

Catching children's stories

by Diane Rich

This article highlights the importance of children's play in developing their ability to make sense of the world and understanding their place in it; providing foundations for literacy. It introduces the term 'storying' for the process of story making within play. It emphasises the need for practitioners and parents to highly value storying and suggests ways to promote and value this important process.

Children create stories within their play. Some stories may be very short. 'There was a robber, or a mummy, or a dinosaur...' can be played as a simple story when a child dresses up or behaves in role. Many simple stories will be repeated and changed each time they are played out. Some will be longer, with a complicated plot. All will be based on something the child has experienced.

Children 'make stories' in their play. This is 'storying'. Storying is 'playing a story.' The stories children play need to be 'caught' by practitioners and parents. The well known kindergarten teacher and writer, Vivian Gussin Paley, catches children's stories as they tell them to her. She transcribes them and later the children enact them as she reads her transcripts. I recommend catching the stories children actually play; catching stories in action.

In the storying example below, a three-year-old was observed at play shortly after a disturbing news story was released about a baby in Canada, lost in the snow. According to the news report, when the baby was found she was declared dead. She miraculously came back to life. It was not made clear how the baby left her house undetected, late at night. This clearly troubled Katie, the player. Katie played a story that ingeniously solved the problem. She played with toys as she enacted a solution. She vocalised her play.

"There was a baby and a mummy. It was nighttime. Mummy had lost her baby. She said, 'Baby, baby, where are you my baby? Baby, baby. I have lost you my baby.'

The baby was asleep. She woke up. She climbed onto a pussycat. The cat took her outside to the train station. She climbed onto the train and the train went a long, long, long way away. It went to the snow. The baby got off the train. The baby climbed onto a doggie. The doggie took the baby to the land of snow. The baby fell asleep. The Mummy had found her baby. The 'amberbance man' put the baby in a special blanket and the baby woke up. Mummy was happy and she loved the baby."

Katie's storying was highly valued by children and adults. Katie's story was told to groups in the nursery, with her permission, on many occasions. Her play resources were used as a mini-world play area, where children could play out the story, 'The Lost Baby and the Snow', by Katie. White sheets were used to extend large role-play in a snowy land. Her story was later printed in booklet format and became a nursery favourite. Katie took a copy home.

Children explore the world and their place in it through storying. They solve problems, as Katie did. The storying provides practitioners and parents with valuable opportunities to learn more about children and their needs. Through catching children's stories adults can learn what children know about and the limits of this knowledge; what they have experienced; what they are interested in and what they want to find out more about; what concerns or worries them. These key areas of exploration form the roots of storying. Catching children's stories can inform future planning and provision for individuals or groups in early years settings.

Where play is highly valued in early years settings, stories will be caught. To catch stories practitioners need to join in the play as a committed co-player. They need to regularly observe the play then learn from what they see and hear. Practitioners can turn their observations, transcripts or co-playing experiences into verbal and written stories for sharing with key players, individuals or a whole group. Sometimes story-boxes can be set up, with resources that represent the storying. Individuals or small groups can use these. Books can be made with the key players credited in the same way as authors, 'This story was played by...' Role play themes and resources need to be influenced by children's storying themes. All of these are positive ways to demonstrate to children that their play is valued. Children who feel their play is valued will be confidently story making within their play.

The themes children choose for play and storying may not be those that adults choose. Interestingly Katie's

theme, lost babies and separation from mum or family, is common in children's storying. So, too, is the play theme of 'power'. It can be very challenging to have monsters, guns and superheroes who are frequently associated with the power theme in play, at home or in an early years setting. For some children this will be what they know a lot about and may be what they also want to know more about, or think more about as they play. Play provides children with a vehicle for thinking about big and important issues and for making sense of the world through testing ideas and theories, thoughts and ideas. Play is a child's starting point for story making and the very foundations of literacy. It is most important to value the starting points for children's storying and to allow characters and themes to develop. If children feel their play is valued, their sense of self esteem will rise. They will know that they are great players. A great player is a great story maker. A great story maker has the potential to be a happy, confident, willing, enthusiastic storywriter. So, when muscles for writing are well enough developed, the important experience of storying will have increased capacity to story make. Thus, when children come to write a story, they will be able to do so with the confidence of an experienced story maker. They will then be able to 'think' through the medium of writing in the same way as they have been able to 'think' through play. Children who have a rich diet of playing and highly valued storying, both indoors and outdoors, who are supported by adults in developing the skills they need to be in control of playing and story making, have the potential to become happy and confident story writers. Story players will approach the task of writing with enthusiasm, commitment and confidence. They will know that they are good story makers and therefore can become good storywriters. They will have explored their world through play, extended their knowledge and understanding of the many things that can be written about and explored through writing. They will be able to write the fantastic because they will have explored its possibilities within their own playing.

This extract forms part of seminars, and presentations by Diane Rich, 'Catching children's stories', 'Issues in children's play themes' and 'Making literacy fun'. This article, along with others by the author, can be downloaded from www.richlearningopportunities.co.uk