

Introducing It: Using Storytelling/Story Acting in the Early Childhood Classroom

Center for Early Education
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

This tip sheet will discuss how storytelling and story acting in early childhood classrooms can support children's language and social-emotional development.

Long before written language, humans shared stories orally.¹ Across cultures, storytelling provides entertainment as well as education. Stories can convey values, lessons, and culturally important history. Research also shows that stories engage young children and help them learn.² Stories can help us make sense of our experiences and the world around us—a key task for young children!

WHAT IS STORYTELLING?

WHAT IS STORY ACTING?

Storytelling/story acting is a whole-class language development strategy for preschool-aged children. The strategy is simple: children regularly dictate stories to adults, then they dramatize the stories as a whole class. As a predictable part of classroom routines, this playful process showcases children's ideas. It builds children's literacy skills, including vocabulary, narrative understanding, and print and phonological awareness.³ It gives children opportunities to practice social and emotional skills like self-regulation. It also builds self-esteem and community.⁴

“Story acting brings the child's story to the group and celebrates her ideas. This provides both a compelling reason to tell stories and an opportunity for the class to create meaning around a text of interest. It allows children to learn from one another as they creatively figure out how to depict a family, a forest, and even a tissue box. It gives teachers the opportunity to learn about their children as they work together to bring a story to life.”

–Ben Mardell⁵

HOW DOES IT WORK?

STORYTELLING:

During arrival, small group time, or free choice time, educators move around the classroom and work with one child at a time. They give the child a simple prompt, such as, “Do you have a story for me?” The child tells a story, and the educator writes it in a notebook. The adult sits so that the child can see what they're writing. They may need to gently prompt the child. (“What happens next?”) The educator writes down whatever the child says, whether the grammar or sentence structure is correct or not. The educator can clarify something by saying, “Let me read that back to you to make sure I wrote what you want to say.” Story collection can also be a helpful distraction, for instance while children are waiting to use the bathroom or be dismissed from whole group time.

STORY ACTING:

During whole group time, the educator announces that it's time to act out some stories that have been collected during the day. Two or three stories are typically the right number for a preschool classroom. Since children are very interested in what is fair and what isn't, the educator creates a list of children whose stories will be told that day so that children know what to expect.⁴ The educator can then rely on this structure and remind the children that everybody will get a turn. The educator draws one child's name at a time from the pre-created list, then asks the author of the story to stand nearby.

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The child can choose to act in the story. They can choose to “cast” the characters as well. This is a good time for them to clarify what they want the actions from the story to look like, too. The educator reads the story aloud once. Then they read it again while the cast acts out the story.

THE BENEFITS OF STORYTELLING/STORY ACTING



LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT:

When children express their ideas, respond to questions, and connect words to physical actions, their language development soars.

Storytelling/story acting is a great way to integrate these language-boosting techniques into your classroom. Research suggests that when children use more than one sense to learn a new word, their understanding of that word grows. So when they see another child acting out “pushing” or “pulling,” they get a better understanding of those words.^{6 7 8 9}

A good command of narrative structure is a strong predictor of reading and writing success.¹⁰ Telling original stories reinforces the idea that stories have a beginning, middle, and end. The storyteller may also choose to experiment with narrative structure. Four-year-olds with robust narrative skills become stronger fourth- and eighth-grade readers.¹¹ As children watch educators write down their stories, they can notice letters and letter sounds. Educators can also highlight features of print as they take dictation, such as spacing between words or punctuation. This step in the process also shows the purpose of writing.

“Storytelling/story acting “offers a model of what curriculum can look like and what teachers can do to support early literacy success that is as child-friendly and inclusive as it is effective.”

–Patsy Cooper, PhD¹²

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Storytelling/story acting provides lots of opportunities for social-emotional growth. Executive function skills come into play, for example, delaying gratification (“Is it my turn to tell my story yet?”). Story acting requires children to practice prosocial skills like working together (“Sure, I’ll act in your story!”). Their emotional vocabulary may grow, too (“In your story, the mom character is angry. How does that look?”).

Children’s creativity and individuality can shine in storytelling/story acting. They take center stage when they tell stories, make choices about how to dramatize them, and act them out. This can develop their confidence. It shows them that they have a unique contribution to make.

This classroom practice also requires active listening on the part of educators. They get many chances to show interest in individual children. For instance, if a child tells a teacher what they did over the weekend with their family, the teacher could say, “Hey! Should we write that story down and we can act it out later?” These small moments of connection can build attachment and make children feel seen and heard.

PROGRAM QUALITY:

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) is a tool for measuring the quality of interactions between teachers and children, resulting in the best outcomes for children’s development.

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Storytelling/story acting includes many practices that the CLASS® recommends for early childhood classrooms. As an example, educators collect ideas and perspectives from children. The CLASS® calls this Regard for Student Perspectives. Educators ask open-ended questions about children's stories, which connects directly to the domain of Language Modeling. After children offer their stories and ideas to the educator, educators can ask follow-up questions or ask children to explain their thinking or word choice. This kind of educator feedback connects to the CLASS® domain of Quality of Feedback.

AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT:

For teachers who use authentic assessment, storytelling/story acting provides important data on children's skills. Authentic assessment "measur[es] how well students can perform tasks that are meaningful and relevant to real-world experiences."¹³ As a daily practice, storytelling/story acting provides teachers with an embedded routine that showcases children's language development and social-emotional skills.

CEED has done formal evaluations of the Children's Theatre Company's storytelling/story acting programs in early childhood settings across the Minnesota Twin Cities metro area.^{14 15} These evaluations showed that in addition to gaining storytelling skills, children developed focus and connection to content, expressed autonomy in the classroom, and practiced self-regulation and transition skills.¹⁵

REFERENCES

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

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Suggested citation: Center for Early Education and Development (2024). Introducing it: Using storytelling/story acting in the early childhood classroom. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota.

DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic:

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 about one teacher's experience working with young children on drawing, writing, and storytelling: z.umn.edu/art_story_process

Download CEED's other related tip sheets:

- Executive function (<https://z.umn.edu/executive-function>)
- Music and emotional regulation (<https://z.umn.edu/music-regulation>)
- Music and inhibitory control (<https://z.umn.edu/music-inhibitory>)
- The authentic assessment cycle (<https://z.umn.edu/authenticassessment>)

Watch CEED's videos on the CLASS® tool:

- Parent Aware and the CLASS® (<https://ceed.umn.edu/parent-aware-and-the-class/>)
- The Pre-K CLASS® Emotional Support Domain (<https://ceed.umn.edu/the-pre-k-class-emotional-support-domain/>)

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