

Five Ideas Or Concepts That Adults Should Know When Helping Youth Be Storytellers

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1. Exposure to Storytelling

When introducing storytelling to youth for the first time, tell them stories! Exposure to many different tellers is a key part of teaching youth tellers. For live exposure, local storyswap groups provide a great place to see different tellers in action, along with any local festivals and library programs. Audiotapes are also a fabulous resource! When I was younger, I always had a storytelling tape playing in the car. Discuss with your students what they liked about each teller and story. Discuss how different tellers use language, pacing, inflection, character voices, rhythm, repetition and music to captivate the listener. Students can learn a lot about storytelling just by *listening*. Videos are also readily available to learn from. If possible, listen to teller tell a story on audiotape, and then watch them tell the same story on video. Does the way they tell the story change? What elements are more or less noticeable between the two media forms?

2. The Space

Often it is very intimidating for kids (and adults!) to get up in front of an audience. Work with them on getting to know the storytelling space. The exercise can be as simple as getting up, walking to the front of the room, introducing themselves and returning to their chair. As they become more comfortable, lengthen the exercise by having them describe something, such as their favorite food, their favorite animal, or their dream vacation. Encourage them to speak slowly, and as loudly as possible (without yelling or speaking in a way that is unhealthy). Discuss eye contact and have them practice making eye contact with the audience. Congratulate them often; positive encouragement is vital!

3. Games

Storytelling games are terrific ways to get kids to use their imaginations. Create a story framework, such as “I went to (a place) to get (an object) from (a person).” Draw slips of paper out of a hat and have the kids build a story around the given framework. If they get stuck, ask the audience for suggestions and let the storyteller pick out ideas to finish their story. The more ridiculous and chaotic the scenario is, the better. Tandem improvisation with 3 students at a time is also a lot of fun, and kids will feel less “on the spot” when telling with friends. Charades is a great way to get kids to practice communicating characters. Have students make up character voices and have everyone guess their mood, or what kind of character would speak in the demonstrated voice.

4. Shock Value

At a Storytelling Club shortly before Halloween, I announced that the kids could tell ghost and scary stories. One 5th-grade boy recounted a grisly tale he made up about a

babysitter who murdered the kids she was babysitting (complete with vivid descriptions of the bloody corpses). He was watching my reaction as he detailed the gore; I didn't bat an eye. For many of the framework stories I presented, favorite objects included toilets, problems with toilets, vomit, moldy cheese, boogers and other things that would make their public school teachers flinch. I often tell the African folktale "The Talking Skull" to school assemblies. The kids will eat up every word while the teachers in the back are looking at each other in horror. Kids love gross subjects, so don't be surprised, affected or try to censor them when they bring them up.

5. Partner Telling

The next big step for student storytellers is to tell a written story. Make photocopies, or type up your favorite, short (1-2 pages optimally) folktales. Pass them out and have the students read through the story (make sure they like the story, otherwise, give them another story). Pair up the students and have them *tell* their story to each other. When they are finished have them switch partners a few times. Allow them to tell for the whole group if they feel comfortable doing so. Discuss what everyone liked about the story and the telling. Give them lots and lots of praise! At the next meeting, have them tell the story again, and encourage them to use character voices, gestures, movement, etc.