



Storytelling Techniques and Tips for Toddlers

by Jane Torres



Over the years, storytelling has developed many methods and strategies. Think of any museum exhibit geared toward children and you will think of several developed storytelling techniques. Techniques range from the very simple to quite elaborate but the most important element is always the story. With infants and toddlers, we may need to learn new and improved methods of storytelling, but it is always the story that reigns over all.



Techniques

1. Assess the group to whom you are telling a story; know your audience. Learn the preferences of the children. Incorporate this knowledge into your practices. Is there a child who adores trains and refuses to part with his toy? Let the child hold the train and encourage him to help the toy “listen.” If you know the children struggle with staying seated, ask them to stand beside



you or sit in a designated spot in the room. One toddler teacher put purple duct tape on the floor. Each child sits on his strip of duct tape and happily listens to the story. Why should these seemingly strange techniques be employed? Because the story reigns! The primary goal is telling the story. If precious minutes are wasted getting a child to put away the toy train for story time or trying to get all the children to sit at a table, the story is being made secondary to social skills.

2. Look for opportunities to use favorite toys and activities in the class. Sometimes these favorite things are referred to as Velcro. Just as Velcro will stick to almost any fabric, a story told in relation to a favorite toy or game will be more relevant to the child. When the toy comes to mind, so will the story. As you read through the lesson in the teacher's manual, look for areas where the story can be customized and personalized for the audience. Highlight those sections as a reminder during teaching. Ask parents if a child's special baby doll or bear could be used for the storytelling. Allow the children to play and reenact parts of the story with toys.

3. Remove your own expectations for storytelling and allow the audience to create the experience. Perhaps when you decided to get involved in Sunday school, you had a mental picture of some idyllic Sunday school setting surrounded by the children eagerly learning God's Word. This picture

needs to be adjusted. The reality is that Sunday school is not for teachers at all. The children in the class are the focus and their expectations and needs are more important than those of the teacher. If time is spent getting the children into a perfect circle because that is the picture in your mind, the circle becomes more important than the story. By adjusting your picture, you trade control for communication. Communication means that you are tuned into the needs of the children more than you are tuned into your ideal picture. Using two-way communication may cause you to pause the story while you weave in application, but in so doing the story will be heard by the children. Toddler teachers learn ways of incorporating the story into every day events.

4. Celebrate each story. Every time you tell a story to the children, you bring an attitude and energy. Be sure you are invigorated and excited about the story being told. If you are not enthused by the story, the children will not be enthused. Get pumped about what you are going to share each week. Sometimes with young children, some digging and extra thought will be required but it is well worth it. When you are excited by the message, the children are eager to hear. They can sense the attitudes of adults around them. If the children are not listening, it is often the case that the storyteller is not enthused to be bringing the story to the class. Check yourself. What is your body language? Are you sitting hunched over with your arms crossed? How is the intonation of your voice? Do you sound excited? What is the expression on your face? Do you appear happy and peaceful or frantic and frustrated? Enjoy the telling of the story!



5. Treat yourself and the children with respect. Toddlers are demanding. If you need a break, ask a parent or another qualified teacher to deliver the story for a week or two. Guard against teacher burn out by providing a break for yourself when needed. If you have no other volunteers in the church, notify the parents that you will need their help so that you do not become weary in well doing! Ensuring a high level of quality in the Sunday school storytelling shows respect for the children. Infants and toddlers are at the height of brain development. Developmentally appropriate Sunday school demonstrates respect for their future growth and understanding. Never believe the falsehood that you are “just babysitting!”

Tips

1. Assemble prop boxes (a plastic bin or box containing items) that correlate with the different Sunday school themes. Gather items that can be played with during the story or used to reenact it after it is told. You can also include items that demonstrate a specific object in the story. If you need items to fill the prop boxes, post a list asking for what you need. Often, teachers do the “run out and buy” routine. The effort and expense quickly adds up and can suppress the storytelling experience. One Sunday school class wanted an aquarium for the toddlers during a “fishers of men” unit. The teacher, knowing that the aquarium could be expensive, asked the congregation to donate unused aquarium equipment. A used tank, stand, and air pump were donated. The class still needed fish. The innovative teacher asked the senior citizens in the church if they would like to purchase the fish and to supply the fish food for the toddlers. The seniors happily agreed and even began stopping by the room to see the toddlers and to find out if there was more they could do. Who knew that so many could be involved in storytelling?

2. Keep a few “lovey” items on hand for toddlers in need. If during the story there is a child who is distracted or simply cannot settle down, get out a lovey and ask him to help the lovey listen to the story. Toddlers love to show how big they are by helping. Lovey items can be rubber animals, plush toys, or even toy cars, trucks, and trains. Lovey items should be washable and sanitized between uses. If a toddler wants to take the lovey home with him, have a bag or box ready that stays in the classroom for the lovey to call home. Tell the



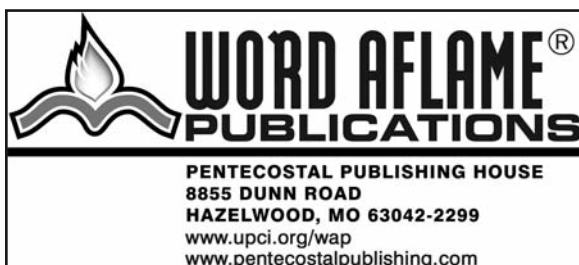
toddler that the lovey is going home, too, and will be at Sunday school next week. The lovey can even wave goodbye to the toddler with your help!

3. Seek ways to make everything a game. The more storytelling seems like a game, the more engaged the toddlers will be. To adults, it seems ridiculous to play the “clap our hands sit down” game, however, games like this fascinate most toddlers. Due to their very active brains, toddlers have short attention spans. Keep the talking short and the action plentiful as you tell the story. If you have a particularly active group, break the story into sections and do some jumping, spinning, or clapping between the story sections. Toddlers learn by doing as they listen. Adapt various rhyme plays to suit your story. Instead of “Ring around the Roses” it can become “Sing a song to Jesus” or some other variation. The class will settle on some favorites and these activities can be used to keep toddlers engaged and learning.

Storytelling Techniques and Tips (Continued)

4. Use limited language. Repeat the same phrases over and over during the storytelling. Toddlers love to parrot information and repetition lends itself to parroting. It is very rewarding to hear toddlers repeating parts of the story to their parents at the end of Sunday school. The children may be so young that their words may need translating but if repetition is used, the toddlers will parrot! Simple statements such as, “I will help you” and “Do not be afraid” can be used over and over again during a story and are valuable words for toddlers to learn.

5. Mind the environment. Toddlers cannot focus in large wide-open spaces. Create a space that is cozy with just enough space for each toddler to sit. A rug, blanket, or even a table can be used to create a good storytelling space. A small corner with a comfy rug or a table and chairs in a confined space will help the toddlers to avoid distractions. The area should also be predictable. If a rug or a table is used, then generally it should be used week to week. The curriculum advises using the snack area as the storytelling area for this reason. If your room is large, use barriers such as cardboard boxes to divide the area into smaller spaces.



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Infant Insight



Research: Infants and toddlers need relationships with caring adults who engage in many one-on-one, face-to-face interactions with them to support their oral language development and lay the foundation for later literacy learning. Important experiences and teaching behaviors include but are not limited to:

- talking to babies and toddlers with simple language, frequent eye contact, and responsiveness to children's cues and language attempts.
- frequently playing with, talking to, singing to, and doing finger plays with very young children.
- sharing cardboard books with babies and frequently reading to them on the adult's lap or together with one or two other children.
- providing simple art materials such as non-toxic crayons and/or markers and large paper for older infants and young toddlers to explore and manipulate. Infants can learn from finger painting with textile materials such as non-menthol shaving cream or puddings.



Environment: Infants learn through their senses. Therefore, the environment should have something that appeals to sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Rarely will two babies in your care be at the same stage of development, so the room arrangement will need to be reorganized and rearranged constantly to best fit the current stages of the children. Having a wall thermometer is good to make sure the room temperature remains comfortable for the babies. Remember that the floor area will be a few degrees cooler than the upper part of the room.



Attachment: To help infants overcome stranger anxiety with teachers they may see only once or twice each week, offer parents pictures of the teachers' faces to take home. Ask them to show the pictures on a regular basis throughout the week to their infants and say the teachers' names. They can use key words such as church, Sunday school, class, or friends to help the infants in making connections with people they see and the words that describe them. This is the first step in the child's association process. You can also ask parents to give you pictures of their family to put in a small album with waterproof pages. As the children are in class you can "read" the family picture book and say the names of the children's family members.



Caregiving: Sanitizing toys and equipment must be top priority in your classroom. Keep non-toxic disinfectant wipes readily available for immediate use on toys that can be commonly shared with more than one child, and especially for mouthing toys. (It is not uncommon for teachers to become ill within a week or two after being in group care of children.) If no disinfectant sprays/wipes are available to you, make a spray bottle of bleach solution (1 tablespoon household bleach to 1 quart of cool water).



Home Connection: This is the perfect age to create memories for years to come. Make use of a camera to take pictures of your class in action. You can distribute the pictures by sending them online to parents or by giving printed copies. If you have someone in your congregation who is gifted in photography, invite him in to help you get some candid shots. Every week is a new stage of development for infants, so this is the time to take pictures as you document their precious times with you. In later years, the children can look at the pictures and see how you were there to care for them.

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Unit 1

Research Environment Attachment Caregiving Home Connection

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Research: In recent years, special attention has been given to the need for detecting hearing loss in infants and young toddlers. More than 12,000 babies in the U.S. are born with permanent hearing loss and another two to three out of every 1,000 newborns have partial hearing loss. Of all the senses, a hearing loss is the most debilitating to an infant's developmental process. There are now many ways for teachers to access local information about current laws and intervention programs for infants with physical developmental delays. Teachers are key persons who can provide activities to ensure that newborns and infants identified with a hearing loss are not overlooked. It is helpful for teachers to work with parents in using simple sign language with all infants, but especially if an infant is identified as having a hearing loss.



Environment: Providing sound absorbent materials can help reduce the noise level in an infant room. Items such as smooth low-pile rugs that can be laundered, textured/quilt wall hangings, and carpet pieces glued on the walls all soften noises in addition to providing interesting and colorful attractions in the room. Infants should be able to experience a variety of textures and colors on their level. Whenever possible, hang banners and colorful ribbons down from the ceiling especially above places where infants are likely to be lying on their backs such as diaper changing tables or cribs.



Attachment: It is important to have parents consistently bid their babies goodbye when leaving them in the care of the Sunday school teachers. Very young children will not exhibit much resistance to being left with strangers, but as they become older, they may show different levels of anxiety to being separated from familiar persons. When/if this happens, help parents understand the importance of continuing to say goodbye prior to leaving, even if the child is crying and it may appear to create more stress. During the first three years of life, children are learning to build trust so it is very important for them to learn that their loved ones can be trusted to come back for them. Even though the sneaking out approach appears to work, in reality that process undermines a child's ability to build healthy trust.



Caregiving: Giving care to infants involves much more than feeding them and changing diapers. Each child has a unique temperament and personality. Teachers also have unique personalities. If possible, each infant should be assigned a primary teacher who greets him each week, and who interacts with him, showing individualized nurturing and connectedness while performing routine care. Repetitious rituals established by teachers create familiarity for infants and help them develop a sense of basic trust. For example, when routinely washing hands after diapering, a teacher may always repeat a sing-song phrase such as, "Washy, washy, washy; wash the germs away."



Home Connection: Many times the infant room is staffed primarily by females. Teachers need to be sure that their attitudes do not make males feel awkward or out of place in an infant class. Rather, fathers should be encouraged to participate in the care of their infants. A new father especially needs to hear how important his role is to his child's development. Use the What I Did Today form provided in the resource packet for jotting individualized notes about each child for parents to read. This is a good way to build a bond with new or single fathers of the children in your care.

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Infant Insight



Research: Emerging literacy is the term used for describing the process in which children learn to communicate. Infants are able to hear before they are born, and those sounds become the foundation upon which children acquire language. The predominant sounds heard by a child will become dominant in the brain and sounds rarely heard will recess in the brain. That is why children learn to make sounds that are unique to the language of their environment. One of the best ways for children to acquire literacy is through reading books aloud. Use voice inflections and variations of tones when reading or singing the words to infants. Board books or books made specifically for infants should be readily available to infants. They should be able to experience books through their senses by touching, tasting, or seeing. Even though infants cannot comprehend a story being read, they will learn to imitate the sounds and become familiar with books. Most importantly, when a teacher reads a book to an infant, an emotional bond is formed which lets the infant know the world in which he lives is good. Practice reading books in every class session.



Environment: Infant rooms should be designed to provide a stimulating atmosphere encouraging safe exploration with many opportunities to reach, grasp, crawl, and pull upright. Provide various musical experiences through playing CDs, children's instruments, and singing. Adult-sized chairs should be available for providing warm and nurturing activities for holding, rocking, and snuggling. Regularly assess the developmental levels of the infants and provide the appropriate toys to stimulate development for learning new tasks. One size does not fit all in the infant room so the types of toys and room arrangement will need to change with the children's needs.



Attachment: The human brain is wired so that the vital part that regulates breathing and heart rate also includes the triggers for pleasure and pain.* Everything a baby experiences affects his sense of security and emotional development. Even the youngest infant can detect sincerity and genuine love from a care giver. The way a care giver interacts with an infant directly affects that child's overall development. What an awesome responsibility infant teachers have to provide the necessary nurturing and care that will determine the child's ability to interact with others in his world as he grows. Making close eye contact with infants as you talk with them in soothing tones is vitally important. Pray for your infants and ask God to allow you to know the best way to connect with each of them.

* Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* Orlando: Harcourt, 2003.



Caregiving: It is good to keep extra diapers and clothing of various sizes on hand in your classroom for emergency accidents. Sometimes parents forget to provide extra diapers or clothing. Many thrift stores such as Goodwill, the Salvation Army, or yard sales sell nice clothing for minimal costs. You could also ask the people in your congregation to supply your infant class with extra blankets, clothing for boys' and girls' sized to fit children in your class, burp cloths, and other items. If necessary, write the church name on the clothing, using permanent ink, to help parents remember to return the clothing items to your class. However, it may be better in some situations to donate the clothing to families in need and to replace the items that are gone. Keeping babies dry and comfortable is a ministry!



Home Connection: Provide a memento from the children for parents to have as a keepsake of their child's time in the infant class. A digital camera can be used to create an electronic file of pictures for each child and can be forwarded to the parents when the child moves to the next class. If able, you can send digital pictures of the children via email to the parents at different times. In this case, a picture truly is worth more than a thousand words!