

TELL ME A STORY

In many cultures there is a rich tradition of oral storytelling. Tales, myths and legends, as well as personal family stories, are passed down through generations providing entertainment, moral lessons and a sense of history. This may take place with or without accompanying written language.

In Western society, where great emphasis and importance is given to written traditions, oral storytelling is considered by many to be a "dying art". The oral story finds itself with much competition, particularly from the television and computers.

This is a pity, particularly for young children, as oral story telling -

- is a source of shared pleasure for both the storyteller and the listener.
- can provide an opportunity to strengthen the bond between adults and children.
- communicates many social "rules" - expected or desired behaviours, such as telling the truth.
- improves listening skills
- helps children interpret the world and their place within it
- sparks imagination and creativity
- builds vocabulary and an understanding of story sequence
- exercises thinking and touches the emotions
- provides the foundation skills and confidence for children to write their own stories.

Of course the benefits of the oral tradition are not limited to young children. As adults we all enjoy and admire the tales of the natural raconteur! Perhaps however, we have not thought of ourselves as storytellers. In fact we are all potential informal story tellers as we relate mishaps and other experiences in our daily lives. Maybe all we need is practice and the belief that we can develop storytelling skills!

From our own experience -

In the past we have conducted some of our "Taking Time for Talking" workshops over two days. Participants have been set "homework" overnight to create an oral story, choosing a character and a setting from a short list of alternatives. Despite one particularly eager and talented "student" who told an intriguing tale of a retired Sea Captain mouse who found himself in an "old mouse home", nearly all of the participants expressed dismay at how "hard" the task was.

Recently, whilst visiting relatives, Sue was amazed at how easily and naturally the young Dad became a storyteller with his two young boys. Just by posing the question "Which colour horse do you want to ride tonight Will?" the story was off- a shared 'do-it-yourself' adventure. This Dad was almost apologetic that he used such an activity when he felt too tired to read a story!

Our challenge as parents and teachers is to harness the energy and spontaneity of the young Dad who is a storyteller. In doing so, we can **bridge the gap** between the natural enjoyment shown by young children in jointly engaging in storytelling activities and the "hard" task of independent story composition.

We believe that some of our school aged children have insufficient practice at being story **tellers** before they are asked to be story **writers**? Perhaps we as adults are not familiar enough with what makes up a story to create oral stories with children

Let's start with the elements of stories

In our recently produced oral storytelling kit, Story Talk, we have emphasized the following key elements of a story.

Character - the central character and also the other introduced characters.

Setting - where and when the story takes place.

Problem - what happens in the story that requires planning and action?

Events - leading up to the problem or resulting from it.

Thoughts - the goals, thinking and planning by the character/s to resolve the problem

Feelings- the emotions experienced by the character/s as the story evolves.

Ending - how the story concludes and the problem is resolved.

Each of these elements is represented by magnetic frames and shapes.

This categorization may be different from other teachers, writers and researchers.

The Education Department in each of the Australian states may also use slightly different terminology. For example the Board of Studies NSW uses the words **orientation**, complication and **resolution**. It really doesn't matter what names you use, as long as you include the essential elements and that the terms are used consistently and understood by parents, teachers and students.

Features of a "good" story

Of course judgement of what makes a "good" story will very much depend upon its content and the interest and engagement of the listener. From the point of view of story structure however, a "good" story will

- introduce the main character and give background information that will
- orient the listener as to where and when the story is taking place
- introduce new characters, differentiating between them as the story proceeds
- outline something that happens to cause a problem
- tell the steps in sequence that were taken to resolve this problem keeping the connections between ideas and events clear
- "wind up" by describing the resolution and the ending of the story.

What sort of language is used in stories?

Storytellers who wish to relate interesting and coherent stories are likely to use some of the following language features.

- **connectors of time** *e.g. then, after that, next, while*
- **connectors outlining cause and effect** *e.g. because, so, therefore*
- phrases to describe **when, where and how** things happened
e.g. seven weeks ago, at the top of the old oak tree, carefully and silently
- **'rich' descriptions** of things seen and also felt *e.g. the man with the spiky whiskers, George felt sad and disappointed.*
- **'thinking' or cognitive verbs** which describe what the character is thinking or planning *e.g. decided, wondered, knew*
- **pronouns** to stand for the character *e.g. 'he' for the man.* These minimize confusion between characters. *E.g. 'he' may also be the dog that was introduced into the story.*

In addition the storyteller can add colour and interest by

- choosing colourful vocabulary *e.g. dainty rather than small, gobbled rather than ate, the steak was "as tough as old boot leather" rather than just tough*
- repeating certain phrases or themes for emphasis
- using story conventions *e.g. Once upon a time*
- using direct speech *e.g. The smallest frog called out to the fish, "Please Mr. Fish let my mother go so that I can"*

How to set the scene for storytelling

- Create a relaxed atmosphere of acceptance and enthusiasm without time pressure.
- Allow the story to develop over time - we allow many drafts for written work - the same should be acceptable for storytelling.
- Model the role of storyteller - show that you are learning too, verbalize about how you enjoy telling stories and how you go about improving your stories.
- Reward the child's efforts to join in. Allow them to take an active part in the creation or direction of the story, or even become involved with the repetition of familiar dialogue at the appropriate places in the story.

How to begin?

- Some parents and teachers will feel they need some tangible resources to get them started. For example they may want something to represent oral storytelling such as a large hand puppet, a stuffed toy, Paddy the bear, a paper doll, or Smiley the character doll from STORY TALK. These props represent that it is time to tell stories. Children will enjoy a continuing story. For example: *"Remember last time Paper Dolly told us about how she was left in the little boy's pocket. We left her hanging upside down to dry in front of the heater then Zac the stripy cat ..."*
- Every family has a wealth of funny or scary experiences that can be turned into "out of the mouth" stories. For example - Jenny's funny haircut (child cut their own hair with scissors), Grandpa's false teeth (teeth 'stolen' by the family dog), Mum's lost keys (frustrating time trying to get into the house).

- Record your oral stories in a book making a note of the title, who it is about and the gist of the story. Perhaps your child can create the title or illustrate each story. This book then serves as a prompt for retellings of the stories.
- You can start your story telling adventures with very familiar and popular stories such as The Three Little Pigs and over successive retellings add some dialogue, gestures intonation and perhaps even a different ending.
- Story "triggers" are also useful. Collect some photos, newspaper cuttings, real objects and use these to stimulate storytelling. It doesn't matter if the stories are short. Story Talk contains verbal and photographic triggers for story telling.
- During a recent interview conducted by the ABC's Andrew Denton with David Wenham, the actor described how he created impromptu oral bedtime stories based on his young daughter's random selection of topics. David said ... "Yes, we have a ritual every night, as I think most people do, we read stories, but we also have, after we read stories, we have make up stories every night. She'll ask for two, maybe three make up stories every night. I have to cobble together stories that can include broken butterfly wings and sandcastles and fairies but ... then a very bizarre thing will be thrown in as well, like a tractor, and so I think, 'Okay, off we go.'"
- Teachers might like to use concrete props such as Story Braid, character and setting boxes or the magnets from STORY TALK to represent the important structural parts of the story.

Stories can be told in any place and at any time. Story telling is beneficial to both the story teller and the listener. Children who participate in story telling adventures receive a wonderful gift.

References and resources

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