Storytelling for Young Children: Simple Short Stories for the ‘Moment’

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Why Oral Storytelling?

When you hear a story being told your mind creates its own pictures. These mind pictures are based on your own life experiences and the concepts you have developed up until this point in your life. As you listen, you see things with your own colours, and you can add your own sounds and background noises in your mind. Someone else might tell the story, but it is your story in your head. When you ask children to retell stories the essential parts they give you will generally be correct, but the way they see things happen, and the way they understand things in the story differ from child to child. They have made that story live for themselves.

Making a story live in this way is something that can’t quite be achieved by reading a book with a child. Now at this point I want to say that book reading IS very important. It is an essential part of literacy learning. When you snuggle up with your child and enjoy a book experience together, you are doing a great deal of groundwork for their literacy development. Mem Fox insists that reading to your child for at least 10 minutes a day is the best way to kick start not only good literacy skills, but also a love of books and stories. I agree with her, however reading from books should not be the only experience of stories that children have. Picture books do not develop the ‘inner mind pictures’, and this is an essential skill for a creative thinker and successful learner.

What is the “Inner Picture”?

Young children live in the moment. While they do have an amazing capacity to remember very interesting experiences after seeing or hearing it only once, their understanding of this learning comes from living and practicing and playing out a concept again and again. When you watch young children play, the themes of their games will not vary much until they reach about 6 years of age. Until then, children still use toys to physically represent the pictures they have in their minds. At around age five/six, children begin to draw upon their long-term memories in play and drawings. It is now that children start bringing to life those ‘inner pictures’ they have stored from listening, watching, imitating and doing. Children at this age are less reliant upon using props for their play, because much of the play is based upon “lets pretend”, or “just say”. They are now able to hold long play sessions with very little toys at all, and will often re-enact moments from their favourite stories in their games. Stories provide fuel for play. Children who have not yet developed the capacity to hold inner pictures are not ready to join in this kind of play yet.

“Children want an image, and want to think of themselves as an image, too. It is just in these things that we see how the teacher will meet the children with a truly “living” quality of soul. And this living quality works upon the children in an imponderable way – imponderable in the best sense.” Dr Rudolf Steiner, The Kingdom of Childhood.

Another word for the inner picture is Imagination. Children who are able to hold an inner picture can become creative thinkers. They are able to grasp a concept, shape it in their minds, relate it to their life experiences, and then use it in creative ways. What a truly remarkable ability – and one so necessary for overcoming abstract concepts such as reading and mathematics. While reading aloud to children will help familiarize them with text, their inner picture will help shape it in meaningful and relevant ways in their understanding.
Children who experience stories and play through mediums that often leave very little detail to the imagination (such as an excess of electronic entertainment/commercial toys/merchandise) may struggle with developing their inner pictures and creative thought life. It becomes a part of the brain that is not well used. In terms of brain development: if a part of the brain is not exercised frequently it gets taken over by other areas of brain function that require more space to store information!

These children will not have had the need to exercise their thoughts and imagination, and they are out of practice. It becomes too hard. These children may find it initially difficult to sit through an oral story, especially when it is the same story told day after day, however very soon (in my experience) they become captivated. It is as if the story is a light that is trying to awaken a very sluggish and sleepy imagination. This can be hard work! And it is best achieved by setting aside time in each day when the television is turned off, putting away the toys that think for themselves (including iPods, electronic games and mobile phones for older children), lighting a candle and beginning with “Once upon a time…”

How do we tell stories without books?

Ah! What a daunting prospect! Putting the book away and telling a story from memory! Stories are unfolding around us all the time, and young children love nothing better than to hear stories they can relate to in their daily life, especially if there is a child who has the same name as them in the story! Day-to-day activities are not considered boring to young children (unless referred to, in a resigned tone, as “work”). To little children, the story of their day, or even a moment in their day is quite satisfying. These stories do not have to take long, they do not require any props, and they do not require any preparation. They are the simplest, and easiest stories to make up on the spot! You can be sweeping the floor and telling a story. You can be in the car. All you need is a short beginning and ending that remain the same for every story. You make this up; it doesn’t have to be tricky or fantastic, in fact the simpler the better. A word of warning: once you get going your child will never let you change this! What ever you do in the middle is up to you.

I have a favourite story that I tell to all age groups, from babies to adults: the story of Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle. I learned this story when I was at university and it has stood by me for all these years since! Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle have helped me out of many an awkward moment with big groups of children, they have helped make sad children giggle, and they have helped over-excited children settle down. All you need are your hands, and a little inspiration.

I tried to make a video of this story so you could see the actions but was foiled by lack of appropriate video equipment! So I will try to describe how it goes: in this story Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle are your thumbs. Their homes are your fingers and when Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle are inside your thumb is tucked inside. Your thumbs are out when Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle are out and about. Whenever the ‘door’ (your fingers) opens and closes you say ‘pop!’ When Mr. Wiggle goes for a walk up the hill and down the hill you make your fist move up and down.

The basic story goes like this:

Once upon a time there were two friends. Their names were Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle. Mr. Wiggle lived on this hill over here (pop!) and Mr. Waggle lived on this hill over here (pop!). One day Mr. Wiggle decided to visit Mr. Waggle. He opened his door (pop!), came outside (pop!) and closed the door (pop!).
Then he went: Down the hill and up the hill, down the hill and up the hill, down the hill and up the hill... until he came to Mr. Waggle’s house.

He knocked on Mr. Waggle’s door. Knock! Knock! Knock! “Hello! Mr. Waggle! Are you home? It’s Mr. Wiggle!”

Mr. Waggle opened his door (pop!), came outside (pop!) and closed his door (pop!). “Oh! Hello Mr. Wiggle! Do come in, you must be tired after your walk. Lets have a cup of tea.” So Mr. Waggle opened his door (pop!), they went inside (pop!) and closed the door (pop!). Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle shared a pot of tea and ate some scones together. When they were finished it was time for Mr. Wiggle to go home.

Mr. Waggle opened his door (pop!), they came outside (pop!) and he closed his door (pop!). “Goodbye Mr. Wiggle, thank you for visiting me! Do come again soon!”

“Good bye Mr. Waggle, thank you for the cup of tea and scones”.

Mr. Wiggle went down the hill and up the hill, down the hill and up the hill, down the hill and up the hill...until he came to his home.

They each opened their doors (pop!), waved goodbye to each other (*), went inside (pop!) and closed their doors (pop!).

And the sun went down, and the moon came up, and that was the end of another day!

I love this story because in it so much happens. First of all there is the beginning and the ending: they are always the same. As are the ‘pops’. Believe me when I tell you that the children will notice if you forget a pop, or if you pop in the wrong place! These are the fun elements that attract children to the story. You say whatever you like in between, so long as the beginning, the end and the pops are always there. When I have told this story, depending upon the age of the audience and the situation, Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle have gone swimming, fishing, boating (lost at sea and washed up on a deserted island), jungle exploring, skateboarding, driving, bicycle riding (down those hills!), cooking and picnicking. They have hung out the washing, washed dishes, tidied their rooms (because they kept losing things in them) and have ended up in hospital with broken bones many times from their adventures!

With this story you can:
- Catch the attention of any child of any age,
- Explore ranges of voice, using sound effects, high and low pitch, exaggerated tones. Be free!
- Throw in little songs they might know (‘row, row, row your boat’ came in when they were on the sea) - Run freely with your imagination, your child’s suggestions, or even just tell the story of your child’s day,
- Use Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle to work through worries or fears in a humorous way,
- Give your child a settling strategy: if they are old enough, ask them to tell you a Mr. Wiggle and Mr. Waggle story while you are driving the car, making dinner, waiting for playgroup to begin…

And the best thing about it is at the end of the day, it all comes good again. They always make it home for dinner and bed, the sun always goes down and the moon always comes up again. The world is good. After all, that is the message we want to pass on to our children.