



# Telling tales

There are better ways to help children engage with a story than merely reading it from a book, says **Wendy Bowkett...**

One of my favourite activities within a preschool setting is storytelling. Stories have so much to offer: they develop listening and communication skills, improve concentration and memory, bring experiences alive, create a sense of wonder and help sequence events. They can also provide information, widen vocabulary and make important links between the spoken and written word, as well as stimulating an interest and enjoyment of books. But the emphasis here is on the telling – I'm not talking about reading from a book...

When I tell a story, I love to see all the children in front of me, watching their reactions and being able to interact with them instantly. With my hands 'free' I can use gesture and body movements to convey many more feelings. Eye contact, facial expressions and tone of voice come more to the fore when children are looking at you and not pictures, giving everyone a completely different experience.

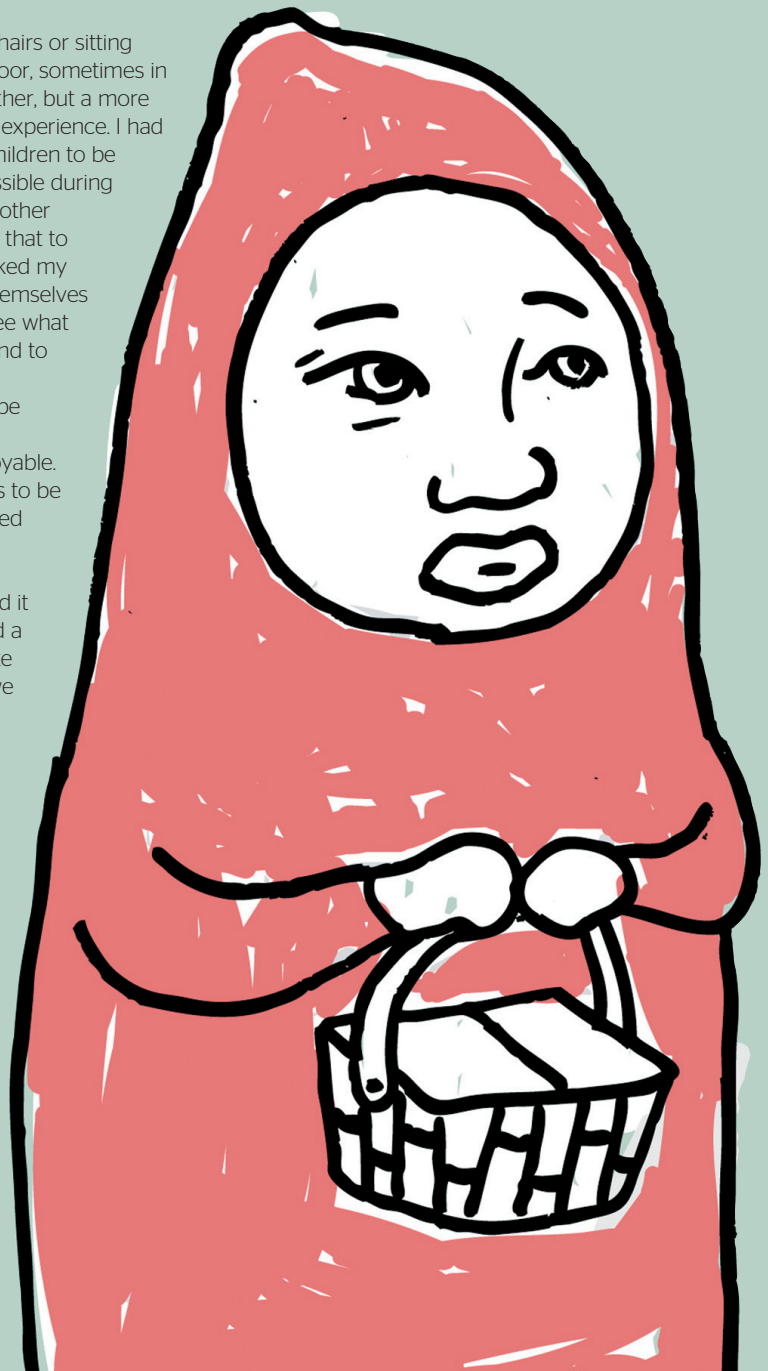
When I worked with deaf children, using sign language, a picture book was usually placed to the side of me on a book rack, leaving my hands free to sign. The children were able to see my expressions, the movement of my mouth and any gestures I made, all of which helped to develop their understanding of the story. I continued this practice wherever I worked, whatever the children's abilities, often forgetting the book was there, and I've always felt that a story should be more than just sitting in front of a group of children and reading straight from the page.

## The story corner

After setting up my own nursery, I introduced colleagues to the idea of a story corner for circle time: not the usual semi-

circle of children on chairs or sitting cross-legged on the floor, sometimes in rows behind one another, but a more relaxing and pleasant experience. I had always encouraged children to be as comfortable as possible during story or circle time in other settings, and I wanted that to continue, but first I asked my nursery staff to put themselves in a child's shoes to see what circle time feels like, and to find out whether improvements could be made to make the experience more enjoyable.

So, we all took turns to be the reader or pretended to be a child in the group, and although one or two of us found it quite daunting to read a story with a team-mate sitting in front of us, we realised why some children were less attentive or more restless during this quieter time. We noticed, especially when sitting on the floor, how a draught or cold spot would make us want to shuffle or wriggle around to keep warm. If we sat cross-legged for long, our muscles stiffened and stretching our arms or legs disturbed children next to or in front





## about the author

Wendy Bowkett has worked in early years settings for over 30 years, and ran her own private day nursery for 15 years. As well as contributing to *Teach Nursery*, she has written a number of books for those working with 0-5-year-olds.

of us. The book 'got in the way' of seeing the adult's face, and if we sat further back we couldn't see the pictures clearly. We began to fidget and become distracted, looking around, losing concentration and disturbing others.

At the next staff meeting, after discussing our reactions to these experiences, we realised that if we were uncomfortable on a hard floor or chair, sitting cross-legged throughout a story or not having enough room to stretch, then perhaps that was the experience of the children in our group too. Our story sessions, it seemed, would benefit from a few changes, and we agreed that comfort and warmth play a huge part in the enjoyment of a story or quiet time. As a result, the story corner became home to soft mats, small mattresses, carpet squares, beanbags and cushions to ensure that children who wanted to lie down or stretch legs could do so without encroaching on another child's space. I have always felt this very important, as often a preschool child's principal experience of stories is at home with an adult, cuddled up on a sofa or lying in bed at bedtime, sitting in a comfy chair or lying on the floor in front of the TV. So is it appropriate to replace this cosiness with sitting in a circle on hard chairs or floors and expect children to enjoy the story they are about to hear?

## Telling contributions

Once we had our story corner ready, colleagues agreed to try storytelling, rather than reading - a frightening thought for many but worth trying! Having mainly read from books before, each member of staff devised their own strategies to help them tell a story with confidence. They knew that whenever a familiar story was read the children would add their own experiences, and knew when part of the tale was missing or the sequence of events was different; it followed, therefore, that telling a familiar tale would elicit the same response while also providing useful opportunities to observe children's listening, understanding and memory of the story.

One staff member kept the book close at hand before starting, her 'comfort blanket'.

Another member of staff wrote down a few key words, which he put in his pocket as a reminder, although this prompt was rarely needed. One colleague showed the children the book of the story, read the title and then said she was going to put the book down and asked whether they would like her to start telling the story. They loved the idea, especially when she forgot bits or deliberately told things in the wrong order - "just checking that you're all listening!" Another team member would sing rhymes to begin her story time.

## Artistic licence

If you don't have much experience of telling stories, fairy tales are a great place to start. They're popular, simple to remember and feature plenty of repetition and familiar phrases for children to join in with. Most importantly, though, always choose a story that you like, enjoy and know well.

*The Three Billy Goats Gruff* is one of my favourites. I often choose three children of varying sizes to be the billy goats to help enact the story, and wooden claves or coconut shells can be played by other children as an accompaniment to the goats

trip-trapping over the bridge. The troll is such a popular character that it is often played by three different children, whose voices become incredibly deep!

I like playing with the idea of telling the tale but altering the characters in it. So, the big bad wolf pops out from under the bridge, huffing and puffing but is unable to blow the goats off the bridge and ends up in the river - three times. When I first tried this, the children told me I was telling the story wrong: "That's not right! The troll jumps out. The wolf frightens pigs not goats." But when I told them that the troll had gone on holiday and had asked the wolf to protect his bridge from the rascally goats, one or two thought that it was a clever plan of the troll.

The possibilities are endless. Perhaps Goldilocks could change places with Little Red Riding Hood, or the three little pigs could leave their porridge and go for a walk in the woods while the troll eats their breakfast? Once the children became familiar with changes to known stories, their expectation and excitement increased as to how a story would unfold. If the story wasn't altered, they added their own ideas and suggestions to help me along. Try it, and have fun!

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