

Storytelling in the ECE Classroom: Weaving Curriculum, Content, and Creativity

by Leora Lazarus

Telling stories is quite possibly the most important way for educators like us to pass along ideas and concepts. That may sound like a big claim, because often we see stories as little more than protagonists and antagonists, themes, and arcs. In fact, stories are the essential ingredient to culture and learning because they allow us to imagine ourselves in another place and time, as another person, sharing emotions, and experiencing challenges outside ourselves. We never just hear a story. We form empathic bonds with the heroes and join in the fight against injustices. We feel more deeply through stories and, in that way, we experience the world more fully, learning through others what it means to be human in a social context. In short, stories allow children to empathize with unfamiliar people, places, and situations from a place of safety.

This is why I say that storytelling is an essential skill for any educator to master. It provides a doorway to adventure and wonder for young children (and their grown-ups, too), and it allows the audience to experience adversity without consequence, which builds empathy and understanding.

There are four ways we can tell stories to children. We can read stories from books, tell stories from memory, share personal stories, or act out stories. No matter how they are delivered, stories help children familiarize themselves with sounds, words, and the mores of language, thereby assisting in the development of early literacy skills. And they also help children find their places in a social environment by sharing ideas about right and wrong, good and bad, helpful and unhelpful, and so on. In fact, we know that stories increase the willingness of children to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

While stories play a serious role, we should never lose sight of the fact that, however they are delivered, stories in an early childhood education (ECE) setting should be fun! When

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children are relaxed, engaged, and enjoying a story, they are soaking up knowledge. They also discover that books, like the one you are reading from, are an escape to a wonderful world that is available to them at any time.

The lesson here is that when you read a story, make certain the children have access to the book. The exposure to books that contain stories children love positively impacts creativity and imagination, language and emotion, and verbal proficiency. Listening to well-written stories develops vocabulary, which directly affects speech.

Leora Lazarus is a best-selling author, illustrator, storyteller, and pre-school and supplemental school teacher. She is passionate about living her Jewish values and founded a free mobile pre-school program in San Diego to bring developmental learning to children in underserved communities. Her mission is to empower Jewish teachers and parents to pass along *Yiddishkeit*, the Jewish birthright, and beautiful traditions to new generations. leora@morahleora.com

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Storytelling is also a valuable tool to teach *midot* (Jewish values), holidays, and festivals. Traditional stories help children contextualize, understand, connect to the different holidays and customs.

As an educator who is committed to the idea that children's curiosity should guide the curriculum, books and stories are my most effective gateways to child-guided learning. Stories, and discussions derived from books, are a far more valuable tool than worksheets, originally designed for a newly-industrialized society in the early twentieth century. Our priorities as educators have changed. Our goal is not to produce sameness, but to nurture individuality and creativity.

In an age of contracting attention spans, concentration skills are improved when children listen to stories and read books. The length of the story is dependent on the developmental stage of the child. With practice, children are generally able to increase their concentration span to listen to longer stories.

Visual literacy, the essential skill of interpreting pictures, is a fundamental skill required for processing and deduction. Telling stories from picture books, or using visual aids while telling a story, is an excellent way to develop visual literacy. Children can observe differences and commonalities of cultures and people, draw unique insights, and subconsciously develop the ability to think beyond the self. Stories that are accompanied by visuals do an excellent job of expanding the worldview of the children listening.

By way of example, I enjoy using the book *Tree and Bird: A Havdalah Adventure* as a tool in the classroom. After reading the story, I ask questions like:

- Where did Bird go first?
- Where did Bird go last?
- What was your favorite part of the story?
- Which part of the story made you happy?

These questions help the children fully internalize essential elements of the story. And, while the book is about *havdalah*, there are other topics for discussion that make the story valuable. We can discuss *Shabbat*, bird migration, olives and olive trees, and the five senses, to name but a few. In fact, I often use this book to draw attention to trees with a specific focus on olives trees.

Using the olive tree example, here is how I might incorporate storytelling into a lesson that brings the five senses into play

- The children hear the story.
- They touch an olive branch.
- We see the illustrations of an olive tree.
- Everyone smells the olives.
- We all taste our olives.

Add to that the science we can bring to bear in the form of an experiment. Using olive oil and vinegar, the child learns about emulsion and makes their own salad dressing.

As my final thought, I want to stress that there are many different ways to incorporate storytelling into an early childhood curriculum: All that is needed is open eyes and open minds.

On a personal note, I was extremely fortunate to be a member of the first cohort of the RISE Storytelling Initiative of NewCAJE. I have incorporated all that learning into my classrooms, and it resonates across everything that I do as a professional. I have been telling stories to children for many years, first as an educator and then as an author. It was only after my experience in the RISE program that I came to see how powerful and transformative my own stories could be in the telling, and that I can now add storyteller to my name.