

This tip sheet tells how to introduce storytelling and story acting in your early childhood classroom.

RECALL IT

The ***Introducing It: Using Storytelling/Story Acting in the Early Childhood Classroom*** tip sheet explains that this whole class activity supports language development and social-emotional learning. Here is how it works: working one-on-one, a teacher asks a child if they have a story to share. This works well during arrival time, center times, and unstructured free play time. The teacher writes the story in a notebook. The child can watch them writing the words. During whole group time, the teacher facilitates the dramatization of the story. The adult reads the story aloud once to the class. The author chooses to act or cast actors (with adult help, if needed). The educator reads the story again as the children act out the story.

SAMMY'S STORY

A teacher approaches a child who is finishing signing in after morning arrival. The teacher says, "Hello Sammy. Do you have a story to tell me today?" The child excitedly starts a story with a sentence or two, and then pauses. The teacher says, "What else?" or "What happened next?" The child watches while the teacher writes down her words with proper spacing between letters and punctuation that matches the sentences the child just said.

Later, during whole group time, the teacher says, "Today, we are not going to read a book. Today, we are going to act out some stories that I heard earlier." The teacher then opens their notebook and says, "The first story today will be from Sammy. Sammy, do you want to come sit in the Author's Chair while I read your story?"

After reading the story aloud to the children, the teacher says, "Sammy, it looks like you have three characters in your story: you, your mom, and your brother. Who do you want to be?" Sammy chooses to act as herself. The teacher then goes around the circle of children and finds one child who wants to play Sammy's mom and one child who wants to play Sammy's brother. Next, the teacher reads the story aloud again while the three children act it out in the middle of the circle.

After the story, the teacher asks, "Does anyone have any questions about this story? How about any compliments for Sammy?" A few children offer comments about how they have a brother, too. Then the teacher thanks Sammy and asks the next child to come sit in the Author's Chair.

BRINGING STORYTELLING/ STORY ACTING INTO YOUR CLASSROOM

Want to try storytelling/story acting in your classroom? Here are key questions to ask before you start.

- When will I collect stories?
- What materials will I need to write down the stories?
- What will I say to storytellers who get stuck? ("What else can you tell me about that?" or "How did you get home from the store?")
- What will I say to children who keep talking? ("I only have this page to write your story on, and I'm at the end of the page. Will you tell me the rest of your story next time?")

- How will I decide what our classroom's rituals are around story acting time? (Will I offer a special ritual, like lighting a battery-operated candle?)
- What do I notice about the language children are using? What does it tell me about their current language skills? Where might they need more practice?
- What do I notice about the stories my children are telling? What issues seem to be important to them?
- How can I connect the children's stories to our current theme? For instance, if we have a plant theme, I could say, "Tell me a story about a flower."

THE MAGIC OF QUESTIONS

Sometimes younger preschool-aged children offer more language when adults ask more closed-ended questions, such as:

**What was the dog's name?
What color was the monster truck?**

Once the child gets warmed up in telling their story, adults can switch to more open-ended questions.

Older preschool-aged children benefit from more open-ended questions. This type of question draws out their language and gets them to explain their thinking. For instance, adults may ask,

**How will the dog get back to the house?
Why did the superhero say that?**

As children answer their questions, they practice thinking out loud, which can turn into more fluency with narrative structure and sequencing.¹

CREATING CLASSROOM COMMUNITY THROUGH RITUALS

A classroom ritual can signal that story acting time is special. Some classrooms have a special "author's chair" or a cape for the author to wear. Sometimes, teachers turn off the lights and turn on a battery-operated candle. Children and adults can decide together if they want a story acting ritual.

CASTING THE CHARACTERS

Rather than choosing for the child or having the child choose friends to act in their story, some teachers have children sit in a circle. They start at the beginning of the circle and ask each child in turn if they want to act in the story: "Would you like to be the bear in this story? No? Okay." Then they turn to the next child. "Would you like to be the bear in this story?" Whatever approach you use to casting characters, be fair and consistent.

STORYTELLING/STORY ACTING WITH VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

One way to collect a story from very young children is to connect storytelling to action.

For example:

When children are drawing, a teacher can say, "Tell me about your picture." They can then write down the words a child uses to describe their picture.

Children can use their vocabulary to practice labeling things, and eventually, they can practice describing things.

OTHER APPROACHES

Storytelling can become part of your classroom culture. Children are keenly aware of what their important adults say, and teachers can inspire young storytellers by modeling.

For example:

During mealtimes, a teacher could share a quick story about their life or about when they were children.

Another fun way to incorporate story acting into classroom culture is to act out a familiar story.

For example:

If the class has just read a version of "The Three Little Pigs," the children could act out that story. The teacher can help with prompts like,

- "How many pigs do we need?"
- "Is there another character in the story? Oh! The wolf, right!"
- "In our classroom, where is the first little pig's house?"

REFERENCES

The sources referenced in this tip sheet can be found at z.umn.edu/storyrefs

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DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic:

Download CEED's other related tip sheets:

- Introducing It: Storytelling/Story Acting in the Early Childhood Classroom for the theory behind this practice and information on how it enhances classroom quality (z.umn.edu/storyacting)
- Tip sheets on the importance of play (z.umn.edu/play_learn)

Check out the Children's Theatre Company's Bridges Storytelling and Literacy School Residencies: z.umn.edu/ctcworkshops

Explore the residencies, curriculum development, performances, and professional development the Speaking Out Collective offers, as they use storytelling in classrooms to spark the curiosity and imagination of children and educators: speakingoutcollective.com

Read Patsy Cooper's comprehensive 2007 book, When Stories Come to School- Telling, Writing, and Performing Stories in the Early Childhood Classroom: z.umn.edu/stories_school

Find out how one district implemented storytelling/story acting in the Boston Listens: Storytelling/Story Acting in the Boston Public Schools report: z.umn.edu/boston_listens

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