Stories are basic to human life. In books, films and newspapers, in day-to-day conversation and on Facebook, they are present all around us. Where would we be without them? Stories tell us about ourselves, people elsewhere and in the long distant past. They take us into worlds of magic far away from our ordinary lives. Sad or hilarious, serious or light-hearted, they give us a wider view. They are vital for all children, and especially so in their early years. Here are some of the many things stories can do:

- Entertain and inform.
- Develop empathy for other people’s situations.
- Extend vocabulary and patterns of language.

WAYS OF TELLING STORIES

Reading from books is the commonest way of telling stories to young children. Picture books offer a wealth of interest with wonderful characters, varied vocabulary and fascinating situations.

For all young children, they are engaging. For children in nurseries or schools who don’t have books at home, they provide a way into learning that they wouldn’t otherwise have.

The other way of delivering stories – and it is the focus of this piece – is by telling them ‘out of our mouth’. This age-old method is so much less common these days, it should probably be listed as a dying art. Even informally in families, it often doesn’t occur. Too little time? Too much else to do? What a shame! When people try it, they are...
usually astounded. Suddenly the children are more engaged, they are responding, they are asking questions.

**STORYTELLING WITHOUT A BOOK**

Perhaps it is not surprising that doing a story without the book is less common. For many adults, the idea is daunting. Here are some of the most common fears:
- Forgetting the story in mid-flow.
- Not engaging the children without pictures to show.
- Voice too boring, too quiet or too strongly accented.
- Other adults overhearing.

Not having the book as prop is at the heart of the problem. How will you remember the story? I’ll say more about this later. Enough to say now is that you are not learning a script. You are going to tell the story in your own words. Your descriptions can be your own. In your version, Goldilocks may have short fair hair, not long golden locks. That’s fine. You are now creating the pictures.

Another key problem is our worries about ourselves. For one young woman who attended a storytelling course for parents I was running, her particular worry was that her voice was too deep. Yet when she started doing stories in her local school, she discovered such a response that she soon started training to be a teacher.

Getting over our fears is important. It is important for the sake of the children. For if you don’t take the plunge, who will? Unfortunately, too many of us fear that other adults overhearing us will think we are rubbish. My answer is to think of ways to get those other adults involved. Colleagues or parents, it is important that, in any nursery or school, everyone gets on board the storytelling boat. As in the olden days when people sat round fires, storytelling should feel like a community thing that all can share.

**PREPARING A STORY**

When preparing a story for telling:
- Choose a story you like.
- Sit down or go for a walk to think the story through.
- Decide how to introduce it (with a prop?).
- Think about sounds or actions where children can participate.
- Decide on a good way to bring the story to a close.

Whether telling or reading, it is important to prepare your story before you do it with the children. Telling or reading, many of the same rules apply. First is to choose a story you like. For telling, it should probably be one of those familiar traditional titles such as The Gingerbread Man or Three Billy Goats Gruff. Then, without referring to the book, start thinking over the story in your own mind, seeing how much you remember, which bits you have forgotten. Any parts you simply cannot bring to mind, you can always go back to the book to check. But once you know the basic plot, stories usually make sense of themselves. The events connect.

Preparing is also about how to make the story attractive to your particular audience. For instance, you may wish to look out a prop or props that will engage the children’s attention before you even begin. You should also pay some thought to the characters and events. Are there different kinds of voice you could use for the various characters? Are
there things that happen when sound effects would be interesting?

Choosing and using props
People are sometimes too ambitious with props, putting together a whole collection of things they then try to bring out at appropriate points in the story. With practice and skill, this can work. However, it can also be distracting both for the listeners and the teller. Better to keep it simple, use your prop to capture interest before you begin and then put it aside, maybe producing it again at the end for a recap on the story you have told.

So, what about one single bean for Jack and the Beanstalk? Children will be fascinated as you hold it up and turn it round in your fingers. Or what about a glove-puppet frog for Tiddalik? Of course, the glove-puppet will be all the more effective if you have also practised your frog noises beforehand.

Preparing for participation
Another important aspect of preparing involves spotting opportunities for listeners to participate. For example, if the story is to involve climbing, you could all make the actions of climbing, hands reaching upwards one by one. Or if there is trumpet-playing, you could raise your imaginary trumpets and make the appropriate toot-toot sounds. If there is someone like Little Red Riding Hood going through a forest, you might prepare yourself to quietly ask, ‘I wonder what might be in the forest?’ Then if no-one responds, you might offer a suggestion to start things off: ‘Some big, tall trees? A little bird?’ Children’s ideas will help fill out whatever scene you are preparing to paint.

Starting the session
Young children are wriggly. They like to be active. It is important to get them ready before you begin your story. With early years children, I always start with a chant. You could create one of your own. My usual one is extremely simple:

> Storytime, it’s storytime.  
> Sh! Listen! What’s going on?  
> Storytime, it’s storytime.  
> Are you ready to begin?

I repeat this chant over and over, tapping my knee in time with the words, raising my hand to my ear when I get to the word ‘Listen’, opening my arms in a questioning way for ‘What’s going on?’ I continue repeating the chant with its accompanying actions until the majority of my audience have joined in.

Telling your story
It’s useful to think in advance about the following:

- How to start.
- Dealing with forgetting.
- Telling the story with feeling.
- Enabling the children to respond.

When you are ready to begin your

A fun rhyme
Higglety, pigglety, pop!  
The dog has eaten the mop;  
The pig’s in a hurry,  
The cat’s in a flurry,  
Higglety, pigglety, pop!

A tale for telling
One day, Sun and Wind had a competition. Sun said, ‘See that woman walking along in that warm coat? I bet I can make her take her coat off quicker than you can.’

Wind said, ‘Hmmm! You think you can win that bet, do you? Watch this!’

Then Wind huffed and puffed and huffed and puffed. But the woman did not take off her coat. Instead, she did up the buttons and pulled her coat more tightly around her.

‘My turn now,’ said Sun. Soon after Sun starting shining, the woman undid her coat buttons and very soon after that, she took off her coat and put it over her arm.

I think Sun won that bet, don’t you?

A personal anecdote
One day, telling stories to a class of young children in a public library, my session involved much clapping and tapping. After it was over, a young mother appeared from behind a stack of shelves. She had a baby in her arms, and she said, ‘All the time, he’s been tapping and clapping along with the children.’ She was clearly delighted. So was I.
story, you don't need to name it as you would probably do when using a book. Instead, you can say something quite simple such as ‘This is a story about a girl’, or ‘Here’s a story that’s got a monster in it’. After that, the classic start is: ‘Once upon a time.’ Or you can expand: ‘Once upon a time a long time ago…’ Or even, ‘Once upon a time, but not long ago…’

Then tell the story in your own words. If you are nervous about forgetting, you can always have prepared a set of cards with memory-joggers on them. Then if you do forget, bring these out and take a look. Or, to give yourself time, ask your audience what they think is going to happen.

Putting emotion into your telling is good. If you were telling your friends about something amazing that happened to you, you wouldn't do it in a dry, monotonous way; you would do it with feeling. It should be the same in telling a story to children. No need to overdo it. Certainly don't ever scream or do anything that might frighten your audience. But make the story come alive and, above all, enjoy it. And when it is over, be prepared for a moment's quiet as the story sinks in.

After the story, it can be a very good idea to give your listeners the chance to respond. ‘Anyone want to say something about the story?’ You might get responses that surprise you. You might get nothing. But over time, opening out your stories in this way will surely be productive, especially if you invite the children to draw, retell or act out the story when it is finished.

Managing your audience
Successful storytelling can and should take account of children's individual needs. For instance, it is important to see that a child with autism, problems with sight or hearing loss is seated in an appropriate place. A boy or girl who tries to dominate is often best given a place near you. A group that always likes to sit together but then gets noisy is best gently separated.

It is also important to keep an open mind about how individual children will respond. Often in my experience, a child generally regarded as difficult will respond in a positive way to stories if given half a chance. During the story or after, he or she may start talking for the first time or show unexpected imagination, thus surprising the adults that work with him or her. Stories can be when people change, revealing new aspects of themselves.

Place and time
How and where your story group is seated is important. Depending on numbers, I find that getting them to sit in two or three wide curving lines works best. Squashing them into a tight space is hopeless. It means you can't communicate easily with the ones at the back. Nor can they easily see you.

Right next to a bookshelf is also less than helpful. It poses an unnecessary hardship for you if children are grabbing books and thrusting them at you while you're doing your story. It is also best if the surrounding space is not cluttered. If it is, cover up such things with a colourful cloth.

Managing your audience also means looking at the times when you normally do your stories. At the end of a session is not a
good idea. Better at that point is to have a short session for rhymes or singing. With storytime earlier in the session, the children will be more responsive because they are less tired. Also at that point, parents will not be arriving to collect them, thus inevitably distracting their attention.

SHARING THE CONFIDENCE

Often in a school or nursery, there is one staff member who has become known as a brilliant storyteller. This is great in itself but it can also be a big disadvantage if it stops other people from trying. Developing a team approach involves developing ways of sharing the storytelling and making it fun for all. Here are some things that can happen:

■ Two people taking on the idea of telling a story together.
■ Holding a storytelling workshop for the whole team.
■ Sharing knowledge of which stories work best.
■ Creating a common store of good props.
■ Trying out various sound-effects.

There are so many different methods of sharing the storytelling. For instance, when two people regularly work together, one can act as cheerleader, encouraging children to join in actions and sounds when the other is telling the story. Or they can work out a way of both participating in any dialogue that occurs in the story.

Another way of story-sharing is by holding a workshop (or several) for the whole team. This is especially useful for any new staff members. Perhaps each participant can bring along a favourite picture-book and then be given the chance to say what makes it work well. Or perhaps a workshop can share ideas of what are good stories for telling without the book.

Or maybe, at the workshop, people can get into pairs where each tells a personal story along a particular theme – for example, a time when you lost something precious. Storytelling games can also be played, for instance passing round animal noises.

Of course, most people will feel shy and embarrassed at the start of such a session. But the best way to relax and get over embarrassment is to realise that we all have stories and we all have some experience of telling them.

INVOLVING PARENTS

Whatever the way that stories are delivered at an early years centre, it is very important to involve the parents. Too often, young children go home with some bit of a story and the parent has no idea where it has come from or what it means.

Of course, sharing knowledge of stories and rhymes that are being told to the children at nursery or school involves more effort on the part of staff. Yet this can be hugely productive. It shares the realisation of how important it is to develop language and imagination. It involves parents who might otherwise feel isolated from what is going on with their child. It can help them to involve themselves with what is going on, perhaps bringing in different languages and new storytelling skills.

TO CONCLUDE

Storytelling develops language and imagination. It increases social awareness. It introduces the fact that there are different ways of dealing with problems. It lets us realise that it is worth thinking about how we react to situations in our lives. For all these reasons, stories are vital. But above all, stories are enjoyable.

We can hold them in our imaginations. We can share them with others. It is not for nothing that they are among humanity’s oldest creations.