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## Teaching Strategies

With their understanding of the components of literacy, teachers plan ways to support children's learning with appropriate teaching strategies. The strategies described in this chapter outline six essential early literacy teaching methods appropriate for use in the preschool classroom.

Each strategy is a way of offering coherent, skills-based instruction that meets children's needs and interests. Sometimes the strategies are part of planned activities for particular times of the day. For example, a teacher might plan to read aloud as an end-of-the-day routine. At other times, teachers use the strategies more spontaneously to extend learning by interacting with children in interest areas. For example, a teacher might facilitate a conversation children are having in the Dramatic Play Area in a way that introduces more complex language and new vocabulary.



# Storytelling

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Storytelling, one of the oldest art forms, is a common form of entertainment and a way cultures pass their beliefs, values, and traditions from one generation to the next. It helps children learn social skills, such as how to relate to and get along with others. Oral storytelling supports children's literacy learning, knowledge and understanding of the world, and social/emotional well-being.

Storytelling encourages children's emotional involvement with literature. When a story is well-told, interactive, and fun, children view **literacy as a source of enjoyment**. They are filled with the wonder and excitement of stories and are motivated to become storytellers, as well as listeners and readers.

Storytelling helps children build **vocabulary and language** skills by showing them that speech carries messages. Through storytelling, children gain experience with a broad range of language: new vocabulary words, unfamiliar expressions, rhymes, dialogue, and the structure of extended narrative. Storytelling also teaches children that they can communicate their thoughts, ideas, and feelings not only with words, but with body language, gestures, and facial expressions. Adult storytelling encourages children to act out and retell stories, which promotes their oral language and cognitive development.

Many stories use rhymes, tongue twisters, and other forms of word play. When children hear patterns repeated again and again by the storyteller, and when they actively participate in the storytelling or retell these stories on their own, they gain **phonological awareness**.

As children hear many stories, they develop understandings about story structure that contribute to their understanding of **books**. They learn that the setting, characters, and theme of a story are introduced in the beginning of a story. They also learn that storytellers recount key events (middle) and end the story by stating a moral or with another conclusion (ending). Storytelling introduces children to various types of narrative, such as folktales, fairy tales, and fables, and it enhances children's later reading skills by inspiring them to read stories they have heard. It also supports their ability to communicate their own experiences. Telling a simple story is a skill essential for children's later independent writing; children who are able to compose a story to tell are more likely able to dictate or write a story.

Certain storytelling strategies contribute to children’s understanding and **knowledge of print**. For example, using a story clothesline (on which pictures of the major events of the story are clipped to the clothesline, from the children’s left to the children’s right) helps children understand the left-to-right progression that is used in text.

Listening to oral stories enhances children’s **comprehension**. In order to find meaning, they must focus on the description of the setting, the characters and their problems, and the sequence of story events. The interactions that occur between the storyteller and the listener before, during, and after the telling of a story are key to greater comprehension.

### **How to Begin**

Storytelling is possible for everyone. It requires no equipment, only the story and the imaginations of the storyteller and listeners. It is sometimes more challenging than reading because you do not have the language and illustrations of a book to support your narration, but storytelling can be learned. These ideas will help you get started:

- Think of yourself as a storyteller.
- Select appropriate stories.
- Prepare for storytelling experiences.

#### **Thinking of Yourself as a Storyteller**

Think about a time when you used a phrase such as *Once I... or Remember when...?* as you began to recount an experience that was important to you. You were introducing a story. As human beings, we have a natural desire to express ourselves, share our life stories with others, and hear their stories. Even very young children eagerly tell their families, teachers, and friends about the latest events and experiences in their lives.

#### **Selecting Appropriate Stories**

Like reading aloud, storytelling requires planning. By knowing the needs, interests, and abilities of the children in your class, you will be able to select appropriate stories, modify their length and the pace at which they are told, and determine ways for children actively to participate.

Finding stories that are well-suited to the age and interests of the children in your class is important. There are many kinds of stories to choose from, such as folktales, fairy tales, tall tales, and trickster stories. With young children, you may wish to begin with a folktale that has simple story elements.

Recall the stories that captured your attention as a young child and identify the characteristics that made them appealing to you. It is likely that they had one or more of the following qualities:

- **a simple plot** (an easy to follow sequence of events), e.g., *The Enormous Turnip* by Kathy Parkinson
- **repetitive words or phrases**, e.g., *The Gingerbread Boy* by Paul Galdone
- **predictable or cumulative storylines**, e.g., *I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* by Simms Taback
- **strong or interesting characters**, e.g., *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* illustrated by Ellen Appleby
- **interesting, entertaining, or humorous situations**, e.g., *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock* by Eric A. Kimmel
- **action or suspense**, e.g., *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak
- **an exciting or satisfying conclusion**, e.g., *Henny Penny* by Paul Galdone
- **a clear message or moral**, e.g., *The Little Red Hen* by Lucinda McQueen or *The Tortoise and the Hare* by Aesop

Your enthusiasm for a story can be contagious. The stories that are meaningful to you will likely become the children's favorites, and they will attempt to retell them on their own.

### **Preparing for Storytelling**

Oral storytelling requires interaction between the teller and listeners. When children listen to stories without the use of a book, they must use their imaginations differently from when illustrations are provided. As a storyteller, you must think about ways to capture and hold the children's attention. Your childhood memories of listening to stories can be helpful. Think of your feelings during the telling of a story, the storyteller's portrayal of the characters, or the ways in which the storyteller involved you in the telling. Keep in mind that the storytelling experience will be more valuable for the children if the story and the storyteller are engaging.

Once you have chosen a story, spend time with it. It may take a number of tellings to find an effective way to tell it to children. The following tips will help you prepare for storytelling.

### **Think about the details of the story characters.**

Develop a clear image of the characters and use many and varied words to describe each one. Think about how the characters might speak, sound, move, and act. Practice portraying the characters.

### **Develop a strong beginning.**

Begin the story with an opening phrase such as *Once upon a time...* or *Long, long ago, in a land far away...* to signal to the children that they are leaving reality and entering the world of make-believe. As you begin, establish the mood of the story and introduce the characters, setting, and theme. Stimulate the children's senses by describing sights, sounds, tastes, and smells in detail.

### **Learn the story.**

Most traditional stories are plot-driven, that is, they are based upon a particular sequence of events. If you understand the plot, you can tell the story simply by recounting what happens in your own words; it is not necessary to memorize the words as someone else has told it. After you have learned the plot, let your imagination work. Picture each event in your mind and think about the language—the descriptive words and phrases—the children will understand. Then tell the story out loud to yourself in your own words. Decide when to lower your voice, when to pause for effect, and when to speak faster. Create different versions of the story and practice telling it to different listeners. Telling slightly different versions of a story is part of a long oral tradition. Of course, if the telling is enlivened by repetitive lines or phrases, you will want to use them.

### **Develop an ending.**

Tales traditionally end with a sentence that lets the children know the story is over and that brings them back to reality. Some familiar endings include, *That's a true story!* and, *They all lived happily ever after.*

## **Telling Stories With Children**

Before storytelling, make sure that classroom distractions are minimized, that the area is comfortable enough for children to relax, and that they can be near you. Place any props you are using where you can reach them easily.

The following chart provides an example of how two teachers, Ms. Tory and Mr. Alvarez, captured their children's attention with an oral story. The children had recently been to a petting farm where they handled and fed many animals. They seemed to be especially interested in the goats, so Ms. Tory thought it was a perfect time to tell the Norwegian folktale *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. The notes on the right explain the teachers' thinking about why they are saying and doing these things.

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Ms. Tory places a globe, a toy troll, and a tone block in the Library Area. Then she invites the children to join her for a story.

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Collects the props and materials in advance.

**Ms. Tory:** *Today Mr. Alvarez and I are going to tell you a story. Since I won't be reading the story from a book and showing you the pictures, you will have to listen carefully to imagine what is happening in the story. Is everyone comfortable and ready to listen and think? (Children nod their heads, yes.)*

Prepares the children for listening and makes sure they are comfortable.

*The story is an old Norwegian folktale called The Three Billy Goats Gruff. A folktale is a story that people have told over and over and over again. In fact, this story has been told so many times we really aren't sure who the author is.*

Introduces the story and gives a little background information about the type of story, its author, and its source.

*When I was a little girl, my dad used to tell me stories that his dad told him. Now I tell the same stories to my son. Do any of your parents or grandparents tell you stories from long ago that someone else told them?*

Fosters children's understanding by drawing on their personal experiences.

Asks for personal contributions.

**Carlos:** *My great grandmother tells me stories about when she was a little girl in Mexico, before she came to America.*

**Ms. Tory:** *Well, this story was first told in another country called Norway. Norway is far, far away, even farther away than Mexico. See? Here is where we live, and here is Norway. (She uses a globe to show the children where Norway is in relation to their homes. Children comment on how far away Norway seems to be. Ms. Tory settles the children and then continues.)*

Gives background information about the story's origin.

Makes a connection between the setting of the story and where the children live.

*Does anyone know what a billy goat is?*

Asks a question that will help children learn about the main characters.

**Susie:** *A goat. Like the ones we saw at the farm.*

**Ms. Tory:** *It is a goat. But what do you think a billy goat is?*

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**Juwan:** *I have a friend named Billy.*

**Ms. Tory:** *Is your friend a boy?* (Juwan nods his head, yes.) *That might give you a hint.* (Ms. Tory pauses and waits for a child to respond. She continues.) *Even though some girls are named Billie, a billy goat is a male, or boy, goat. So this is a story about three boy goats. Let's begin.*

Explains or defines unfamiliar words to build children's vocabulary and understanding.

Allows time for children to answer and proceeds when they do not.

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**Ms. Tory:** *Once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived three billy goats. And the last name of all three billy goats was Gruff.*

Opens the story with a statement that lets children know that they are entering an imaginary world.

**Ms. Tory:** *The youngest billy goat Gruff was very, very small. He had two little horns just starting to show on the top of his head and he spoke in a soft voice.* (Each time Ms. Tory introduces a new character, she changes the pitch of her voice and uses her hands to show the size of the goats and its horns.)

Uses her voice and gestures to help children imagine the characters.

*The second billy goat Gruff was a middle-sized goat. He had horns, too, and he had a few whiskers on his chin.*

*The last and oldest was great big billy goat Gruff. He was HUGE! He had long, pointed horns, almost like spears; big hooves; and a beard. He made his two brothers feel safe because he was so big and strong.*

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**Ben:** *My brother Broderick is strong!*

**Ms. Tory:** *Does anyone remember what billy goats like to eat?*

Asks a question to help children connect to the story.

**Zach:** *Grass and seeds.*

**Carlos:** *And sometimes old shoes and stuff like that!*

**Ms. Tory:** *Well, these billy goats loved to eat sweet, green, juicy grass more than anything else. One day when they were grazing on grass near their home, one of them noticed a lush hillside not too far away. The grass looked green and tasty, and, when the breeze blew, the goats could smell its sweet smell. They just had to have it, so they decided to go up to the hillside to get some of the grass.*

*But...(Ms. Tory pauses and looks in the children's eyes.) there was a problem. You see, to get to the other hillside, the billy goats had to cross a bridge. Now the bridge wasn't the problem, but what lived under the bridge was a BIG problem.*

*What do you think lived under the bridge?*

**Children:** *A monster!*

**Ms. Tory:** (Ms. Tory lowers her voice, moves a little closer to the children, and speaks slowly and deliberately.) *Under the bridge lived a TROLL. (Ms. Tory takes out a toy troll and shows it to the children.) This is a toy troll. But the troll that lived under the bridge was BIG and UGLY and VERY, VERY MEAN!*

*His eyes were as big as saucers, so he could spot a goat a mile away. And his nose was as long as a poker, which meant he could smell a goat a mile away. (Mr. Alvarez stands nearby and makes gestures to indicate the size and nature of the troll.)*

**Kate:** *He would scare me! He's so big and mean and ugly!*

**Ben:** *Yeah! I bet he gets the billy goats when they cross the bridge. Huh, Ms. Tory?*

Makes eye contact with the children and maintains it throughout the telling. This helps to hold the children's attention and provides information about whether and how storytelling strategies should be modified.

Uses her voice to emphasize story details.

Uses simple, natural gestures.

Encourages children to comment during the storytelling.

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**Ms. Tory:** *Well, the first billy goat to cross the bridge was the small billy goat Gruff. He went trip-trap, trip-trap, trip-trap over the bridge. (Ms. Tory uses the tone block to make faint, fast, trotting hoof sounds.)*

Uses props, as appropriate, to enhance storytelling.

*About that time the troll roars in the meanest, loudest voice you've ever heard.*

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**Mr. Alvarez:** *Who's that tripping over my bridge? (Clenches his fist and uses a deep, roaring voice.)*

Uses movement and a dramatic voice.

**Ms. Tory:** (Responds in a quivering, high-pitched voice.) *It is I, the tiniest billy goat Gruff. I'm going to the hillside to make myself fat.*

**Mr. Alvarez:** *I'm coming to gobble you up!*

**Ms. Tory:** (Again in a tiny, pleading voice.) *Oh, no! Please don't take me. I'm much too little. Wait for my brother, the middle-size billy goat Gruff. He's much bigger and meatier than I am.*

**Mr. Alvarez:** *Very well. Be off with you!*

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**Susie:** *That billy goat tricked you! (Points to Mr. Alvarez.)*

**Mr. Alvarez:** *You're right. I may need some help! (Invites children to participate.) Let me hear you say, in your meanest troll voices, "Now I'm coming to gobble you up!" (Children respond.)*

Involves children in the telling.

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The story continues with Ms. Tory playing the part of each billy goat and Mr. Alvarez playing the troll. To represent the difference in the size and strength of each goat, she plays the tone block more and more slowly, loudly, and deliberately, and she alters the pitch, tone, and volume of her voice.

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**Ms. Tory:** *Pretty soon, all three billy goats were on the hillside eating that sweet, juicy, green grass. They ate so much that they got really, really fat and they could hardly make it home. In fact, they are probably still fat. And so—snip, snap, snout—this tale’s told out.*

Concludes the story with a sentence that will signal the end of the story and the return to reality.

*What did you think about that story?*

Asks an open-ended question.

**Children:** *It was good! That big billy goat wasn’t afraid of the troll.*

*At first I was scared! But I’m not now.*

**Ms. Tory:** *It can be a little scary. Do you think that story really happened or do you think it was make-believe?*

Acknowledges child’s feeling and asks a question to help children distinguish between real and make-believe.

**Carlos:** *Make-believe, because goats don’t really talk.*

**Ben:** *And there is no such thing as a troll.*

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Ms. Tory affirms their responses and continues the discussion. She asks the children if they would like to hear the story again. She and Mr. Alvarez make plans to create puppets and a backdrop to use next time. After that, they will invite the children to retell the story using the props, and they will add the props to the Library Area for the children to use at choice time.

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Ms. Tory is a skilled storyteller, so she used minimal props to tell the story. However, it is appropriate to use props, or visual aids, with young children as long as they do not distract children from listening to the story. A few simple props can be useful in holding young children’s attention during storytelling, and placing them in the Library Area encourages children to tell and retell stories on their own. A discussion of various storytelling props and techniques can be found in the section “Story Retelling.”

## Tips to Share With Families

- Make up stories with your child as the main character.
- Tell stories about when you and other family members were children.
- Tell stories about your child when he or she was younger.
- Tell stories where the main character does what your child did that day. The main character does not have to be a child.
- Invite family members to share stories about their life experiences.
- Use familiar storytelling phrases, such as, *Once upon a time...*, *They lived happily ever after*, *In a far-away land...*, and *The end*.
- Change your voice to portray different characters.
- Involve your child by having him add sound effects or motions.
- Involve your child by encouraging her to repeat a refrain or supply a missing word.
- Take turns telling parts of the story.
- Use props, such as an old hat, puppets, household items (e.g., a pot for a helmet, a piece of fabric for a cape).
- Laugh and have fun.