



## ***"Preschool Audiences: To Tell or not to Tell, That is the Question"***

**By Joey Talbert  
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**One of the great mysteries for some storytellers is "What does it take to work with preschool children? How can I tell if my shows are geared for this young of an audience?" After talking with Joey Talbert, a preschool teacher in Massachusetts for 11 years and now a Professional Storyteller as well as Pre-K Drama Instructor, she reveals that working with preschoolers should not be a mystery, but instead an experience that takes special skills and preparation. In this article she gives us practical advice on how to tell if you are a storyteller whose work will carry to preschool children.**

I often hear Storytellers referring to Preschool audiences as something to "survive." Unfortunately, many storytellers think of telling to a Preschool audience as a necessary evil, something to be avoided if possible, or muddled through if inevitable. I feel that Preschoolers deserve better. They deserve to be valued, admired and cherished as the unique audience they are. Sure, they squiggle, squirm and interrupt. Yes, they will get up mid-story to grab a potato chip, or ask you for a drink.

Sometimes they will announce right at the critical part of your story that the story is too long. However, these things are the beauty of a Preschool audience. You never know what to expect and no story experience is ever the same twice. I am not saying that all Storytellers should embrace the Preschool audience; I do not believe that is true. In fact that is the reason that I am writing this article.

Storytellers, like any other performers, need to examine who they are as artists. Why are they telling stories? With whom do they want to share their stories? Ask yourself the following questions to determine if the Preschool venue is right for you.

### **1. Does your message relate to 3-5 years olds?**

Good should always win over bad, and it must do so in no uncertain terms. Preschoolers need to know that the troll is dead, or that the wolf has been chased out of the forest forever. They need to know that the "bad guy" is not going to be a threat to them. Developmentally, they have not fully separated fantasy from reality and therefore; they

need to be reassured that they are in no danger. Ask a preschool audience what should happen to the bad guy, you might be surprised by what you hear. *I once was working with the story "The Three Billy Goat's Gruff" and decided to let the children decide what should happen to the troll. I asked about 15 groups of children, between the ages of 3 and 5, and they all wanted him to be killed. Some got quite graphic. I was told a shark should eat him, go over a waterfall, be crushed under rocks at the bottom of the ocean, and be washed away by the river until he drowned.*

These children went to Preschools that actively taught peaceful conflict resolution, and the teachers were quite baffled. I was not. I knew what was going on. The troll needed to be dead for the children to be safe. The power of having control over his demise made them feel better. Children have very little power in their lives. Allow them the power of story.

Show, rather than tell as often as you can. Showing how ugly the troll was by squinching up your face and changing your voice is much more effective than describing his contorted features. If a character is scared, look scared; if he is mad, then make a scowl when you talk about the anger. Invite the children to make the faces with you; they will invest more in the story and have a better understanding of the characters.

Names in the story need to be easy to remember, or repeated and practiced often. If the children cannot relate to the characters, they will not attend to the story. You may think the names are clever or beautiful, but if the kids can't remember them, the story will not make sense. Be especially sure the names do not sound alike. It is extremely frustrating to listen to a story and not be sure if the teller is referring to the good sister or the bad sister because of similar names.

Nothing should be too scary, or too loud, or happen without any explanation. I have found that if I want to be loud in order to make a certain character work warning the children in advance works well. I literally break from the story and say, "I'm going to be loud now. Are you ready?" Then I proceed with the story. One would think that it would break the mood and ruin the story, but quite the opposite is true. The children embrace the suspense and become even more invested in the story. Silly is great, but the story must make sense. Silly for silly's sake often proves to be annoying because the children are searching for meaning. Having silly characters is fun, but you need to have a sensible character to balance it out and make everything come out right.

Repetition is good and song even better. If something is crucial to your story, introduce it early. Make sure to repeat it. When the critical point arrives the children will know the information. With preschool audiences, get the kids to join you in the story as often as possible. Set them up for success. You should give the children enough information so they can predict what happens next. There is nothing more satisfying to an audience than telling you what is about to happen.

## ***2. Are you willing to sit on the floor?***

Your audience is on the floor; you should be willing to be there with them. If you are standing up, two things happen. First, all they see are your knees. This is very frustrating for them, and can be uncomfortable, because they have to strain their necks to look up at you. Second, they perceive you as removed from them. You are not one of them, and they can see that you are not willing to join them. You will lose a Preschool audience that does not feel connected to you, which brings me to my next question.

## ***3. When you think "Preschool," do you think "rugrat," "linoleum Lizard" or "ankle biter"?***

Children are very perceptive. They know when a performer is real, and when they are faking it. They may listen to the first story, no matter what, because stories are interesting. However, keeping a preschool audience for a 45-minute show will prove to be difficult if you are only going through the motions. The stories will only carry the show so far, and then it is how you relate to them that will keep a Preschool audience with you.

## ***4. Are you a story crafter?***

Are the words in your story and the pace with which you tell important to you? Preschoolers are not much impressed by plays on words, alliteration, or even rhyming. If a story takes many twists and turns, Preschoolers will become lost and disinterested. A complex plot may be very impressive to an older audience, they can see the skill with which it is woven, but preschoolers just want to get to the end and find out what happens. The more straightforward, the better children understand the story.

It is the experience of the storytelling that Preschoolers enjoy-- the interaction with the storyteller and the sharing of stories back and forth. You must be willing to let the story take a back seat to the experience for a truly wonderful Preschool show.

## ***5. Are you able to keep the thread of your story through multiple interruptions?***

No matter how good your stories are, or how engaging you are, Preschool audiences will interrupt you. In fact, the more they like you, the more they interrupt! Therefore, you can actually judge the success of your performance based on the number of times they blurt something out! Sometimes they tell comments like that "It is my brother's birthday," "I just potty trained," or "My mother is 32."

*I was doing a birthday party, and decided to tell my longest story last, because it was one that they were familiar. After three minutes of telling, they started to eat the big bowl of cheese balls that had been sitting on the table next to the couch. I continued the story, focusing on the one child that sat with rapt attention, and the parents who had been sitting in the back. After the show, the children all approached me to tell me how much fun they had. They told me that the last story was their favorite.*

Eating the cheese balls had nothing to do with not liking the story, they were hungry, and they noticed them. The key is, can you respond to a child's comment (or ignore the sound of crunching cheese balls) and continue with the story without becoming lost or flustered? Not everyone can and that is OK, but if you cannot, then you should reconsider performing for Preschoolers.

**Are you still with me? Great! Preschool audiences may be right for you.  
Here are a few thoughts to keep in mind.**

Children are small in stature and big in heart, mind and soul. Respect their intelligence. If you tell a joke, make sure it is aimed at the children, and not over their heads at the parents. Preschoolers deserve better.

We may think that kids are cute little beings, but they do not think that of themselves. They are growing and learning so rapidly at this age, that they have tangible evidence of it. If you say to a Preschooler, *"Oh, aren't you a cute little boy?"* He will respond, *"I'm not little, I'm big, see?"* He will then stand up to his full height and beam at you, because he knows full well that he is bigger than he was last year, when he was "little." We need to respect their perception that they are important in their world. Do not tell "cute little stories" to Preschoolers, it is insulting. If you find the story insignificant, so will they. Only tell stories that you love and love with the same intensity the 100th time and the 1st time you tell them. When the intensity dulls, find new stories. Preschoolers deserve your best.

Children need to be fully involved. Ask questions often. Let them lead the story in some way. Let them name the main characters or tell you which animals are in the story. Be careful, however, to always set them up for success. Do not open the story up if you only have one way for it to go. Do not ask leading questions, because they are often not on the same train of thought as you are. Only ask questions when you can accept many answers, or when they know the answer because you have already given them the information. Never say "No" to an idea that a child has offered. If it is not what you wanted, thank them for the reply, and ask the question differently, maybe you were unclear. If the answer seems like it came from left field, saying *"Rachel, that is an interesting answer, I never would have thought of it"* will make the child feel good, and will still give you the opportunity to accept a different answer from another child. Remember that a child's perception of the world is different from yours, but no less important. Never take for granted that they see the story the same way you do. Listen to their questions, and watch their faces to make sure that they are following you. If they seem confused, never be afraid to back up a story, and repeat an important part, or clarify something. You and your audience will be glad you did.

Make sure that you get Preschoolers up and moving between each story. Stand up and announce that you have a song or a game and invite them to stand with you. There is no need to announce they are squirming, it will make them feel that they are being reprimanded. Be enthusiastic! Learn lots of songs that have movements. Children love

them, and you will have fun too! Fingerplays are OK, but full body movements will prove invaluable if you are performing a 45-minute show.

With all of that said, do you feel that the Preschool venue is where you belong? I hope so, because Preschool audiences deserve performers who respect them for who they are and what they can teach. They need people who value them as an audience, and truly want to be there. Invest yourself in a Preschool audience, and reap the rewards. And above all else, ENJOY!

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