

STORY-ACTIVITIES TO DO WITH CHILDREN

By Michael Parent

INTRODUCTION: The focus of this workshop is on the relationship of story-related activities --such as listening to stories, reading stories, writing stories, telling stories or reading stories aloud -- to children's "imaging capacity," the ability to form pictures in one's mind. If we think of the imagination as a "mental muscle," then it makes sense that the development of that "muscle" will affect those activities where that muscle is used. Listening, speaking, reading and writing might improve AND become more enjoyable for a child who is given opportunities to develop one of the primary muscles used in those activities – the "imaging muscle" or imagination.

The observation that skills like listening, reading, and writing are often related is not a new one. It would hardly surprise any teacher that the best readers in her/his class are also usually the best writers. Nor would it surprise that same teacher to find exceptions. For instance, a truly advanced reader might have a difficult-to-explain mental block about writing. But if we can at least generally accept the reading-writing connection, might we also then consider other connections?

For instance, perhaps the "activity" of listening to a story told or read aloud can result in the development of a child's "imaging muscle"? (Do you think listening is passive? Not really an "activity?" Try doing it well for more than a few minutes.) If so, then it might be possible, assuming reading skills are adequate, that the same "muscle" or capacity would come into play when the child who has been the listener becomes the reader. Basically, if the child has practiced making better "pictures in the mind" while listening to stories, s/he is likely to make better "pictures" as a reader. Better pictures make the words on the page come alive and lead to more enjoyable reading.

I'd suggest that there are many activities which develop that imaging, picture-making muscle. And that "better pictures" may not only lead to better reading, but to better listening, better writing, and perhaps even to better speaking. Whether we call it the "picture-making muscle," "imaging capacity," or "the imagination," this function of the mind is a cornerstone of creativity, a source of literature, art, music, and enriched living. I'd also hold that it is the key to the possibility that reading, listening and writing can become tantalizing adventures -- even for the "Television Generation."

STORY-RELATED ACTIVITIES

The following activities may help develop the "picture-making muscle." They are arranged somewhat sequentially, beginning with those activities that I'll call "adult-centered" and moving toward those which are "child-centered."

A) Adult-Centered Activities:

1. Grownup READS A STORY to children.

Pick an appropriate time and place. Encourage the children to make their own mental pictures of the settings and characters in the story. Stop reading at various points during the story and ask the children to tell you about some of the pictures they are making with their minds. Try having them close their eyes while you read and see if different or clearer pictures result.

(If you regularly set special time aside to read to children, they will not have to constantly be told that reading is important.)

Grownup TELLS STORY to children.

Much of our daily conversation is narrative. We tell our friends and family what happened at work, at school, at other activities, and even on the way to and from those activities. "What happened?" is one of the basic human questions. There are countless "stories" you can tell to children whether you consider yourself a "storyteller" or not. You can tell them about interesting people you've known, important events in your own life, strange or funny things you've experienced or heard about, interesting or unusual aspects about your own growing up or schooling. Tell them complete or summary versions of stories, articles, or even novels you've read.

Tell them about movies you've seen. When my grandparents went to the movies without their many children, my grandmother would always "tell the movie" upon her return. My mother always said that Grandma's "tellings" were better than the movie itself.

Furthermore, the stories I heard about my Grandma Fournier made me feel as though I really knew her, even though she died years before I was born. If you want children to remember someone (even historical figures), tell them stories about the person.

If you feel comfortable doing so, you can add flavor to your reading aloud or your telling of stories to children by trying different voices for various characters in the tales, by playing with inflections, intonations, and facial expressions. Overdoing this kind of thing in a forced, unnatural way can become a huge distraction. But even a slight change in voice or expression, one that feels natural, comfortable and fun to you, will likely add to the pleasure of your young listeners. This is often a matter of just letting yourself do what you would naturally, comfortably do anyway. (Example: use of "voices" -- bottom of page 3, top of page 4.)

B) Adult AND Child Centered Activities:

When the children are accustomed to listening to your reading and/or telling, there are a variety of activities you can try which will involve them more directly and further stimulate the "imaging muscle."

1. SELECTING STORIES.

Encourage them to bring you stories or books to be read aloud.

Take the children to the library for a "Treasure Hunt" for good books to read aloud. You might even pinpoint specific kinds of "book treasures" that a child, small group of children, or a class could be searching for on each trip. If, for instance, they've enjoyed a story by an author who has written a number of stories or books, the "treasure hunt" could focus on finding more of that author's work.

2. SHARE THE READING.

Easy to do with one or two children, since they can share your copy of the book, and requiring a bit of planning (and extra copies of the book) with a larger group or class. Have children take turns reading the story with you. Your co-readers can be assigned various parts -- some of the children might read the dialogue spoken by specific characters, while others alternate in the reading of the narration. Logistics can be worked out according to the abilities and interests of each group.

3. REFRAIN KEY PHRASES.

Many stories, especially folktales, have key phrases that are repeated, much like a song's chorus, throughout the story. One way of involving a child or whole group of children is to have them ALL say the phrase every time it comes up in the story. The key here is to give the children very clear cues for beginning this bit of participation.

4) PROVIDE SOUND EFFECTS.

As with the key phrases, this allows the children to make an auditory contribution to the pictures in the story and the pictures in their minds. Stories containing strong auditory elements such as wind, rain, crashing of waves, creaking of doors, etc. are an opportunity to exercise the children's imagination AND creativity. Logistics will vary, and you may find the best method for each group through experimentation. For instance, you can put a group of children in charge of making sound effects, reminding them that their job is to support and enhance the story. You might give them a few minutes to read the story ahead of time to plan their sound effects strategy.

5) READ OR TELL A PIECE.

Give the children a taste of a story or book by reading a section, perhaps the beginning, perhaps another piece that stirs the imagination. Then give them time to read the story themselves.

6) YOU READ, THEY PHYSICALIZE.

The logistics of this activity will depend on the number of children participating. There are basic ways to have children physically act out the story and thus enhance their involvement in it -- without having to spend most of your energy, and theirs, in preparation.

The first and most basic method is to simply assign characters for the children to play. You, the grownup, will handle the narration, including dialogue, and the children will be responsible for physically miming the characters' actions as you describe them in your narration.

The second, more involved method is one in which the children "lip-mime" the dialogue as you speak it. They simply move their lips silently as you read or tell their dialogue, creating the impression that their character is actually speaking. Hearing the story read through once before they try this the first time may be helpful. It isn't necessary that the kids perfectly mime every word of their character's dialogue. The "lip-miming" will come off as quite believable if they assume the character's attitude and emotion and just move their lips in a suitably animated fashion.

You, the narrator, can add to the effect by holding the book in front of your mouth when you speak the dialogue. If you are telling the story, you might speak each character's dialogue from a position behind the child playing that character, again keeping your mouth out of the audience's sight. You may find that the children will quickly expand the possibilities of both these methods.

C) Child-Centered Activities:

It is entirely possible that some of the children will soon be ready to assume some of the "grownup roles."

1. Children READ STORIES to Children.

Each child can read to a partner, to a small group, and perhaps some kids will work up to reading to a large group -- all of their classmates, for instance. Preparing to read a story to other children may provide a child with a different kind of perspective on, and a new attention to the story. The activity might also promote a clearer focus on the images in the story and, hopefully, more enjoyment in reading.

When the children get experience of reading aloud and gain confidence, you might encourage them to enliven their reading with the same techniques that you've already used in your reading to them.

Many kids will do this with no prodding from you. You might introduce them to one phase of "enlivening" at a time. For instance, it's great fun to play with different voices for the characters in the stories. A basic way to get children, especially the reluctant ones, started using different character voices is to point out the voices we all have available and already use everyday. There are many, but it might be best to start with the three most basic - our own normal voice, the higher-pitched voice that often emerges when we get excited, and the lower-pitched voice that sometimes comes out of us when our anger begins to boil. If the story's main character is a dog, we might give it our normal voice; if the dog encounters a mouse, that character might get our higher-pitched voice; if they both later cross paths with a rhinoceros, it could be assigned our lower-pitched voice.

2. THEY READ, THEY PHYSICALIZE.

Refer to section B ("Adult & Child Centered...") #6. In this case, one of the children replaces the grownup as narrator. Also, when the children become more familiar with the activity, the grownup(s) can simply divide the children into groups, and the youngsters themselves can decide who among them will be the narrator and who will play each character in the story. The "lip-miming" may provide laughs as well as increased drama.

3. CHILDREN TELL A STORY.

Start by broadening their definition of "story." You can point out that whenever human experience ("What happened?") is put into a narrative framework ("First this..., and then that..., so they decided to..., and they finally...") what we end up with can be called "story." Later, in the process of WRITING stories, it will be good to re-acquaint them with (or remind them of) more precise, "classic" ideas of story structure. For now, you can all splash around in the shallow end of the pool, so to speak.

"You won't believe what happened..." is as much a ritual beginning for every-day stories as "Once upon a time..." is for the "classic" folk or fairy tale. Have the children start simply, with very short stories. Try anecdotes with a theme -- "The Funniest (Strangest, Scariest, etc.) Thing I Ever Saw." Have them start with a partner, or in groups of 3 or 4.

Urge them, above all, to think of the stories they're telling as a series of images, or pictures, that they are pulling out of their memories and describing and bringing to life rather than as a group of words that they have to spout forth in a rigid, never-changing order. The kind of storytelling you're now asking them to do is very much like conversation -- spontaneous, free-flowing, and improvisational. They will learn more structured kinds of storytelling later. You're now introducing them to how much storytelling skill they already have. A focus on images as well as on the joy and natural impulse of "telling what happened" will likely have an effect on their subsequent reading, writing, and speaking.

4. Children CREATE a STORY.

This activity will hopefully tune the children in to their own considerable wealth of images and give them some ideas about ways to organize or structure those images in the form of a story.

This is a good time to introduce them to what we might call the "PIZZA PRINCIPLE." Kids know pizza. And most of them are aware that there are basic ingredients (crust, sauce, cheese) and multiple flavorings (pepperoni, peppers, ham, artichoke hearts, pineapple chunks, etc.) that can go into the making of a pizza. The idea that better ingredients make better pizza is also obvious to most kids. They've probably participated in the creation of a pizza at one time or other. In any case, they also know that the ingredients must be put together in a certain order to produce a pizza. Throwing the sauce and cheese into the oven without the crust might produce something, but you'd hardly call it pizza. The same is true with stories. Human beings understand story structure. Kids have heard and seen many stories.

Events begin ("What happened?"), unfold ("Oh yeah? Then what happened?") and we look for resolution ("So what happened in the end?")

Making children more consciously aware of the general set-up, or "recipe" for stories may help give focus to their ever-so-active and ready-to-go "picture-making-muscle." So here are the basic ingredients for the "pizza" we call "story."

- a) SOMEONE b) SOMEPLACE c) HAS A PROBLEM
- d) THEY TRY, TRY, TRY (Good Tries. Sometimes with Help.)
- e) UNTIL THEY FIND A SOLUTION. (Change in the situation.)

I'd suggest you explain this to the children once, and then do the following exercises to get the kids into the process. Then come back to the recipe when they've actually created some raw ingredients you can work on. PLEASE remind the kids that WRITING IS RE-WRITING, which it takes many tries, even for accomplished writers, to come up with a really good story. The following activities are meant to produce the raw ingredients, to get into the "kitchen" of story and see the amazing variety of "story-pizzas" that are possible.

These activities consist of 1) a "STARTER IMAGE" & 2) a FORMAT. The "STARTER IMAGE" is a picture in our minds that can become the beginning of a story. It can come from any of our five senses. Here's an example from the sense of HEARING.

A sound is introduced in the room, and repeated a few times. (At first by the grownup, later by anyone who has an idea.) Let's say the sound is three notes on the piano, played together at regular intervals a number of times. One child pictures a Mexican village when the notes are played. Perhaps she sees a young girl standing in front of a simple house looking into the distance. The first sentence of a story starting with this image could be "Once, in a small Mexican village, there lived a girl named Maria." And, Ta-Daa! there are the first two ingredients -- the "someone" ingredient and the "someplace" ingredient. After we learn a bit more about Maria, we might find out what the "problem" ingredient is. "Maria did not mind caring for her baby brother while Mama went to market, but it had never taken her mother so long to return, and baby Gregorio wouldn't stop crying."

SENSORY SOURCES FOR STARTER IMAGES: (I'll suggest some sight and sound sources, partly because they are logistically simpler to manage, but I'm sure you will expand on these as well as discover endless possibilities in smell, taste, and touch.

A) SIGHT (Visual Starters)

1) Pictures, Paintings, Drawings.

Make the characters present in these become part of the story, or insert characters into the scenes depicted. "Once there was a man walking along a deserted highway toward snow-capped mountains."

2) Unusual Object.

Bring in, and have kids bring in, an object that is out of the ordinary, something not commonly seen. Before any explanation is given of what the object is or what it is actually used for, have the children start a story in which the object is featured, with whatever use the children imagine or create for it. An elaborately carved African pestle, actually used for grinding grain, could then become a magic stick that can tame wild animals. "A long time ago in the Australian outback, a nine year old girl named Cora was given a special gift."

3) Hats, Clothing, Hand Puppets.

Have children wear unusual hats or clothing you've all brought in. Have them pose as characters. Give the characters a name, then a place to be, and the story is underway. Do the same with hand puppets.

4) Draw and Tell.

Many possibilities. In a school setting, have some kids go to blackboard to draw any scene that comes to them. Have observer-children use drawings as story-starters. Or have ALL the children do a drawing, and then put all the drawings up so that they're easily seen by everyone. Next, have the children start a story from any drawing they choose. In a non-school setting, simplify the exercise to fit the number of children and use whatever drawing materials are at hand

5) Let the Chalk Talk.

A silent exercise. A grownup or child takes chalk (or magic marker), goes to board (or large sheet of paper) and writes a word (noun or verb), turns to face group. Next person who has an idea walks up, takes chalk and makes a sentence from the word that includes the "someone" ingredient. Next person must write a sentence that includes the "someplace" ingredient. For instance:

#1 -- "AARDVARK"

#2 -- ONCE THERE WAS AN AARDVARK NAMED WILBUR.

#3 -- WILBUR'S ARRIVAL AT RECESS STARTLED EVEN THE 8TH GRADERS.

You can then structure the story loosely (see "Round Robin" format below) or more tightly (see "Story Chain" below).

B) SOUND (Audio Starters)

See Introduction of "Starter Image" above for a workable example of an audio starter (Notes played on piano -- Mexican girl).

1) Hit a single note or chord on a musical instrument, repeat a few times, have children jot down images that come to their minds, and use that as the starter for the "someone" or "someplace" ingredient. (Have the kids close their eyes if that seems to help.)

2) Do the same with a variety of sounds.

3) Have children imagine a familiar sound in an unusual setting -- e.g., the sound of a vacuum cleaner in an abandoned, musty mineshaft.

("Our clothes were soaked with drippings from the ceiling of the cave. Jillian's flashlight finally gave out. Then we were startled by a sound we'd heard before, but certainly didn't expect here.")

SIMPLE, BASIC FORMATS.

The two formats suggested here can work for most of the above activities. Once the group has created a starter image (or many) and you are ready to work with that image to create a story, you have a number of choices as to how to proceed (in addition to those already mentioned).

"Round Robin" – simple, and good for involving a large group.

Perhaps best done in a circle, one person takes starter image and begins the story. Set various parameters as you try this a few times. For example, each person can be asked to add only one sentence to the story, then, the next time around, "One word per person" can be the means of getting the story moving around the circle. And the last person in the circle ends the story.

"Story Chain" -- good for small groups (4, 5, or 6 seems to work well).

Same basic idea as Round Robin but, since there are fewer people, they will each likely make a larger contribution to the story. This compressed format also underlines each person's responsibility to introduce the story ingredients in a timely fashion.

If, for instance, persons 1, 2, and 3 of a 4-person-group barely get the story past the "Someone, Someplace" ingredients, the 4th person ends up needing to tell most of the story.

With certain groups, it may be most helpful to assign responsibilities. Assign one child to each element. So, if you decide to have a six person group, you might divide the story into --

#1 SOMEONE	#4 FIRST TRY
#2 SOMEPLACE	#5 SECOND TRY
#3 HAS PROBLEM	#6 SUCCESSFUL TRY (Solution, Change of Situation)

Then each "link" in the story chain has a clear idea of her/his job in the chain.

The five senses are our source of images or mind pictures. These pictures are important for many reasons. They are the beginning of our stories, as well as our songs, paintings, sculptures, inventions and even our great business ideas. As children are encouraged to flex their crucial "picture-making muscle," we tilt the odds toward the possibility that they will more often think of reading, writing, and listening as a pleasure and an adventure rather than as a chore and a bore.

Please do think of ALL OF THE ABOVE as a kind of "Starter Kit." When you draw on your own resources, your own "pictures," and make any of these suggestions work by adapting them to your own situation and special gifts, then you'll really be creating a unique, delicious "pizza" for those children lucky enough to have you in their lives.

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