

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

Creating Young Storytellers

Storytelling and Listening

Introduce children early to the time-honored practice of storytelling. It's a wonderful way for them to learn the basic structure of stories and to gain and practice new vocabulary. This practice guide suggests ways to promote a toddler's ability to enjoy storytelling and related activities.

What is the practice?

Toddlers particularly love to hear stories about themselves or other family members. This gives them many chances to learn to listen and tell stories with and about the important people in their lives. By beginning with this focus of interest, toddlers become active participants in the development, telling, and retelling of stories.



What does the practice look like?

Repeated storytelling occurs any time a toddler repeats a story she heard from another person or a story jointly made up by the toddler and an adult. A toddler telling about what happened when playing with a friend or retelling a story about a family trip to the beach are both examples of *repeated storytelling*. Repeated storytelling expands a toddler's knowledge of how to put thoughts in order to form a story. It also increases the number of words they know how to use and their enjoyment of the art of storytelling.

How do you do the practice?

Many opportunities to take part in storytelling and repeated storytelling happen every day. They might occur when children are busy with favorite toys, engaged in a book, or looking out a window. Try some of these ideas for prompting storytelling:

- Start by identifying topics that are interesting to the child. If a toddler is interested in trains or has a favorite pet, make up a story about one of those interests. The toddler is more likely to participate in the storytelling moment if she finds the topic interesting. Remember that toddlers often like to hear stories about themselves (the day they were born, for example) or about the important adults in their lives.
- Choose times and places for storytelling that are most likely to make it easiest for the toddler to take part. A place where you can hear the toddler and she can easily hear you is helpful. Though the attention span of a toddler is not long, it is helpful to have some time when there will be few interruptions.
- Start the story, but quickly encourage the child to add information to the story. If this is a made-up story, ask the toddler to contribute details to the story (for example, "What's the dog's name?"). If it is about a real person or event, ask the toddler for some information she knows about the person or event.
- Retell the same story during different storytelling sessions. With each retelling, ask the toddler to supply more and more of the story, until she is able to tell the basic story on her own.
- If the child has trouble adding information to develop or retell a story, provide two possible choices and let her decide how to continue. "Does Papa Bear say his bed is too soft or too hard?"
- Smiling and responding to your toddler's efforts will keep her interested in the story.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is the toddler repeating more stories?
- Does the toddler seem to enjoy telling stories or helping you tell them?
- Has the toddler tried to tell new stories when asked?

Take a look at more learning to tell stories

Toddlers Telling Stories

Jacqueline, an early childhood specialist, likes to help classroom teachers encourage toddlers to become storytellers. She is talking with a teacher in a classroom of 2-year-olds about ways to include these very young children in storytelling. It is spring in this rural farming community where most young children like the big farm machines. Jacqueline and the teacher decided that toy farm machines and farm animals would be good props to use with a small group of four to five children. The teacher introduces the toy "props," making sure the children know what they are. She then weaves a story by asking them questions about the farm animals and equipment so the children become the storytellers.



Interest-Focused Stories

Ava's mom looks forward to the arrival of her daughter's home visitor because it is a chance to get helpful information. She heard on TV that it was important to tell stories to little children, but she doesn't know how since Ava is only 20 months old. The home visitor starts by helping Ava's mom think of what Ava enjoys. Mom mentions that Ava's favorite toys are her baby doll and her stuffed dog. The home visitor suggests that Mom start making up a story with Ava about her favorite toys. Mom asks questions about the story that Ava can answer to keep her engaged—questions such as "Where is the baby's hand?" and "Do you want the doggie to go for a walk?" Ava and Mom create and tell the story together.

Signs and Visual Cues

Delia is a 2-year-old child with a hearing impairment. Her mother uses signs with Delia to help her learn how to communicate. The home visitor supporting Delia encourages Delia's mom to use props or pictures when telling a story, and to build the story around signs Delia knows like *Mom*, *Dad*, *red*, *dog*, and *cookie*. Using a stuffed dog and a real cookie, Delia's mom draws her daughter into the storytelling by asking her questions with signs and gestures. Together they tell and sign a short story about the dog eating Delia's cookie.

