Storytelling with Puppets, Props, and Playful Tales

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My personal thanks… Mary Jo Huff

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There is no better way to share life than with a group of children and a good story. To each of you who values the art of storytelling and enjoys this book I say, ‘Hand down the past to the present and preserve the present for the future. Tell a story!’
Introduction

In today’s modern world storytelling has become a lost art. Paper and pen, the typewriter, and now the computer have replaced the oral story sharing that was once the way to keep our cultures and heritage alive.

But things are changing. The ancient art of storytelling is being resurrected to once again play an important role within families and as part of school curricula. As an early childhood educator for 24 years and a professional storyteller for 6, I am very happy to see this new interest. And since I believe that everyone is a storyteller, I have written *Storytelling with Puppets, Props and Playful Tales* to motivate you to find the storyteller within yourself and to become creative and comfortable telling stories to young children.

*Storytelling with Puppets, Props and Playful Tales* is appropriate for children of all ages. Working with the ideas found in this book will help you to:

- stimulate imaginations
- develop oral communication skills
- increase auditory discrimination
- strengthen listening and pre-reading skills
- encourage creativity
- improve fine motor skills
- promote visual discrimination
- develop critical thinking skills
- strengthen sequencing skills
- encourage participation
- create a love of books, reading, and, eventually, writing.

The book is divided into three parts: *Puppets and playful tales*, *Props and playful tales*, and *Story corners and playful tales*. Storytelling techniques for the non-professional storyteller will be introduced, as well as how to make and use storytelling puppets and props and how to put together an exciting storytelling corner. Tales and chants to use with the storytelling aids are also included.

*Storytelling with Puppets, Props and Playful Tales* has been written with you in mind. I encourage you to take from this book storytelling ideas that are a part of my life and share them with a child. There are new and exciting story experiences waiting for you just around the corner.
Tips for telling stories

Discover the right story to tell:
- look for stories that are age-appropriate
- find stories that you love and believe in
- check picture books written for different age levels
- collect stories from family, friends, and community
- create your own stories.

Learn the story:
- by reading it several times
- by breaking it into a beginning, middle, and end.

Retell the story many times:
- listen to yourself telling the story
- tape-record your version
- practise telling the story to family and friends.

Speak naturally:
- use your normal speaking voice
- use sound effects, such as unusual voice and story sounds, sparingly.

Use simple, natural gestures:
- add gestures when they add to the story, but don’t overuse them.

Polish the story:
- by telling it, retelling it, and retelling it.

Once you have a story ready to tell, create a story corner in which to tell it. You can set one up with the story corner props described in *Story corners and playful tales*. Then . . . BEGIN!
- make eye contact with your listeners
- introduce the story
- tell the story looking directly into your listeners’ eyes
- encourage your listeners to interact with you
- enjoy and work with your audience’s enthusiasm.
Developing a storytelling curriculum

To make the most of storytelling’s benefits, stories need to be repeated again and again. If you use a literature-based curriculum, you’ll be able to extend a story’s ideas throughout the day. As you do, listen for the children retelling the story in their own special way.

The following is just a sample of how a story can be extended using The farmer’s headache. (see pg 89–90). I encourage you to adapt these possibilities to suit your curriculum.

**Story talk.** Ask the children if they have ever had a headache or if someone they know has complained of a headache. Does noise bother a person with a headache? What remedies are there for a headache? Why did the farmer have a headache?

**Art.** The children can create stick puppets for the characters in the story and add more characters to the plot. Set out scissors, markers, sugar paper, thin card, laminated paper, glue, and ice lolly sticks. Several types of paper provide different textures for the puppets.

**Cooking.** Bake animal-shaped biscuits and let the children retell the story during break time.

**Story corner.** To help children retell the story, provide storytelling materials in a story corner. You can create a farmyard story box by cutting slits in a box top and placing stick puppets in the slits as the story unfolds. Puppets with magnets can be used on a magnetic board and story board characters can be attached to a board with Velcro™ (hook fastening) pieces. Supply the corner with plenty of books about farmers and have paper, pencils, markers, crayons, and scissors available for children to create their own characters for storytelling.

**Maths.** Ask the children to count the animals annoying the farmer. Let each child choose a favourite animal and then graph the results. The children can also predict and then graph which animal made the loudest noise.

**Science.** Play a tape of different animal sounds and let the children identify the animals. Which animal has the loudest sound and which one has the softest? What do the animals eat? Do they live inside or outside the barn? Talk about the different sounds that children hear daily.
Story classifications

Storytelling with puppets and props isn’t limited to just one kind of story. When you develop your storytelling curriculum, be sure to include a good variety of story types:

**Fables**
Short tales that have a moral and communicate a truth about life. The main characters in fables are often animals that act and think like humans.

**Fairy tales**
Stories that often feature fairies, elves, genies, pixies, leprechauns, and other make-believe characters.

**Legends**
Stories that revolve around incidents that are believed to have taken place in a particular culture’s history.

**Folk tales**
Stories that come to us from many parts of the world. These stories reflect a particular country or people’s flavour and preserve cultural traditions.

**Poetry**
Rhyming poetry, in particular Mother Goose rhymes, is a source of excellent stories for young children.

Puppet and prop materials

Most of the materials needed for puppet and prop making are readily available and inexpensive to purchase in craft shops, supermarkets, stationers, school supply catalogues. Some of the items, such as shoe boxes, old gloves or socks and kitchen towel rolls, can be brought in from home. Construction materials for making a portable story wall will cost a bit more, but the wall will be usable for years to come.

One material which is very useful for puppet and prop-making and in the story corner is Velcro™ or hook and loop fastening products (see page 128 for suppliers). To be effective, the soft side, or loop side, must meet the rougher side, or the hook side, of another piece. Be sure when making puppets or props to use with a story board, story can, or other storytelling accessory that the hook fastening on the puppet will adhere to the loop nylon on the story board.

Self-adhesive hook fastening can be cut into small pieces that you store till needed in a plastic bag. Self-adhesive hook fastening can be stuck to art foam, poster board, laminated materials, plastic, wood, felt, and fabric. If the self-adhesive pieces do not stick well, add a drop of quick-bonding glue and press in place. When disengaging puppets or props that have been attached to a surface with hook fastening, place your thumb at the top of the item and gently pull down.
The benefits of storytelling

Puppets
Puppets are a powerful way to reach children – even a shy child will relate to a puppet. Puppets are also multisensory vehicles for storytelling, and create an art and language experience that children can understand. When you find a special puppet, and give it a personality and a home, you’ll be amazed how children interact with it. Use it in your story corner and throughout your curriculum.

Props
Going beyond simply reading a story adds a great deal to the reading/listening experience. Using props:
- creates story awareness
- helps the children to hear and feel the language
- makes each story come alive
- lets the children participate in the story and develop fine motor skills as they manipulate props and puppets
- helps the children learn to retell stories.

Story corners
Storytelling involves cooperation and interaction. This in turn promotes literacy and love of language. Encourage the children to interact during your storytelling. Also encourage parents to tell family and other stories to the children. Experience with interactive storytelling will provide a solid foundation on which to build future reading and writing skills.
Puppets and playful tales
Storytelling with puppets

The puppeteer
Find a story with one or two main characters – this will help since you have only two hands for holding puppets! If a story has many characters, let the children act out the smaller parts.

When you tell the story, give your puppet a special voice and character. Puppets are magical, and the audience should focus on the puppet and not the puppeteer. Find a comfort zone with your puppet and story. Children never get tired of hearing or acting out favourites, such as Goldilocks and the three bears and The three little pigs. Treat the puppets as if they were alive. REMEMBER also, that some children are not used to puppets, so proceed with caution.

Puppet voices
Once you’ve created a puppet, spend some time with it to learn its character. Experiment with your voice to decide what the puppet’s voice should be. Using a lower pitch is easier at the beginning. Work up to a higher pitch to give yourself a three-level range: normal, high and low. Once your puppet has its own voice, you are ready to tell the story. Puppets with open mouths are more expressive.

Puppet etiquette
Puppets should never be allowed to fight. Many times children try to make puppets bite, punch, or hit each other. Give direction on how they are to use their puppets. Set limits for puppet activity and treat the puppets with respect. The children will model your behaviour.

Puppet houses
Give your puppets a place to live. Also be sure puppets have a special place to enter the story. Do not let the audience see you put on a puppet or take one off your hand.

Mascot
Giving the story corner a mascot – complete with name, voice, and personality – will help children relate to puppet storytelling. Keep the mascot puppet in a special house and bring it to life to prepare the children for circle time, story time, or as a transition tool.

Introducing the puppets
Use a soft voice at first and gradually change it as needed in the story. Move the puppet slowly. Touch the puppet gently and let it whisper in your ear or in each child’s ear. Let all the children touch the puppet. Ask the children if they want the puppet to help tell a story. Provide puppets for the children to use on their own.