Photograph by Eric Torgerson

Starting with Stories: Building a Sense of Community

by Linda Torgerson

Last week my preschoolers and I shared a new picture book at circle time. After reading Oram and Varley's *Badger's Bring Something Party*, I asked the children to tell me what they would bring to such a party. Later, in the midst of dramatic play, Daniel handed me a bulging envelope and said, "It's an invitation to my party." I asked, "Is it a 'bring something' party?" He responded, "Yes, and it's right now, so hurry." I chose some tiny paper hearts for my contribution and joined the ten children who had gathered around the playroom climber. One child presented a teapot and cups from our housekeeping area, another a plastic squid and crab to provide our snack. Others offered dress-up clothes and flowers.

I know there will be other "bring something" parties. I've set out my tape recorder so we'll have music at the next one. Good stories can evoke rich dramatic play that is repeated in many variations whether adults set the stage or it happens spontaneously.

Because of my own attraction to children's literature, I rely on books and stories to build a sense of belonging. When the whole group is gathered at circle time, I often read books and tell stories to promote the feeling of community. Once we have enjoyed the same stories, we have a base for shared dialogue, play, and reenactment. We belong to a community where stories matter.

I start the year with books that invite participation by each child. When phrases are easily remembered, children take them from storytime to playtime, especially if adults use these phrases in their playful interactions. Some of my favorite lines to chant come from old favorites such as *Millions of Cats*, *The Little Red Hen*, *Caps for Sale*, and *Where the Wild Things Are*. Our repertoire of common language connects us in our conversation and play. It may be, as Holdaway (1979) suggests, that chant in combination with other dramatic modes satisfies a primitive need for expression and social bonding.

Once I've read "Snip, snap, snout. This tale's told out" at the close of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, I add these words at the end of other tales. It doesn't take long before children chant them spontaneously whenever we finish a story. Eventually, the expression makes it way to other settings. A child may end her snack with "Snip,

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snap, snout. This snack's told out." "Hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats" becomes "hundreds of bears, thousands of bears" or "millions and billions and trillions of blocks." In the dress-up area, I might hear "Caps. Caps for sale. Fifty cents a cap." "Oh, no, please don't go. We'll eat you up we love you so" becomes a familiar farewell. Everyone knows what it means when the teacher calls "La-la-la-la-lei" at the end of our time in the park, because we've read Flack's *The Story of Ping* together. Chants from the books we've shared spread throughout the program and help define who we are.

Books that invite participation also lead to reenactment. This is more likely if the story has been repeated or read in several versions. It may be spontaneously reenacted, for example, during dramatic play. Teale and Martinez (1988) suggest that it helps if a teacher reads a book at least three times to make it likely that children will reenact the book on their own. Although many children know fairy tales from their homes, they are more likely to reenact them in your setting if you have read them there so they are all familiar with the same script.

In 1954, Dorothy White noticed, while watching her daughter and a friend act out a fairly tale, how useful it was among small children to know a core of stories upon which they could build games and share a common heritage with one another. *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and Burningham's *Mr. Gumpy's Outing* can easily be reenacted if the caregiver reads the stories and then recognizes bits of the script in the children's play.

Some stories work well for more formal reenactment, where children take turns with roles, and the caregiver acts as "stage manager" or narrator. *The Mitten*, Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, Lester's *Tacky the Penguin*, and Kimmel's *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock* have been requested year after year by the groups I work with. The aim is not to achieve a polished production, but an opportunity to make the story come alive. I gather props ahead of time and carefully plan out each new reenactment. I want children to return to these stories in their play; so when we finish with them, I place dress-ups and props conspicuously both inside the playroom and outside, so they will suggest story-based play in the future.

Children come to my program with many common experiences: they have watched the same TV shows, seen the same videos, and attended the same movies. Many own look-alike toy replicas and matching clothes based on these shows. Although I do not prohibit media-inspired play, I do not encourage it, either. I concede that commercial characters such as Pocohontas and Power Rangers may create bonds among the children, but I advocate reading books that promote very different values from the ones underlying the popular culture.

Yet, I don't advocate reading stories that preach about well-mannered children doing kind deeds. Characters like Anderson's Stina, Ardizzone's Tim, Steig's Irene, Potter's Peter, Henkes' Sophie, and Van Leeuwen's Amanda and Oliver Pig provide models for the kind of caring interacting I look for among the children in my program. The adventures in these books were not contrived to sell books or movies or toys, but spring from genuine human experience and emotion.

Several years ago, I began sharing stories at circle time based on episodes of the children's own dramatic play. At first, I scribbled notes during the play and then used them to create a story. Later, I began telling "the story of their play" at circle time without using a written script. There are advantages to both techniques. When I've taken notes, I include the children's exact words, which they always recognize with delight. The advantage of telling rather than reading the story is that eye contact

can be constant. When I am describing the pirates who deserted their ship to go on a camping trip, I can look right at the children who participated. Their faces light up. Whether I tell or read them the story of their play, their joyful responses are "That's us!" or "That's our camping trip!" or "I was the one who built the fire, remember?"

Later, I realized the possibility of using stories to acknowledge the child who is ignored or rejected by peers. The child who is not attractive or popular can be recognized as an important member of the group during circle time, avoiding unwelcome adult interruption during free play.

Here is an excerpt from a story I once told about a child who was unappreciated by his peers:

A boy approached the Lego players and decided that he would join in. No one welcomed him. He watched for a while and then asked for a Lego horse and rider. They were generously given to him. He did not build like the others had. He was a player. He made the horse come alive!

Because the children had not acknowledged him during their Lego play, I made sure that he had unmistakable importance in the story of their play.

The children in my program spend most of their time in activities of their own choosing, so their experiences vary markedly. Since I believe that being a member of this class matters to each child, it is my responsibility to balance each child's needs and interests with those of the whole group. Both are necessary for the health of the child and the society. If we want our children to become adults who contribute to the well-being of their communities, then our programs for even the youngest children must reflect this virtue.

Throughout the day, during free play, meals, naps, and clean-up times, we can acknowledge each child's contribution to the community. I believe adults working with

Circle Time Strategies

- As children approach the group area, I ask them to choose a book from one of the bookshelves to look at until everyone arrives. An adult may read to a small group or a child may pour over a book alone. I note which books are chosen, while making suggestions to some children of books I think they would enjoy.
- When I am ready to read to the whole group, I show them where the book will be held and ask them to sit somewhere on the rug where they can see the pictures. If children complain about not being able to see, I tell them that it is their job to find a place where they can see. If a child can't manage it alone, one of the adults offers help.
- I remind children to sit with their feet in front of them, so they won't kneel and block someone else's vision. Other children sometimes suggest "crisscross applesauce," or sitting cross-legged. This expression has been passed down from school-aged siblings.
- I ask other adults to sit at the back of the group so that children who enjoy laps and adult contact aren't all clustered around me. I might ask an adult to sit by a child who has difficulty focusing at story time. If the children are crowded, I ask everyone to take one giant scoot backwards.
- If it is taking a long time to get settled, I sometimes start reading the story in my most dramatic voice. Their other concerns diminish once the story is underway.
- If children interrupt the story with unrelated comments, I ask them to save them until we are done. After finishing, I pause to savor the story. Then, if no one makes a comment, I return to the children who interrupted and express my appreciation that they could wait until the whole story was read.
- I usually choose books with illustrations that can be clearly seen from the back of the group. Occasionally, I read a book with details that may not be visible to everyone in the group. Then I remind them that this book will be on the bookshelf for several weeks and encourage them to study the pictures more closely later.
- Prominently displayed books encourage children to return to them again and again. Whenever I have read aloud a book like Burningham's *Avocado Baby* or Lester's *Tacky the Penguin*, I watch on subsequent days to see how often children return to study the pictures, "read" the text, or ask an adult to reread it.

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children should ask: "How am I fostering a sense of belonging among the children I work with?" My own answer to this question includes reading and telling stories that matter to me and to the children. Stories from circle time weave a web of common themes and shared joys that connects all of us.

Once not long ago, a boy decided to make invitations for his next party. Because it was a bring-something party, everyone scurried to find something to contribute. Each one did not want to be the "One Who Didn't Bring Anything To A Bring Something Party Except His Muddy Self."

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We want to include thanks to Bonnie Blagojevic and the Early Childhood Education On Line subscribers who participated in the online discussion of circle time. If you would like more information on this discussion group, please contact LISTSERVE@MAINE.MAINE.EDU. When the body of the message comes up, type ECEOL-L(your full name). The list serve software will automatically come on your screen.