potter

Wisdom Tales from Around the World by Heather Forest

Most books by Robert Munsch

Books about encouraging children to tell their own stories

Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom by Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss (includes DVD)

The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: the Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom by Vivian Gussin Paley

The Girl with the Brown Crayon: How Children Use Stories to Shape Their Lives by Vivian Gussin Paley

Stories in My Pocket: Tales Kids Can Tell by Martha Hamilton

Storytelling for the Fun of It: A Handbook for Children by Vivian Dubrovin

A great video for new storytellers

Storytelling Know-How by Rick Sowash

Internet resources for storytellers

Catch the Story Bug – www.storybug.net

International Storytelling Center – www.storytellingcenter.com

National Storytelling Network - www.storynet.org

Storytelling in the Classroom – www.storyarts.org/classroom

The Moth: True Stories Told Live – themoth.org

Note: The Moth is a great site to hear very good storytellers in action, but much of the content is **not suitable for children**.



Three Sample Stories for Beginning Storytellers

Story #1:

A trickster tale

Trickster tales often feature a smaller, weaker character who cleverly outsmarts larger, more fearsome foes. Trickster tales are part of story lore around the world, and include Coyote tales from the American Southwest and Anansi the Spider Stories from West Africa. Mouse Deer stories are trickster tales that have entertained generations of children in Malaysia and Indonesia, often handed down from parent to child as part of the oral tradition.

As you tell this story, teach the children Mouse Deer's chant: *"I'm quick and smart as I can be. Try and try but you'll never catch me!"* The children will also be able to help you out with some buzzing wasp and hissing snake noises in this story.

The Tale of Mouse Deer and Tiger

*"I'm quick and smart as I can be.
Try and try, but you'll never catch me!"*

Mouse Deer sang his song as he walked through the forest. He was looking for tasty fruits and roots and shoots. Though he was small, he was not afraid. He knew that many big animals wanted to eat him, but first they had to catch him.

Suddenly, he heard something - *"Roaaaaar"*
There was Tiger!

"Hello, Mouse Deer. I was just getting hungry. Now you can be my snack."

Now, Mouse Deer didn't want to be a snack. He looked around and thought fast. He saw a mud puddle.

"I'm sorry, Tiger. I can't be your snack. The King has ordered me to guard his pudding."

"His pudding?" said Tiger.

"Yes. There it is." Mouse Deer pointed to the mud puddle. "It has the best taste in all the world. The King doesn't want anyone else to eat it."

Tiger looked longingly at the puddle. "I would like to taste the King's pudding."

"Oh, no, Tiger! The King would be angry."

"Just one little taste, Mouse Deer? The King will never know."

"Well, all right, Tiger. But first let me run far away, so no one will blame me."

"All right, Mouse Deer, you can go now."



“Yes. There it is.” Mouse Deer pointed to the python. “It’s the best belt in the world. The King doesn’t want anyone else to wear it.”

Tiger said, “I would like to wear the King’s belt.”

“Oh, no Tiger! The King would be very, very angry.”

“Just for one moment, Mouse Deer? The King will never know.”

“Well, all right, Tiger. But first let me run far away, so no one will blame me.”

“All right, Mouse Deer, you can go now.”

Mouse Deer ran quickly out of sight.

“Imagine!” said Tiger. “The King’s belt!” He started to wrap it around himself.

The python woke up - Ssssssssssss.

It didn’t wait for Tiger to finish wrapping. It wrapped itself around Tiger. Then it squeezed him tight - Ssssssssssstt!

“Ooh! Ow! What have I done? That’s no belt. That’s a python! Help!”

But Mouse Deer was far away. And as he went, he sang his song:

*“I’m quick and smart as I can be.
Try and try, but you’ll never catch me!”*

The End



Story # 2: A suspenseful story for beginning storytellers

This simple story allows you to practice suspenseful, descriptive storytelling, with a nonsensical, very un-scary ending!

Because of the slightly scary way in which this story progresses, it is most suited for children in Pre-K and beyond, though younger children may enjoy it if they know you well and if you reassure them that nothing bad will happen during the story. For older kids in first grade and beyond, really “ham it up” to get them on the edge of their seats! This story is probably only good for one telling with school-agers, but little children will ask to hear it again and again once they figure out that it is more silly than scary



Set up for this story by finding a small, mysterious looking wooden box. Inside, place a single, pink jelly bean. Make a show of placing the closed box in front of you before you tell the story, and solicit some guesses from the children about what they think might be in the box. If your audience is allowed to have candy, you might want to have a box of jellybeans tucked away to share with your listeners after the story.

The Tale of the Pink Jellybean

(Or, *The Tale of the Small, Dark Box* if you don't want to give away the surprise!)

At the end of a long, dark road is a long, dark path...
and on the edge of the long, dark path is a lone, dark house...

At the front of the lone, dark house is a single, dark door...
and behind the single, dark door is a long, dark hall.

At the end of the long, dark hall are some tall, dark stairs...
and at the top of the tall, dark stairs is a long dark balcony.

On one side of the long, dark balcony is a big, dark room...
and at the edge of big, dark room is a great, dark closet.

In the back of the great, dark closet is a little, dark door...
and behind the little, dark door are some steep, dark steps.

At the top of the steep, dark steps is a dusty, dark attic....
and at the end of the dusty, dark attic is a gigantic, dark chest.

Tucked inside the gigantic, dark chest is a small, dark box...
And in the small, dark box is... *(pause and slowly open the box)*
...a pink jellybean! (Boo!)



Story #3:

A funny story inspired by real life events

Most children love being cast as characters in the stories you tell, especially if they get to be the heroes. What happens if you make up stories starring real children, based on actual classroom or life events? Children's author and world-class storyteller Robert Munsch often does exactly that.

Here, he tells about an alligator story that he made up for a second grade class in South Carolina.

I was the prize in a Scholastic Book Club Contest. The winner was Ms. Gaugler's second grade in Georgetown, South Carolina. I was in Georgetown for 3 days and on one of the days we went on a field trip to Huntington Beach. The beach had a big swamp behind it that was supposed to be full of alligators, but Ms. Gaugler said they were supposed to be very hard to see. She knew that because she has talked to other teachers. Ms. Gaugler was a first year teacher from New Jersey who knew NOTHING about alligators.

We stopped the bus to look for alligators. No alligators. We walked down into the tall grass. No alligators. We got right down beside the water. No alligators. Ms. Gaugler was said, "We will be lucky to see one. Look very far out into the water." So everybody was looking way out except one kid who said "Look! A big one is one right here!"

And there it was, an 8 foot alligator sunning in the grass right at our feet. Actually, the kid had to say, "LOOK", several times because everyone was busy looking way out in the water like Ms. Gaugler said. Then suddenly everyone looked down and saw the alligator. Mrs. Gaugler yelled, "RUN", only everyone was running already. I made up this story right afterward. The kids in it are in Ms. Gaugler's class.



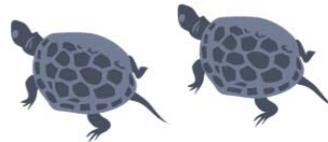
Here's the story that Robert Munsch told to the children. Notice how he uses repetition and exaggeration to craft a story that will delight second graders...

Alligators

When the school bus stopped by the swamp, Ms. Gaugler said, "We are going to go look for alligators. There are supposed to be lots of alligators here."
All the kids walked down the road. They walked and walked and walked looking for alligators.

Sherri said, "I don't see any alligators."
"I don't see any alligators either", said Shakera.
"Me neither." said Felicia, "There is nothing here except green water and turtles."
So everyone jumped over a little fence and went through really tall grass all the way to the water.

Sherri said, "I still don't see any alligators".
"None at all", said Shakera.
"Me neither." said Felicia, "There is still nothing here except green water and turtles."
"Let's walk out on that log" said Sherri, "there might be some alligators out in the deep water."
So they walked out on the log and Sherri said, "No alligators".



Shakera said, "No alligators".
Felicia said, "This log has eyes".
"Logs don't have eyes", said Shakera.
"Logs don't have eyes", said Sherri.
"Logs don't have eyes", said Felicia.

And they all yelled "Aaaaaahhhhhhaaaaaahhhhhhaaaa!"
because alligators do have eyes.
But before they could get off, the alligator started
swimming out into the swamp and they were standing on
top of the alligator like it was a boat.

"Oh no" said Sherri.
"We've had it" said Shakera.
"We're dinner" said Felicia.
Just then the teacher saw them and she yelled, "STOP!!!"
But the alligator didn't stop.
So Ms. Gaugler picked up a kid named Brittany and held her out over the water upside down.

Brittany went, “Ahhh! – Ahhh! – Ahhh!- Ahhh!

“Good”, said the Ms Gaugler, “Keep up that yelling.”

The alligator heard Brittany yelling and decided that she might be dinner, so it started swimming back to the shore.

“Good!” said Shakera, “This alligator is going to eat Brittany and we’re gonna get back alive”.

The alligator came right up to the shore. Ms. Gaugler lifted Brittany up high and the alligator sat still and waited for Brittany to fall so he could eat her.

“Oh dear” said Sherri. And she walked very carefully up over the alligator’s eyes, over the alligator’s nose and ran onto the shore.

“Oh Dear”, said Shakera; and she walked very carefully up over the alligator’s eyes, over the alligator’s nose and ran onto the shore.

“Oh Dear”, said Felicia; and she walked very carefully up over the alligator’s eyes and onto the alligator’s nose; but when she was standing on the alligator’s nose the alligator opened his mouth. Felicia went flying way up high in the air and was going to come right back down into the alligator’s mouth, but Brittany grabbed her by the hair and pulled her up into the air away from the alligator.

The alligator’s mouth went, “SNAP” and all it got to eat was Felicia’s lunch which had fallen out of her backpack.

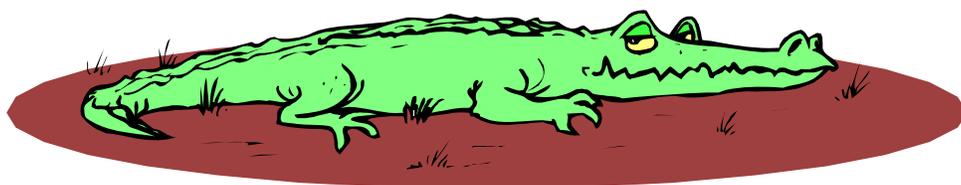
“I’m Safe!” yelled Brittany.

“I’m Safe!” yelled Sherri.

“I’m Safe!” yelled Shakera.

“I’m Hungry!” yelled Felicia.

Mrs. Gaugler did not say anything because she had fainted. Happily, she had a really nice class of kids; and they carried her back to the bus and did not leave her for the alligators.



*Thank you to Robert Munsch for inviting us to share his story!
For more Munsch stories and poems, visit <http://robertmunsch.com>*