

# Storytelling with young children

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Jane Smyth

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## About the author:

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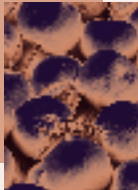
Jane Smyth, BEd (Early Childhood) Dip SKTC, is an Early Childhood Consultant and director of Jane Smyth & Associates, Work and Family Consultants. Jane is interested in all aspects of teaching and parenting and, with a colleague, recently designed and delivered a new professional development series, Teaching for Pleasure, to preschool teachers in the ACT.

Previously a teacher of Child Studies at the Canberra Institute of Technology, Jane has a particular interest in young children and the arts, and has encouraged many adults to develop storytelling skills and to share them with young children.

Currently Jane is enjoying a new role as project manager of At Home With Books, a literacy project for children in foster care in the ACT, which is funded by the Telstra Foundation.

There is no right or wrong  
way to tell a story.  
Perhaps you will forget the  
beginning, or the middle or the  
end ...  
Ask the little ones their happiest  
moments. Ask the teenagers the  
scariest time of their lives ...  
Give the old ones the floor. Go  
all around in the circle ...  
Ask each person. You will see.  
Everyone will be warmed,  
sustained by the circle of stories  
you create together.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1993)



## Storytelling

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Storytelling is a social experience because it connects a teller and a listener.

Telling stories to young children is important because it is a creative and expressive activity which engages their imagination more than any other form of story.

The connection between the teller and the listener encourages the development of relationships – the physical closeness required in storytelling can lead to feelings of comfort and to the formation of bonds. This makes storytelling especially suited to young children and small groups.

The emotional impact of storytelling also means it can be used in many varied situations, for example to soothe a worried child, to calm a child before bedtime, to create delight or to foster a sense of pleasure.

Storytelling has features which make it more sophisticated than everyday exchanges and conversations – its form is more complex, its vocabulary broader. It requires speaking and listening. This makes it an excellent precursor and support for the development of language and literacy.







## Sharing stories

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Stories are passed on in many ways – through song, dance, drama (including puppetry and mime), prose, poetry, painting, drawing, sculpture, film, radio, television, video and the Internet.

The tradition of storytelling is as old as human experience. Once the prime means of passing on knowledge and creating meaning, storytelling is still one of the great mediums of communication for people everywhere. Myths, legends, folk tales, fairy tales, parables, oral histories, anecdotes, jokes and yarns are all part of our oral heritage.

Although we may not realise it, most of us are storytellers. When we are recounting an embarrassing moment or retelling an old story as we remember it, we are using storytelling skills. If we use our voices and bodies to convey meaning and if we successfully engage our listeners so that they imagine the situations and people we describe, we are taking part in the ageless tradition of storytelling.

Whether they are real or imaginary, stories can entertain, inspire and teach. Listeners can be encouraged to imagine all sorts of events and characters in all kinds of probable or unlikely situations. Children can see that stories come from within us and that they are made available to others through sharing. Storytelling extends children's understanding of language and encourages the creation of their own stories.

In storytelling, the 'illustrations' are in the listener's imagination, and so a heightened form of comprehension is required. This has particular value for very young children, as it supports the expansion of knowledge and the development of language skills.

The adult who has storytelling skills and a repertoire of stories will have immediate access to an important source of rich entertainment and pleasure – stories held in the memory are portable, accessible, and unencumbered by the need for props or technology. A storyteller is an asset to the classroom or the dinner table and will have skills for public speaking as well as for long car journeys!

It is possible for adults as well as children to develop the skills to tell stories.

## Storytelling and story reading

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Storytelling and story reading are *not* the same.

- *Storytelling* depends on the *spoken word* to connect the teller and the listener so that a story is created in the imagination.
- *Story reading* depends on a *focus on print*, which includes words and illustrations.

Young children should experience *both* types of story for their own pleasure and enjoyment as well as for language and literacy development.



## Telling children *our* stories

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The best way to help children become good listeners is to make a story work by enjoying it *with* them. When adults recount incidents from their own lives, they often become animated through their own involvement. Stories may not always have a neat plot, lots of action or an exciting conclusion, but they will often connect the teller and the listener and engage the common imagination, so that good times are shared and a bond develops.

Young children enjoy hearing about familiar experiences and they especially enjoy *our* stories such as:

- things we remember about them when *they* were little;
- the time when *we* were little or made a mistake;
- the time we fell off our bicycle/skateboard/horse;
- the lost pet we found;
- details of grandparents' lives when they were young;
- exciting or amusing situations;
- the doings of someone eccentric or a remarkable person who is known to the child; and
- successive stories developed so they form a sequence.

Family members have much to share, and children often respond to previously unknown information. Those who create opportunities to tell stories will be helping children's understanding of the wider world in a way not always possible in the classroom. The teller's reward is to hear 'tell it again'!

Older family members, especially grandparents, are a rich source of stories and are often able to give time to listen, to talk and to tell stories. When the telling is child-centred, the listener will enjoy unhurried attention and the physical closeness of the experience.

Here is a simple story as told by a grandmother to her grandchildren. (She cannot remember how many times she has been asked to tell this one!)



## The Story of the Strange Noises

*I had a very big surprise yesterday morning. I was just going outside to pick up the newspaper and I was walking along the verandah when I heard little noises like this: 'Cheep, cheep, cheep ... cheep, cheep, cheep ... cheep, cheep, cheep ...'*

*So I listened carefully and the noise seemed to come from an old cupboard where we keep flowerpots and a watering can and things for the garden. I bent down and listened: 'Cheep, cheep, cheep ...' So I opened the cupboard door. It was dark in there and I couldn't see anything, just some old gloves, but I could still hear 'Cheep, cheep, cheep ... cheep, cheep, cheep ... cheep, cheep, cheep ...' So I went inside and found my torch and went back to the cupboard, and I opened the door, shone the torch and looked in. Then I discovered what was making the noise! Right in the corner of the cupboard, tucked under a shelf, was a bird's nest and in the nest were four baby birds, all with their mouths opening and closing and all saying, 'Cheep, cheep, cheep ... cheep, cheep, cheep ...'*

*I turned off the torch and closed the cupboard door gently and went away to the other end of the verandah and waited ... Then I saw the mother bird bringing food in her beak for the babies. She went behind the cupboard and when she came out she wasn't carrying any food so, when she had flown off, I went back very quietly and looked behind the cupboard and I saw a hole where the wood was rotten. So that's where she was going in and out to her babies. Now when I hear 'Cheep, cheep, cheep ... cheep, cheep, cheep ...' I'll know it's those hungry babies waiting to be fed. I'll be watching every day because, when those little birds are big enough, they'll learn to fly. One day they'll leave their nest and fly away. Then there'll be no more strange noises on the verandah – no more 'Cheep, cheep, cheep ... cheep, cheep, cheep ...'*

*Every time I open the old cupboard on the verandah I'll think of those little birds and the big surprise they gave me.*





## Telling children *their* stories

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Because they are egocentric, young children enjoy stories about themselves and the people or animals they know. They love stories in which they have roles – especially as central characters (or, better still, as heroes!):

- the day you were born;
- the day Dad fell off the ladder;
- the day you found something precious which had been lost; or
- the day you warned me something was burning in the kitchen, and you were only two years old!

By putting something familiar into story form, we give it a new interpretation. Learning to decipher the world helps children understand and structure the events of their own lives.

### *The Day the Car Broke Down*

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*Well, one day, after we had been to the supermarket, we were in the car going home along the road and you were in the back, nearly asleep, I heard a noise that sounded like this (Make the sound ... ) So I turned off the CD. 'Listen,' I said, 'What's that noise?' You listened too, but we still didn't know. Then I heard it again and it sounded like this ... (Repeat the sound.) 'What **is** that noise?' We listened again but we still didn't know so I kept driving. Then suddenly you sat up and you said ...*

So far, in the above story, the scene is set, the characters are in place, and the problem or conflict is presented. To follow a traditional story pattern, the story will now need a climax and then a resolution. (You can finish this story!)

A story can be rich and fantastic, short and simple or quite complex, but one important purpose is to allow listeners to imagine the story for themselves, using the details they are given.

- Young children enjoy sharing simple stories with lots of expression, sound effects, activity and repetition.
- Older children can appreciate rich, imagined detail and will accept unlikely events and see humour in exaggerated characters.



## Telling children stories that belong to all of us

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We can tell stories that belong to all of us in the same way as they were told to us and we can invite others to tell us *their* stories.

Most of us remember some well-known and loved stories such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, the epics of Monkey and the story of *The Rainbow Serpent* – these and countless other folk tales, fairy tales and fables are known in many cultures and often in different forms.

The purpose of the storyteller is to share and to delight. Care must be taken in choosing for a young audience – not all traditional stories, even though they are old favourites, are suited to very young children. Stories which leave the young listener confused or with unresolved fears do not create increased understanding or the closeness which should come from sharing stories.

One story which has satisfied listeners for thousands of years is *The Story of the Pedlar and his Caps*, sometimes known as *The Pedlar and his Monkeys*.

Beginning with 'Once upon a time' ... it has a central character with one remarkable quality – he sells caps and stores his goods in an unusual way – on his head. The detail is important because we must imagine his caps worn in a colour sequence and balanced on his head as he walks. Here are all the elements of a good story – an interesting character, an unusual (but believable) situation, a refrain (to provide repetition), a dilemma, an amusing and surprising climax, and a satisfying resolution.







## The Story of the Pedlar and his Caps

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*Once upon a time there was a pedlar who sold caps. On top of his head he wore his old brown cap. On top of the brown cap he put his yellow caps. On top of his yellow caps he put his blue caps. On top of his blue caps he put his green caps. On top of his green caps he put his red caps. Then he would go down to a village, walking up one street and down another, calling 'Caps for sale! Caps for sale!'*

*One day nobody wanted a cap – not even a red one. 'Well,' thought the pedlar, 'This will be a good day to just take a rest.' So he walked off to the edge of the village, where he found a large tree. He settled himself down by the tree, balancing all the caps against the trunk of the tree and went sound asleep.*

*He slept for a long time. When he woke up, the first thing he did was to feel for his caps. All he could find was his old brown cap. He looked in front of him. No caps.*

*He looked to the right of him.*

*No caps.*

*He looked to the left of him.*

*No caps.*

*He walked all around behind the tree.*

*He looked up into the tree.*

*There he saw monkeys and every monkey had a cap on.*

*'You monkeys, you,' he shouted, shaking his finger at them, 'you give me back my caps.' But the monkeys only shook their fingers back at him and shouted, 'Tsk, Tsk, Tsk.'*

*'You monkeys, you,' he shouted, shaking the finger of his other hand at them, 'you give me back my caps.' But the monkeys only shook their fingers back and shouted, 'Tsk, tsk, tsk.'*

*'You monkeys, you,' he shouted as he stamped his right foot, 'you give me back my caps.' But the monkeys only answered back, 'Tsk, Tsk, Tsk.'*

*'You monkeys, you,' he pleaded as he stamped his left foot, 'give me back my caps.' But the monkeys only answered back, 'Tsk, Tsk, Tsk.'*

*Then the pedlar was so angry he took off his old brown cap and threw it on the ground.*

*Every monkey took off his cap and threw it on the ground. So the pedlar gathered all his caps together again. On top of his head he put his old brown cap. On top of the brown cap he put his yellow caps. On top of the yellow caps he put his blue caps. On top of the blue caps he put his green caps. And on the very top he put his red caps.*

*Then he went back to the village, up one street and down another, calling, 'Caps for sale! Caps for sale!'*

Author unknown. In Tooze, R. (1960) *Storytelling*. (A number of versions have been published over the years with variations of this traditional folk tale.)





## Indigenous stories

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All groups have their own stories. People with strong oral traditions such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have many marvellous stories which satisfy young children. (Some stories deal with important or sacred information and must not be shared without permission.) *How the birds got their colours* is a simple story, highly descriptive and rich in meaning. It was told during Multicultural Week 1996 at the National Gallery of Australia by Pauline McLeod and is reproduced here with the permission of the teller. The story is told throughout NSW by a number of tribes – this version belongs to the Wiradjuri people.

### How the birds got their colours

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*When the world was young, in the Dreamtime, a rainbow appeared in the sky. This rainbow appeared to take colour from all around it and it grew. It took all the reds, and the blues, the oranges and the greens, and it kept growing and growing. Then right before your very eyes the rainbow exploded and the pieces fell down to the ground.*

*As the pieces fell towards the ground they changed to all the birds that we know today. Some of the birds didn't like the feeling of falling so they cried out in horror: 'Aahh, Aahh, Aahh, Aahhh', just like the crow does today. Other birds thought it was funny and they started to laugh out loud: 'Haaaa, Haaaa, Haaaa', just like the kookaburra. Other birds fell straight down to the ground and started running around, making a noise like this: 'Ummmp, Ummmp, Ummmp', just like the emu, and other birds loved the feeling of flying and they spread their wings and started to sing. And that is how the birds got their colours and voices today, because of that rainbow in the Dreamtime.*

### What makes a story good to tell?

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Stories for young children need a clear introduction, a recognisable theme, a simple, clearly-developed plot with believable characters and quick action. The introduction will help the children to become familiar with the characters. While action is important, elements of sadness require a satisfying resolution for young listeners.

## How shall we tell stories?

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- **There is no one way to tell a story.**

There are as many ways to tell as there are tellers, and the same teller will tell a story differently every time.

*Tip: Choose a story you enjoy and which you believe is suitable and then become involved as you tell it.*

- **A teller, a listener and a tale is all that is required.**

Storytellers often use props (such as puppets, toys or other appealing objects), but they are not essential.

*Tip: If you do use props, use them to gain interest but never let them become more important than your story.*

- **The body should be used expressively.**

Voice, facial expressions (especially eye movements), and body gestures are the tools of the storyteller.

*Tip: Use your eyes to create surprise, wonder, happiness and sadness.*

*Tip: Develop different voices for characters and keep these consistent.*

- **Telling is done with words and silence.**

*Tip: Remember to pause for effect. You may wish your audience to have a moment to think before you continue.*

- **Voice is an essential tool of the teller.**

Tone should reflect the mood of the story. Volume must be considered. (Can the listeners hear you? How well?) Practise to find the right pace and consider varying the pace for meaning and for effect.

- **Eye contact is important.**

*Tip: Try making brief eye contact with every listener while you are telling.*

- **Hand gestures and movements can be used to add meaning.**

*Tip: Practise in front of a mirror and check that excessive hand movements do not detract from the story.*

- **Believe in the story to do its work.**

The story itself holds the elements of interest; the teller's task is to share the story and create enjoyment.

*Tip: Use your body expressively.*



## Learning a story

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There are many different ways to learn stories. Here is one approach:

1. Choose a story which appeals to you and which will work as a told story.
2. Consider your listeners while choosing – will this suit their interests and abilities?
3. Read the story for plot and sequence.
4. Visualise the story, carefully noticing details and patterns of speech.
5. Read the story aloud.
6. Consider the effects you hope for – think about creating mood, arousing compassion, humour, happiness and sadness.
7. Find a ‘voice’ for all the characters.
8. Learn the first and last sentences as well as key phrases but do not memorise word-for-word.
9. Practise telling the story to yourself in your own words (written cues may help).
10. Tell the story often so it remains in your repertoire and keep a copy and/or tape for revision.
11. Develop the story with each performance.

## Storytelling practice

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***When you have found a story, make it your own and share it.***

- Choose your story.
- Learn it.
- Try it out on an audience and notice the responses.
- Seek feedback wherever possible.
- Keep practising and improving your skills.
- Observe other storytellers.
- Make contact with other storytellers for discussion and to share tips.
- Find more stories to tell. (A good source is the Web. Try a search using ‘storytelling’ or ‘folktales’.)
- Enjoy the storytelling experience, share the pleasure and *have fun!*



## Beginning to tell stories

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Good storytelling takes practice, so it is wise to start simply and be prepared to improve gradually. Most novice storytellers soon discover the shared pleasures of storytelling, but not all children immediately accept the lack of stimulating visual images. Some beginning storytellers report children saying, 'Where's the book?' Tellers may be challenged by this – not all children will welcome being expected to listen and to imagine; some will expect materials which help them focus on the story content.

## Materials and props to enhance storytelling

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Children may enjoy a puppet, an image, a toy or an object to introduce a story. A familiar, attractive or loved object (such as a bell or musical instrument) can draw attention and signal the start of a storytelling session. Additional materials are useful to help children settle. If the prop is intended to enhance a story it should not dominate. Having been shown and discussed, it can be set aside for the duration of the story (e.g. 'Now we can put the possum here so he can listen to the story with us'). This is especially important for storytelling sessions when time is allowed later for all children to handle the materials.

Additional materials are essential to some stories – so important that the teller may need enough for all listeners.







## The Story of the Little Red House

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Two props – a red apple and a knife – are required for the telling of this old favourite. (A cutting board is useful but not essential.)

*Once upon a time there was a little boy who had played almost all day. He had played with all his toys and all the games he knew and he could not think of anything else to do. So he went to his mother and asked, 'Mother, what shall I do now?'*

*His mother said, 'I know about a little red house with no doors and no windows and a beautiful star inside. You can find it if you look for it.'*

*So the little boy went outside and there he met a little girl. He said, 'Do you know where there is a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?'*

*The little girl said, 'No, I don't know where there is a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside, but you can ask my daddy. He is a farmer and he knows lots of things. He's down by the barn and maybe he can help you.'* So the little boy went to the farmer down by the barn and said, 'Do you know where there is a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?'

*'No,' said the farmer, 'I don't know, but why don't you ask grandmother? She is in her house up on the hill. She is very wise and knows many things. Maybe she can help you.'*

*So the little boy went up the hill to grandmother's and asked, 'Do you know where there is a little red house with no doors and no windows and a beautiful star inside?'* 'No,' said grandmother, 'I don't know, but you ask the wind, for the wind goes everywhere and I'm sure he can help you.'

*So the little boy went outside and asked the wind, 'Do you know where I can find a little red house with no doors and windows and a star inside?'* And the wind said 'OHHHHOOOOOOOOOOOO!' and it sounded to the little boy as if the wind said 'Come with me.' So the little boy ran after the wind. He ran through the grass and into the orchard and there on the ground he found the little house – the little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside! He picked it up, and it filled both his hands. He ran home to his mother and said, 'Look, Mother! I've found the little red house with no doors and no windows, but I cannot see the star.'

*So this is what his mother did (storyteller cuts the apple). 'Now I see the star!' said the little boy. (Storyteller says to the children) 'Do you?'*

Anonymous. In Machado, J.M. (1990) *Early Childhood Experiences in Language Arts*.



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## Using props

One value of storytelling is its simplicity – anyone can do it! Our bodies are the most important resource. When we tell stories, it is our bodies we use to make a story come alive; we model a practice which children can copy.

Many superb puppets and felt shapes are now available, but true storytelling is not merely a puppet show or a performance with pieces of felt.

The test of a true storyteller is the ability to engage the listeners and to connect listeners to the story. The audience receives information and interprets the teller's expression to build the story in their imagination.

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## Where can storytelling take place?

Creating a suitable space is essential. At home cuddled up close in a chair, at bedtime with pillows, at a child care centre with soft cushions indoors, in the car, in an informal moment on a seat or on grass in the playground, or in an early childhood setting on a rug with others – many places are suitable and the choice will depend on the space available and the number of listeners.

For indoor settings a quiet, comfortable space with soft surfaces is ideal. Outdoor settings are suitable if noise can be reduced and distractions removed.

When sharing stories with young children, it is important to have additional space as small, informal groups may quickly grow in size.

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## Where do we find stories to tell?

There are thousands of stories to share with young children. Look in libraries, bookshops, archives, resource centres. Connect with other tellers and share stories.

Storytellers give tips about improvising and creating your own stories on [www.storytell.com.au/artnscreat.html](http://www.storytell.com.au/artnscreat.html)

You can join an email list such as [storytellers@yahoogroups.com](mailto:storytellers@yahoogroups.com)

Children are fortunate if they are told stories and led to characters and scenes they could not have experienced in books or on screens. After a well-told story, images remain. When children supply their own visual version of the action, they project themselves into the minds and bodies of their characters. This is a creative activity – they feel for other people and, for a short time, they become these other people so that their experience is widened and their understanding is increased.

Through storytelling, adults are able to share pleasures with young children, perpetuate a valuable tradition, foster the imagination of their listeners, and create closeness between peoples of all ages.





## Acknowledgement

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Pauline McLeod of Bapu, Traditional Aboriginal Dance Company of the ACT, for permission to use *How the birds got their colours*, a story told at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra during Multicultural Week, February 17 - 23, 1996.

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Estes, C. P. (1993). *The Gift of Story* New York: Ballantine Books.

Machado, J. M. (1990). *Early Childhood Experiences in Language Arts USA*: Delmar Publishers Inc.

Tooze, R. (1960). *Storytelling*. USA: Prentice Hall.

## Recommended reading

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Mc Kay, H. & Dudley, B. (1996) *About Storytelling*. Sydney: Hale and Iremonger.

## Useful websites/contacts

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[www.australianstorytelling.org.au](http://www.australianstorytelling.org.au)

[www.storytell.com.au/artnscreat.html](http://www.storytell.com.au/artnscreat.html)

[storytellers@yahoogroups.com](mailto:storytellers@yahoogroups.com)



## Storytelling with young children

'The tradition of storytelling is as old as human experience. Once the prime means of passing on knowledge and creating meaning, storytelling is still one of the great mediums of communication for people everywhere.'

In *Storytelling with young children*, Jane Smyth updates her earlier work on this topic and clearly explains the skills and methods needed to engage young children. Through storytelling, the child's imagination is stimulated, their knowledge enhanced and language skills extended.

A terrific resource for all educators and carers who wish to develop their storytelling capacities.

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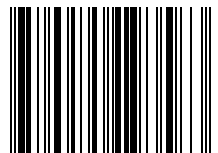
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