

Especially for practitioners working with toddlers! 

Creating Young Storytellers

Storytelling and Listening

Introduce children early to the time-honored practice of storytelling. It is a great 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 above all 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 important people in their lives. By starting 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 someone else or a story jointly made up by the toddler and an adult. A toddler might retell a story about what happened when playing with a friend. Retelling a story about a family trip to the beach is another example 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 picking out topics that are interesting to the child. If a toddler is interested in trains or 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 or about the important adults in their lives. The story of the day the child was born is a favorite of many children.
- Choose times and places for storytelling that are most likely to make it easy for the toddler to take part. A place where you can hear the toddler and she can easily hear you is helpful. The attention span of a toddler is not long. However, it helps 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 add details to the story. For instance, you could ask the toddler, "What's the dog's name?" The story may be about a real person or event. If so, 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. Keep on doing this until she is able to tell the basic story on her own.
- The child might have trouble adding his ideas to develop or retell a story. Try providing two possible choices and let him decide how to continue. "Does Papa Bear say his bed is too soft or too hard?"
- Smile and respond to the toddler's efforts to 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

Jacque-Lynn, 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 very young children in storytelling. It is spring in this rural farming community where most young children like the big farm machines. Jacque-Lynn and the teacher decided that toy farm machines and animals would be good to use with a small group of children. The teacher introduces the toy “props,” making sure the children know what they are. She then begins to weave a story with them. The teacher pauses and asks the children questions about the farm animals and equipment so the children become the storytellers.



Interest-Focused Stories

Ava’s mom looks forward to when her daughter’s home visitor comes. Their meetings are a great chance to get helpful information. Ava’s mom heard on TV that it was important to tell stories to little children. However, she does not 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. She might ask, “Where is the baby’s hand?” or “Do you want the doggie to go for a walk?” Ava and Mom create and tell the story together.

Signs and Visual Cues

Dawn is a 2-year-old child who is hearing impaired. Her mother uses signs with Dawn to help her learn how to communicate. The home visitor who supports Dawn encourages Dawn’s mom to use props or pictures when telling a story. She suggests building the story around signs Dawn knows like Mom, Dad, red, dog, and cookie. Using a stuffed dog and a real cookie, Dawn’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 Dawn’s cookie.

