

## STORYMAKING WITH CHILDREN

Storytelling is a basic part of human existence. Our lives are stories. One of the mind's functions is to take the chaotic stimuli the universe chucks at us, and turn them, by selection and re-arrangement, into a narrative. *(Please feel at liberty to disagree with this, or any other of my opinions).*

Stories told can fulfil all kinds of functions. They can instruct, entertain, challenge, console. Not so long ago in Britain, stories and storytellers were relatively commonplace.

Hector Urquhart, a gamekeeper, writing around the middle of the 19th century about his boyhood in Ross-shire in the Scottish Highlands, remembered:

*'When I was a boy, it was the custom for the young people to assemble together on the long winter nights to hear the old people recite the tales or sgeulachd, which they learned from their fathers before them. In these days tailors and shoemakers went from house to house, making our clothes and shoes... I knew an old tailor who used to tell a new tale every night during his stay in the village; and another, an old shoemaker, who, with his large stock of stories about ghosts and fairies, used to frighten us so much that we scarcely dared pass the neighbouring churchyard on our way home.'*

Of course, by concentrating on some details and omitting others, Hector Urquhart makes a story from his story about storytelling. There must surely have been some people who groaned when the storyteller came to the village ("Oh no! Not the one about Jack and the Beanstalk again!") But he does paint a vivid picture of how a good storyteller can captivate an audience by the power of words alone.

There are several exercises designed to help people tell stories in public. A good one is to take a favourite picture book and tell the story in your own words, using the pictures as an anchor and guide.

But here I want to pass on some of the ways I've made stories with and for young children, often using songwriting ideas and musical instruments. Some of them may work better for you than others, and you will have ideas and techniques that are entirely your own.

Here are some of the ideas that work for me:

- To repeat once more, keep it simple and start from what you and the children know.
- An episodic structure can be very useful. Take a central character or characters (I often use the Mummy and the Baby Turtles, represented as ocarina flutes) and lead them through a few encounters and adventures. If there's a beginning and an ending, the middle can be as short or long as you like.

- If you have a good supply of, say, puppets, noise-makers and instruments of different shapes and sizes, they may suggest a story. You could provide a simple structure, and the children could take it in turns to fill in the narrative by choosing from whatever is on display.
- If you're stuck for ideas, borrow a basic structure, or a whole plot from a favourite storybook.
- Use plenty of formulaic repetition, so that the children can join in. When I tell about the night the Mummy Turtle couldn't get to sleep, each time a new disturbance takes place, we all shout, "Oi Frogs!" – or whoever's causing the disturbance this time – "Stop that noise! WE'RE trying to get some SLEEP!"
- Ask the children lots of questions about the story. You can incorporate their answers into the narrative ("And what do you think the wolf said to the hare when he stepped on his foot?"). It takes the pressure off you and can sometimes throw up unexpected answers. (Recently I asked some primary children what the sound of the singing bowl reminded them of. A boy with autism replied that it was like an organ pipe. And he was right. But no-one had previously made that connection. We were all too busy looking at the shape of the bowl.)
- Use whatever opportunities are available for participation. Get the children to give names to the characters in a story. Choose simple song structures so that they can contribute to the composition. Let them play the instruments whenever possible.

Finally, here is a rough guide to the story of the night the Mummy Turtle couldn't get to sleep, to show how I would put some of the above ideas into action. Because the story is episodic it can fit any available amount of time.

*Begin by showing the children the two ocarinas, larger and smaller, and asking what they are. If the children decide they are tortoises rather than turtles, then that's what they become for the length of the story.*

Mummy Turtle has had a really long day, and she's very tired.  
*Perhaps ask what she might have been doing to make her so exhausted.*

She goes to put the baby to bed. She lies down beside him and sings a special song to help him go to sleep.

*Ask what we call a song that helps us go to sleep.  
Play a simple tune on the big turtle ocarina.*

Before she's even finished singing the lullaby, she and the baby are both asleep. But it's not long before she's woken up by a terrible racket outside. Down by the river, the frogs are having a party!  
*Introduce the wooden croaking frogs. Begin with the smallest, the baby, then ask what relation the bigger ones are. Hand the frogs out for the children to play.*

So, the Mummy Turtle opens the window and shouts, "Oi! Frogs! Stop that noise! WE'RE trying to get some SLEEP!"

*Teach the formula to the children, with appropriate gestures.*

The frogs stopped making the noise. The big Granny frog looked up at the window and said, "Oh, sorry. We didn't know you were there. We'll go somewhere else to have our party." So, they all hopped onto lily pads and floated away down the river.

The Mummy Turtle looked at the baby, and he was still sound asleep. She put her head on the pillow, and soon she was asleep too. But it wasn't long before she was woken by a noise outside.

*From here on, it could be:*

- James the Dancing Man (we examine his clothing and especially his footwear);
- The church clock striking midnight (singing bowl, and count to twelve);
- A coach party who have been to Blackpool to see the Illuminations, and have stopped off at the zoo to pick up some animals (singing *The Wheels on the Bus*, and the children can decide which animals getting picked up);
- Selena the Spider (glove puppet);
- Sammy the Snake (rainmaker, which one of the children can operate);
- The wind (a harp, which can be played just by running fingers over the strings);
- A wolf (everyone gets to howl).

And so, it goes on. The children join in with "Oi!... Stop that noise! ... ", as the Mummy Turtle gets increasingly frustrated.

At last, when she's finally sound asleep, the Baby, who hasn't woken all night, wakes up, sings a happy song, and asks for his breakfast.