

The — *greatest* — SHOW ON earth

Roll up, roll up, cries **Wendy Bowkett**, and introduce your children to the excitement, colour and educational possibilities of the circus!

The idea for a circus and clowns theme began when planning for a special Red Nose Day at our nursery. We'd kept noses from a previous year in a dressing up box with other accessories – ties, spectacle frames, wigs, scarves, bows and ribbons. The 'goodies' in this box clearly had the makings of a fun time. Put on a hat or a wig, a false nose and a pair of oversized glasses and you become a different person, one very likely to make others laugh.

I put on a red curly wig and large framed spectacles with an attached nose, and pretended to juggle. I sang an adaptation of a number rhyme about soldiers standing in a row as I dropped one ball after another. Then I was an acrobat balancing, singing step by step in a circus ring and, thinking it was a very clever act, I called for another little acrobat. And so it continued and became the beginnings of our circus topic.

1. **Animals Matter** (Knowledge and understanding of the world)

■ Introduce environmental concepts. The children were entertained by the camels and elephants performing at the circus, but we need to encourage them to think about how circus animals are trained and how cramped and unsuitable their living conditions may be. Many countries have already restricted the use of non-domestic animals in circuses and are promoting animal-free circuses.

What do the children think about this?
■ Develop the children's observational skills by introducing opposites. Clowns come in all shapes and sizes: tall and short, fat and thin, and the hoops and cars they use go over and under, through and around.

■ Play spot the difference by face-painting two children's faces with slight variations – just like real clowns, no two are the same!



A circus had been to our town a few months before and many children had seen camels, elephants and horses in the field around the Big Top. Children who had visited the circus had also seen performing dogs along with clowns, acrobats, jugglers and unicyclists, so the idea was familiar and appealed to them. One of the rooms was ideal to convert into a Big Top with strips of coloured crepe paper hung from string supports in the middle of the room out towards the top of notice boards. Red, yellow and blue were the chosen colours and with chairs and cushions arranged in a semi-circle underneath, leaving plenty of space for the performers, the circus had come to nursery!

Can parents help?

Parents often have accessories that can be used within a theme like this. One dad donated a child's top hat that he'd been given when he was five years old. This was ideal for the ringmaster. Imagine how important you would feel wearing it, shouting "Step right up, step right up! Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, the greatest show on Earth is about to begin!" We provided a chalkboard on which the children wrote or attached their name card to ensure no-one missed a turn at drawing in the crowds! Another dad gave us a pair of oversized shoes that we could decorate for our clowns to wear.

2. Tickets please (Personal, social and emotional development)

- A circus with a box office will provide children ideal opportunities to sort tickets, brochures and programmes. A cash register and pictorial prices alongside a conventional price list will encourage children's understanding of coinage and its value.

- Make a number frieze of clown faces to encourage counting and ordinal numbering.

- A height chart depicting a clown on stilts adds a welcoming entrance to any Big Top and can be used for comparing and measuring. Tape measures adhered to strips of card make quick, simple stilts.

- Deciding on how many performers there'll be in each show and how long each can be in the arena will encourage problem-solving and develop children's reasoning.



3. Having a ball (Personal development)

- One of the activities that created the most fun was everyone learning to juggle. Some of us couldn't even catch a ball let alone throw it in the right direction, so imagine the scene as we tried to manipulate two or three sponge balls at a time?
- Somersaults became a regular 'exercise' in the nursery, with any spare carpeted space used to practise tumbling techniques!
- A length of rope stretched across the floor became a very difficult tightrope routine. Balancing along its length was often tricky and not as easy as it looked.
- We were lucky enough to have a balance bar and not only were tightrope walkers found balancing their way along it but several pirates were seen walking the plank too!
- If possible, borrow a pair of flippers so that children can experience how it feels to walk in extra large shoes. Is it easier to balance on one leg when wearing longer shoes? (Nb this activity needs close supervision and guidance because of the potential dangers)
- Our clowns also had competitions on the trampette. How many bounces in a minute? Who could bounce the longest, the highest and make the most unusual position in the air?



Sensory balls pictured available from tts-group.co.uk

4. Send in the clowns (Creative development)

- Painting a clown face on an outline which can be later made into a mask was fun, and as each picture was different they could be used for comparing and contrasting.
- As soon as *Entry of the Gladiators* music was played, the audience started flocking into the Big Top and quickly got into the spirit of the circus, cheering, clapping and laughing. We had borrowed a CD of circus music from the library, but a quick browse on the internet will provide you with a whole variety of tunes to accompany each act.
- Providing hats, wigs, masks, feathers and fabric will enable children to design and make their own outfits ready for their performance.
- Creating circus posters prior to the event will encourage participation or planning ahead.
- One of our outdoor cars with a wonky door, opening and closing of its own accord, was used by several of our clowns, adding to their audience appeal!
- Provide refreshments during the interval. Coloured cardboard lollipops, cotton wool ice cream and drinks were purchased before the second half of the performance began.

5. Splashing out (Personal, social and emotional development)

- During our discussions, we talked about the dangers, nervousness and excitement of performing in front of other people. How would it feel to swing above the crowds, drop a juggling ball or lose your balance on a tightrope? We also touched on how some clowns make us feel uncomfortable, maybe frightened and why that might be – a difficult subject for under-fives.
- The children were fascinated to learn that each clown is unique in face and name, and that their make-up can take over an hour to be completed.
- Try it wearing some of the accessories yourself and see what happens. Some wigs and hats help to reflect the character and personality of the artiste you or the children are portraying – some bossy, some sad, others confident or funny.
- One of the most popular clown performances used plastic flowers, the children pretending to squirt water into the audience. Buckets were filled with blue crepe paper streamers and the contents thrown into the crowd caused fun too.

6. Making introductions (Communication, language and literacy)

- Hand a child a microphone and you're often halfway to a performance. Not only did the ringmaster use it to bring in the crowds and announce the first performer, but many of our 'acts' liked to introduce the next artiste themselves!
- Introducing each act will develop children's self-esteem, confidence and vocabulary. One 'ringmaster' introduced his friend dressed as a juggler with the words, "And now ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together while I introduce the funniest man I know. His gags are second to none, but he can't juggle."
- Print out clown images from the internet and give each one a name. Giving a reason for the name develops children's thinking skills. Adapt well-known rhymes and songs to incorporate the different performers in a circus. For weeks after this theme finished, we still sang I'm a little 'acrobat' instead of 'teapot'.
- Use storybooks to enhance the theme. Some of the simple outlines in the books make very effective and colourful displays or eye-catching window art in any pre-school setting. Use rhymed words in sentences – the clown falls down, she flies high touching the sky, an acrobat wearing a hat – to develop children's listening skills and understanding of sounds.