

How I Became a Storyteller **by Mandy Hart, MA, CCC-SLP**

I have always loved reading stories to children, but I have discovered that telling them is much more rewarding.

When I first started leading drama classes, I was extremely nervous. I didn't want to tell the stories because I was afraid that I would forget parts or leave out important characters or confuse the sequence of the story. Instead of telling them, I would read the stories, paraphrasing the difficult vocabulary to insure that the children understood all the words. The children enjoyed the stories, but there was no spontaneous participation and no "magic."

At the time, because my reading was so animated and because I was able to make a great deal of eye contact in between sentences, I felt that it wouldn't make much of a difference if I read or told the story. Now that I tell stories all the time, I realize that it does make an incredible difference!

Gradually, as my confidence grew and I became more familiar with the stories, I became less and less dependent on reading the written text. This provided me with more freedom and allowed me to be "in the moment" as I shared the story. It's great not having to stick to the exact lines written in a book! I felt more free to move around and I really started having fun acting out the different parts. "Magic" began to happen. The children became more involved in the story and began participating spontaneously—bursting out with what was going to happen next. Heads would turn when I pointed down the road to the giant's castle as I told "Jack and the Beanstalk." I began asking the children questions about the story as I told it. In response, they would act out their answers.

Depending on the children's levels and auditory processing skills, I often begin with stories that are very familiar to them or I use a story that has a significant amount of repetition.

My assistant teacher, Cindy Bowen, often tells the story together with me. I narrate and Cindy and I take on different parts, acting out the story as we go along. We agree upon which roles we will do before class, but we don't rehearse what we are going to do or say. We let it happen spontaneously. The children love this. It excites them. They can't wait for their turn to act out the story.

Many stories have repetitive lines that have rhyme and rhythm. I preserve these. If I need to, I memorize them beforehand to pass them on to the children. Usually, by the end of a session, the children have incidentally learned all the lines and are having fun with them. Making up dialogue once we start acting out the story becomes easier because they have a good start on what each character needs to say. The continuous eye contact I am able to make as a storyteller engages the children and helps them to focus on the story throughout its presentation.

I still usually tell stories with the book open in my hand with the pictures facing the children. Apart from being a good visual aid, especially for children who have attention difficulties or auditory processing problems, the book remains my security blanket. But sometimes, when the children are able to focus without a visual aid, I tell a story on the spur of the moment and keep the book on the bookshelf!

I know that it will be scary for you to move from reading the text to making it up, but take it gradually. Practice with friends and children you feel comfortable with. Be confident that you know your stories. I'm sure you do—you've probably known most of them since you were about five years old!

Telling stories has made teaching creative drama more enjoyable for me and for the children in my classes.

Telling stories is wonderful.

RELAX AND HAVE FUN WITH IT!