

Oral Storytelling

Building Community through Dialogue, Engagement, and Problem Solving

“Tell me a story,” says Ariel. As I begin to weave a tale together, more children gather around to listen, nudging closer, wriggling into my lap, offering suggestions as their eyes widen. I tell stories outside on the playground and whisper stories to children at nap-time. Together, we act out familiar stories at our gatherings.

We frequently read stories from illustrated books that the children choose, but my coteacher Veda and I make a conscious effort to tell oral stories as well. Oral storytelling supports young children’s learning and development differently than stories read aloud from picture books. It gives children an opportunity to exercise their imagination, communicate effectively, enhance their social literacy, and build community in a different way. Many of the skills practiced through oral storytelling and the dramatic play that stems from it address applicable local and state early learning standards as well.

Building community

With each new group of mostly 3-year-olds, Veda and I start the school year by telling many stories. In our classroom we gather in a circle as an entire community twice a day. Holding a book and reading it aloud to children can be logistically and spatially difficult. During read-alouds, children sometimes complain they can’t see the pictures. Oral storytelling, however, and the dramatizing that inevitably accompanies it, makes it possible for everyone to participate and be included in a “close-up” way.



The children and I make direct eye contact without a book between us. As we read each other’s faces and emotions, a kind of call-and-response takes place, a mutual matching of facial, vocal, and physical expression. If I suddenly jump up or raise my voice, the children’s eyes widen and they gasp. If I begin to whisper, they crouch forward and draw close. This kind of listening and response is a direct form of communication that creates a level of intimacy, empathy, and unity at our gatherings.

Listening, participating, learning

One morning, during a community gathering, I tell the story of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” As I tell the story, I stop at appropriate times to invite the children to physically engage in the story’s action. I invite them to hold the tiny bowl of porridge that Goldilocks finishes. They cup their palms to make the bowl, blow at the

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steam, and taste the porridge. They rock back and forth in their places, pretending to sit on a rocking chair. They lie down to sleep, making their own snoozing sounds like Goldilocks might make. And at the very end of the story, when I describe Goldilocks waking up in fright and running away, they spontaneously stomp their feet in place to make the clamor and rhythm of Goldilocks fleeing.

When telling a story, teachers can find moments to intensify through performance. When using a familiar story with which you are comfortable, choose these moments spontaneously. Feel free to plan in advance with newer stories. Performing a story offers children a more dynamic experience than listening to a story as the teacher reads it aloud. Dramatizing even a few parts of a story brings the words to life and gives them an immediacy that captivates children's attention.

By acting out stories, children attend not only to how characters and creatures might look but also to how they move and sound. When they embody a character, they consider its unique qualities and traits and develop a vocabulary of gestures and words to make it real. For example, asking children questions like "How does this troll move his arms when he speaks?" or "How does the eldest Billy Goat Gruff sound different from the Baby Goat when he crosses

the bridge?" helps them distinguish between and pretend to become various sizes or temperaments. This questioning and prompting supports children in developing awareness and sensitivity to characters' attitudes.

When children engage in a series of actions with purpose and direction, their physical experience can help them remember a story and its sequence better. This kinesthetic learning supports their understanding of the story's sense of weight, rhythm, movement, and timing, and it helps them connect with the story more personally. For example, as I told the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," the children felt the weight and temperature of the bowl of porridge; they felt the jolting contrast between peaceful slumber and sudden flight; they used intuition and an internal sense of timing and volume to switch from stillness to sudden stomping. Young children develop a more sophisticated concept of space, time, movement, sound, and rhythm when they physically participate in telling a story this way.

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Getting to know a story

Telling children a familiar story or using a repetitive phrase within a story helps them feel comfortable and confident. Children anticipate the pattern and join in saying the refrain, sharing ownership in the story. For example, "We're Going on a Lion Hunt," Aubrey Davis's *The Enormous Potato*, and Linda Williams's *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything* engage preschoolers and offer opportunities for them to recognize patterns in stories, recall repetitive phrases, and participate in the storytelling. In "The Three Billy Goats Gruff," the repeated *trip-trap-trip-trap* as the billy goats cross the bridge and the troll's repeated threat provide predictability and familiarity.

A few months ago, my coteacher Veda invented a story about four characters named the Pinky Sisters. She tells it in installments, like a series, offering a new story each day on the playground by the climber. She keeps it open ended so the story continues to grow and evolve, and she frequently asks the children for their ideas when creating new characters and unfolding new events. The same group of four or five children requests a Pinky Sisters story. They make suggestions and embellish the cast of characters and events. They regularly identify with different characters, based on traits those characters possess. Veda incorporates

the children's ideas so their imaginations directly impact the story's progression and outcome. For example, Veda was inspired to name the characters the "Pinky Sisters" because two girls in the group regularly wear pink. As she told the story of how they met a monster one day, the children interrupted, saying that the monster should be big and green and become their friend. Thus, the cast of characters in the Pinky Sisters stories grew. The preschoolers have grown attached to this series because they revisit familiar characters every day, and they have also grown attached to the primary storyteller and the place on the playground where the story is usually told.



Engaging children in drama

Oral storytelling naturally lends itself to dramatic presentations. As children bring alive a story by using movements and sounds, and make meaning by performing and building on what they imagine, they nurture an "I did it myself" attitude that helps them see themselves as creators (Stinton 2002) and fosters self-confidence. Dramatizing stories lets children actively choose and make sense of characters, events, predicaments, and solutions. When children take on and cast off a role from one moment to the next in pretend play, they enjoy a sense of control over who or what they are, and they find safety in knowing they have the power to substitute one role or circumstance for another (Paley 2004).

One morning, 3-year-old Anna notices a baby praying mantis edging its way along the playground fence. Later, when we return indoors, she pulls out a large, brightly colored plastic praying mantis from our toy insect collection.

"My praying mantis is sick," she says. "He got smushed in your pocket. I need to fix him." Then she takes apart a stethoscope from our dress-up area and connects the tubes to the front legs of the plastic praying mantis. "There you go," she tells it, "you are all better now."

Engaging in oral storytelling during solitary dramatic play helps Anna imagine the insect's changing condition. Anna has the power to improve the insect's condition in her pretend play, and by reasoning aloud she reaches conclusions about what is wrong, what must be done, and whether the solution is satisfactory. She is pleased with herself when the insect recovers, and feels responsible for this positive outcome. Oral storytelling allows Anna to make sense of the praying mantis's experience of struggle, imbalance, and health. Later she may apply this understanding to her own experiences when she has a cold or the flu.

Problem solving

When preschoolers make predictions, thread a sequence of events together, or interpret tone and mood, they develop the skills necessary for learning to read as well as learning to understand and engage in human behavior and interactions. As young children take turns communicating with each other, they begin to appreciate different points of view and work together to resolve conflicts. They develop the language and comprehension to articulate and negotiate plans and solutions. Their ability to link cause and effect enables them to understand more deeply the impact of their actions on others. This practice of combining reason and imagination through the process of improvised storytelling and role-playing helps children anticipate possible situations and outcomes and prompts their visions of alternative endings and solutions (Charney 2002; Worth 2008).



The following conversation demonstrates Ramon's emerging understanding that he can and will change, that he can make different decisions from the ones he made before.

Ramon (Grimacing): When I grow up, I'm going to be a giant. And I'm going to eat people up.

Ariel: I'm going to be a happy giant.

Ramon: I'm going to be a grumpy giant. (Pause) But a giant needs friends.

Ramon continues thinking about the topic the next day as he discusses his ideas with me.

Ramon: When I grow up I'm going to be a giant that eats everyone up.

Teacher: Will you eat your friends up?

Ramon: Yes.

Teacher: Who will you play with if you eat your friends up and they won't be with you anymore?

Ramon: They'll be with me in my belly. (Pause) The second time I grow up, I'll be a giant and I won't eat my friends.

Over time, Ramon reflects on what he imagined was true before and shapes a new model for what he thinks is true now.

Using dialogue and imagination

One summer afternoon, 3-year-old Julie and 4-year-old Ariel sit together on the playground. Julie calls me over to listen to her tell the story of Peter Pan. She creates an image of Peter Pan in her mind, based on what she heard when her mother told the story the night before. Ariel, who

Tips for Oral Storytelling

- Learn a few simple stories. Use fairy tales, folktales, and stories from your own life.
- Tell stories with refrains or dialogues that repeat and can be easily remembered and predicted by children, such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "We're Going on a Lion Hunt," *The Enormous Potato*, and *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything*.
- Identify parts in the story—while planning or as opportunities arise—when children can perform physically or express themselves through words and sounds. Invite children to act out or make sounds for these parts.
- Ask questions related to the story that prompt children's imagination. For example, "Why do you think Goldilocks chose to sleep in the baby bear's bed?" or "How do you think she feels once she's found the perfect chair?"
- Retell stories that children enjoy. The more familiar they become with a story or character, the more they will want to perform it independently.
- Understand that children may interrupt because they are fully engaged and wish to contribute their ideas. Find ways to incorporate their ideas in the story without losing momentum.

has seen an image of Peter Pan from a movie and in book illustrations, recalls another picture. Their different mental images help shape their dialogue.

Julie: Peter Pan arrived in the window with his shadow. He flew with his wings.

Ariel: He didn't have a shadow. And the Peter Pan I know didn't have wings.

Julie: Yes, he does, because he flies with them.

Teacher: Does a creature need wings to fly?

Ariel: Yes.

Teacher: You said your Peter Pan doesn't have wings. How does he fly?

Ariel: I think with his arms.

Julie: Follow my story! And the children wanted to go with him because they wanted a mama.

Ariel: What happened to their mama?

Julie: I don't know. They didn't have one.

Ariel: Did they have a papa?

Julie: Yeah . . . I forgot what happens in the story.

Teacher: What happens between Peter Pan and the children?

Julie: The children don't want to grow up. They wanted to be children forever.

Ariel: Why didn't they want to grow up?

Julie: They wanted to play games all the time.

Ariel: But grown-ups can play games.

Julie: It's not the same. Then they flew with Peter Pan to the place that I forget its name, so I'm going to call it "No Growing Up."

As Julie's story unfolds, it triggers points of conversation, questioning, and even disagreement. When she tries to describe her image of Peter Pan, Julie is challenged by Ariel's different mental image and memory of the story. The process of oral storytelling offers moments of genuine reflection, reevaluation, and theorizing between the two children. They create and communicate their own mental images rather than relying on a predetermined picture of Peter Pan from a book.

Though illustrations play an important role in supporting children's literacy development, sometimes pictures prevent a child from imagining—creating his or her own mental images of the characters and events in the story. Oral storytelling challenges children to apply their own visual associations to the story instead of an illustrator's. When children integrate information that they hear and transform it into a series of their own images and personal meanings, they exercise the same creativity and inventiveness necessary for problem solving. When preschoolers have opportunities to represent and describe landscapes, textures, and images without the aid of picture books, they hone their ability to construct new mental maps and relationships.

Conclusion

Oral storytelling encourages a heightened and more sophisticated level of engagement among preschoolers through its invitation for role-playing and performance. While some stories are initiated by a teacher, most are informally dramatized and brought to life through daily play and conversations among children. Preschoolers develop important speaking and listening skills when they express and respond to their own and others' ideas. Experiences that arouse a deeper level of engagement and curiosity in a child and that propel the child to continue learning are valuable educational experiences (Dewey [1938] 1997). Oral storytelling and the dramatic play intertwined with it provide the foundation for children's educational experiences now and in the future.

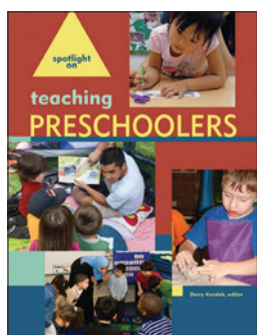
Educators can support young children's cognitive, language, social, and emotional development by using some of the storytelling techniques illustrated in this article. Teachers can also record (by writing, using audio or videotape, or a combination of these methods) the children's conversations and document their interactions in order to better examine and validate the unique paths of inquiry that children open every day in their dramatic play and oral storytelling. Documenting this development over time allows educators and families to follow and mark interesting milestones in the way a child processes, represents, and communicates his thinking and understanding of life experiences. Often documentation reveals themes in children's observations and questions that teachers can intentionally incorporate in the curriculum.

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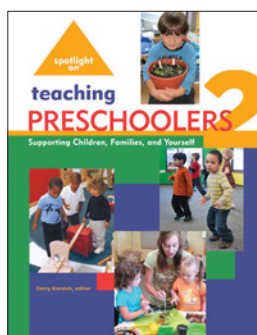
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