

Guide to Storytelling and Story Acting

Logistics

Materials: Each child will have her or his own storytelling notebook. Masking tape may be used to delineate the stage.

Physical Space: For storytelling, stories can be written down or dictated anywhere in the classroom. It may be helpful to designate a “storytelling corner” or chair for adults to take dictation side-by-side with children.

For story acting, you will need an area where the whole group can comfortably sit in a circle with space in the middle for acting. It is very helpful to delineate the acting area—the stage—with tape.

Who tells stories: Any adult can model storytelling: teachers, classroom volunteers, administrators, family members, community members, and even older students in your school all can share stories. ST/SA is a great way for administrators to connect with the children and an important tool for collaborating with families. Including a range of storytellers helps ensure that children will hear stories from different perspectives and cultural backgrounds.

Taking dictation of children’s stories provides a regular opportunity for adults to have engaging, fun, one-on-one interactions with each child in the room.

When: Children’s storytelling (dictation) can occur during arrival, Centers, snack, or any other time when the class is not engaged in whole group activities. Story acting (dramatization) is designated for one 10-minute period per day which can occur at the end of the day, during morning meeting, or during a transition between other activities. To provide predictability for children (helping them wait for their chance to tell a story), *it is essential that story acting be included in the classroom schedule* and that children know when it will be their turn to dictate their stories. To build successful routines and get the most benefit from the practice, ST/SA should happen reliably every day of the week.

Adult stories can be told at any time throughout the day, including during transitions.

Modeling Storytelling

Adults’ stories provide models for children to draw upon—ideas for how to organize stories, characters to include, and plot lines to spin out. Children will rarely copy these models directly, but rather mine them for inspiration. Hearing adults tell stories helps create a culture of

storytelling, inspiring children to share their stories with their classmates. Thus, children need to hear adults telling stories on a regular, even daily, basis.

You and your colleagues can draw from a wide variety of sources to find stories to tell children. These include personal experiences, folk tales, imaginary tales, children’s stories from previous years, and stories connected to curriculum.

Note: A beginning adult storyteller may worry about remembering all the parts of the story they intend to tell. It is perfectly acceptable to use notes.

Stories are compelling—perfect for attracting and keeping the attention of groups of children. Here are some tips:

- Use a ritual opening. Rituals might include turning on a special light, ringing a bell or chimes, or reciting a chant. Rituals can be tied to cultural practices. Some teachers introduce the “Crik-Crak” call and response ritual: “On the island of Haiti in the Caribbean, storytellers often start their stories by saying *Crik*. Now you say, *Crak*. I say, *Crik*. Now you say, *Crak*.” Inviting children’s input in creating rituals can be part of building and maintaining a healthy, democratic classroom community.
- Connect stories to the children, including them as the protagonists.
- Mine children’s interests for story themes and characters.
- Tell stories that respond to ideas and counteract stereotypes children are expressing.
- Use puppets and props; this can be especially helpful for children who are learning English.
- Give the audience (children) a role such as participating in call and response or contributing motions and gestures.
- Include songs and chants. Stories such as “Abiyoyo” have songs embedded in them.
- Repeat familiar stories. Children love hearing stories they enjoy multiple times; repetition helps children understand stories and practice vocabulary.
- Tell some short stories, 1-minute-stories, as all stories do not need to be long and complex.
- Modulate pacing, voice and gesture. Slow down; alternate volume and tempo; incorporate gestures.

Storytelling: Listening to and Collecting Children’s Stories

Supporting children as storytellers involves careful listening and gentle scaffolding. Listening to children’s stories provides an opportunity for building relationships and getting to know children deeply. Over time, children’s comfort with storytelling and their narrative abilities will grow. During story dictation, “teacherly moments” will arise—times when, because a child shows interest, we can support children’s specific literacy and language skills. However, it is critical that ST/SA not be turned into a phonics lesson. The adults’ primary roles in dictation are as listener and recorder.

Guidelines for Dictation

- Begin the year by taking dictation yourself or invite another adult in the classroom to take it, so that you have a couple of stories from each of the children.
- Aim to collect and act out one story from each child about every two weeks (two stories per month will result in each child having a significant story collection by the end of the year). A calendar will help children know and anticipate their storytelling days.
- For stories that will be acted out, limit each story to one page. Lengthy stories take a long time to copy down (robbing other children of the opportunity to tell stories) and can be very difficult to act out. Let children know at the beginning of the year that their stories can be as short as they like, but no longer than one page.
- Write down stories verbatim. There will likely be some conversation throughout the storytelling session. Modeling this method will help children when they are scribing for each other.
- Read the story back to the storyteller. When a child has finished telling his or her story, ask, “Is there anything you want to add or change in your story?” At this point, also ask for a title. Treating the story as a text increases print awareness and provides an opportunity for more sophisticated narratives.

Issues that may arise in children’s stories

Some stories may be inappropriate for sharing with the whole group because they concern private matters. We recommend that you listen to and scribe these stories and invite children to tell alternative stories to act out.

Some children are exposed to violence through the media or in their personal experiences. Grappling with issues of power and control, many children are drawn to stories involving superheroes and fighting. Whether or not to censor stories with violent themes is a controversial issue. Because stories are a way children make sense of the world, we recommend that they be allowed to tell and act out stories involving superheroes and fighting.

Supporting all children as storytellers

While some children will begin the year confident in their storytelling abilities, others will have trouble getting started. The challenge is to provide just the right amount of support that aids children’s development without taking away their ownership of the story (and thus decreasing their motivation to participate in storytelling). Variability in children’s language and communication styles will emerge as children tell their stories. Very short stories—even one-word stories—should be celebrated.

Some children who are not immediately comfortable expressing themselves in spoken English will benefit from certain kinds of supports. These include adults modeling storytelling, visual prompts (such as story cards or dice), verbal prompts (“Where does the story begin?” “How did

you/the character feel when that happened?”), and co-construction (teachers or peers giving suggestions to help children start their stories or providing a word). Children can certainly tell stories in their home languages; they might then try telling the story again in English. Fortunate classrooms will include an adult who can transcribe these stories in their original languages. Others may look to other children, family members, or other members of the school community for assistance.

Not all children will want to tell a story at the start of the year. Storytelling should *always* be a choice. Experience shows that, over time, almost all children choose to tell stories.

Supporting literacy skills

During dictation, kindergarteners may read familiar words and recognize features of print. Without making it a formal reading lesson, teachers can support children’s encoding, decoding, and understanding of printed language conventions. Many Reading Foundational standards can be addressed fluidly and in context. For example, while writing a particular word, some children may be able to sound it out or, after the story is completed, some children may be able to decode some of the words they just dictated.

Promoting language development

During dictation adults have opportunities to supply new vocabulary words. Dictation is also an opportunity to discuss elements of stories, such as characters, setting, and action.

Grammatical errors will appear in children’s stories.

- Write down exactly what a child says, staying true to his or her words.
- If a child is making a grammatical error, and you feel that they are able to learn the standard grammar or that the mistake will make it difficult for others to understand the story, offer an option—“I can write this as you told me, or I can write it as it would be in a book. In a book it would go like this: ‘_____.’ How does that sound?”

Note: In reading stories to the whole class, some teachers with a high proportion of children learning English will correct grammar in order for children to hear the stories in standard English.

Story Acting (Dramatization)

Story acting brings children’s ideas to the group. It gives a compelling reason for children’s storytelling, celebrates children’s ideas, and provides an opportunity for the class to create meaning around a text of great interest. Conversations about stories and dramatizations extend children’s literacy learning.

Getting Started

Many but not all of the children in your class will have become familiar with ST/SA in K1. To help children learn the routines of story acting you can act out stories and books, work with small groups of actors, and act out scenes more than once with different actors.

Stage rules

Stage rules create a safe environment for story acting. Two simple rules are usually sufficient:

1. Stay one arm- or leg-length from one another when pretend fighting.
2. Stay off the stage while you are a member of the audience; come onto the stage if you are acting.

Acting out the story/choosing the actors

Begin the dramatization by reading the first words of the story. When you come to a role (character or inanimate object), turn to the child next to you and ask, “Can I see you be the ___?” Likely she or he will come onto the stage and start acting the part. Of course, a child may always decline the role. Continue reading the story fluidly, going around the circle to invite actors to come on stage as parts appear in the story. You and the children can be expansive in your definition of characters; a house, a forest, wind, or rain can be acted out, as well as people and animals. Including inanimate objects allows more children to participate in the dramatization. In stories with many characters, have actors sit down when their parts are finished to make room on the stage for others.

Avoid negotiating with children about roles they want to play—it should not be an option to say, “I don’t want to be the princess, but I do want to be the knight.” Going around the stage in the manner described here is fast and efficient, allowing many children to participate in dramatization and many stories to be heard.

Notes:

1. Let the author of the story choose the role he or she wants: to act, narrate or watch the dramatization. This can be determined when the story is dictated.
2. Some children may be hesitant to take on gender-specific roles (a boy being reluctant to play the mother). You might say, “In acting, boys can pretend to be anything: girls, flowers, dinosaurs, anything.”
3. Early in her career, Vivian Paley had the story author choose the entire cast. She changed this practice out of considerations of fairness (some children were asked to be actors far more than others).

Supporting the actors

New actors may be shy about performing on stage and use only small body movements and facial gestures. If needed, teachers can also offer prompts (“show me how a turtle crawls” or “remember how you pretended to be a baby in the dramatization center?”). Over time, children will expand their repertoire of movement. Some teachers read a story twice, so that during the first reading the class can discuss and practice different ways to act out particular roles. When acting is happening, read slowly so actors have time to perform. You can encourage the actors to take a bow at the end of the performance.

Supporting the audience

Focusing the audience's attention on the actors, rather than spending time trying to manage the audience's behavior, helps everyone attend to the acting on stage. In addition, the audience can become involved in the dramatization (singing a song that is part of the story), and the audience might applaud at the end of stories.

Conversations to extend learning after dramatizations

Invite children to offer compliments and suggestions immediately after story acting, taking time at the beginning of the year to define compliments and suggestions, teach some parameters, and practice as a group. These group conversations about storytelling and acting can produce high-level conversation and sophisticated acting. Teachers can also draw connections among stories, share their impressions, and ask children their impressions about individual stories and emerging themes across stories. Terms such as characters, setting, plot, and mood can be included in such conversations. Important concepts in writing can be reinforced, such as purpose, language, and audience. Over time, you and your children will establish your own way of dramatizations. Occasionally, you may want to discuss how your rules and rituals are working.

Communication

After stories have been told and enacted, teachers can provide additional opportunities for children to enjoy the stories and communicate their ideas. These opportunities can be offered during Centers as well as at other times of the day. Teachers are encouraged to provide individual notebooks to collect stories. Children may want to illustrate stories in notebooks and/or with diverse materials at the Art Studio; build in the Block Center, or act out the story again in the Dramatization Center.

Family Involvement

Many families have intrinsic knowledge and deep traditions about the value of storytelling. It may also be helpful for families to understand how stories support children's success in school by enlarging vocabulary, learning about sequencing of events, developing creativity, and learning to express and regulate, along with the strong ties to literacy development. Teachers can also:

- share children's stories at conferences with parents/families;
- encourage families to tell stories and listen to the stories their children tell;
- invite families to share stories in school;
- learn from families what stories are important to them and share these in class;
- share stories from school with families;
- share video of story enactments, via email or during parent-teacher conferences;
- request stories from home; or hold a family story event at school.

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Appendix: Developmental expectations about children’s stories

It is valuable to know what to expect when collecting children’s stories, as children’s abilities to tell stories expand over the course of the early childhood years.

age	description	example
3 year olds	“Leap Frog” stories While connected in the child’s mind, to adults they seem to hop from one event to another.	“I went to the doctors. Sarah came over. I had cake for breakfast.”
4 year olds	Chronologies, also referred to as “and then and then and then stories.” These stories are connected temporally, but do not have a well-articulated beginning or end. Can continue for a long time.	“I had cake for breakfast. And then I went to the doctors. And I got a shot. And then we went home. Sarah came over. We played with my dolls.”
5 and 6 year olds	“Classic Narratives” with a beginning, middle and end; a story with a problem that is resolved	“One night my brother and I heard a knock. We thought it was something getting knocked down. So we grabbed hockey sticks, and my brother said, ‘If you see anyone, stab it with this hockey stick.’ We went downstairs to see what the knock was. We looked in the living room. In the family room. We looked in the kitchen. We looked downstairs. It was just my cat. The end.”
7 and up	Over time, children’s ideas, use of language, and vocabulary in stories become more complex, as they continue to emulate and integrate, ever more smoothly, the language of print.	

These characterizations do not constitute hard and fast rules, as children’s narrative abilities develop at different rates, and older children may tell stories reminiscent of an early stage of development.

Children may also choose to tell poetic stories, developing a mood rather than describing an event (“Sometimes when you catch wind, snow comes down. I caught the wind and then it flew out of my hands.”). Children’s cultural backgrounds influence how they tell stories. (see McCabe, A. (1997). Cultural background and storytelling: A review and implications for schooling. *The Elementary School Journal*, 97 (5), 453-473)