



Outside spaces for storytelling and story making

"I like story making and storytelling with children because it actively engages and stimulates their imagination and reveals so much about their emerging personalities, their hopes and fears. It also challenges the adult to keep up with the child's boundless creativity!"

**Kevin Graal,
professional storyteller**

We know how important it is for us to model a rich variety of language with babies and young children. Storytelling and story making can offer us flexible, inclusive and spontaneous ways to do this, encouraging two-way communication.

Outside spaces can set the scene perfectly for these interactions. This edition of Playnotes has been written by Elizabeth Jarman and provides practical ideas to help you develop your outside spaces to support storytelling and storymaking activities.



The importance of getting the learning environment right

It's essential to observe, reflect and then make informed decisions about any changes you create in the environment. The LTL development process will support you in this.

The learning environment that we create is key in setting the scene for children's activities and interactions. Many

"Story making taps into children's instinctive need to make narrative sense of the world; to arrange the jumble of experience and stimuli into some kind of order. Storytelling has an all embracing quality. The book embraces words and images, but live storytelling can include music, song, dance, drama, puppetry and so much more. Above all it can create a special bond between teller and listener."

**Kevin Graal,
professional storyteller**

physical factors impact on the way that children use spaces. Some of the key themes that emerged in the recently published *Communication Friendly Spaces Toolkit: Improving speaking and listening skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage* are particularly relevant when we consider how to create outside spaces to support storytelling and story making.

Key points to consider:

- It's really important to consider how the physical environment supports the education pedagogy in place. The two should connect.
- It's essential that we consider the environment from the child's perspective.
- Although for this article, we are focusing on outside spaces, it's important to view learning spaces as a whole both inside and out and make the most of what you've got, using every nook and cranny.
- Across the space, children need secure areas to talk where they feel comfortable and relaxed, where storytelling and story making can happen naturally. Margaret Meek suggests that children's language is at it's richest in their imaginary worlds. Children do not always need adults to initiate story making, particularly when they are engaged in imaginative play. We need to reflect on this and consider how we can support it. Observation skills are key, knowing when to step back and allow the children's language and story making to develop unaided.
- The way that a physical space is set up says a lot to children about the sort of interactions and behaviours welcome there.
- An excessively noisy, consistently lively environment is a poor one. It's important to consider the layout of your outside space in terms of the activities and their associated noise and movement. If you want to encourage a quiet, calm, activity, the space should reflect this.
- Colours can trigger a physical and emotional response. Targeting the use of colour to support activities is important. Natural materials add a 'warm' feel and can make a space intimate and cosy.
- Outside spaces offer free access to natural light, a magical resource which makes us all feel energised and more focused.

How does this theory translate into practice?

Here is a collection of ideas and photographs from settings with very different outside spaces. All of them have deliberately planned areas to promote storytelling and story making activities, in response to careful observation of the children and their needs. Do think about how you could use or adapt some of these ideas to develop your outside spaces.



The Coombes Nursery and Infant School in Reading has a variety of different storytelling spaces. All make use of natural materials.

This collection of rocks is packed with fossils. It's a simple but effective example of a space that is arranged to support storytelling and story making activity. It offers a calm, shady spot for children to gather and is a fantastic stimulus. Some of the other rocks in the outside space at this setting have lines of poetry carved into them. The environment is regarded as a

provocation here, designed to facilitate and inspire interaction.

This outdoor classroom space is built completely from wood and can seat about 30 children. The design includes a centrally positioned storyteller's chair. The space is positioned in a quiet area, away from the general flow of movement. It is enclosed and doesn't have the brightly coloured, busy distractions that are often found in indoor story areas. Natural colours help children focus and engage more deeply.



Consider your own environment:

- Is your outside environment arranged with an awareness of which spaces are quieter and more suitable for storytelling and story making?
- Sometimes you will want to be noisy. Be aware of the impact that this can

have on other activities and children in areas close by.

- Think about how your outside spaces connect and the need for them to be flexible, to support the story making and telling process as it develops and maybe moves around the environment.

Lark Children's Centre, in Plymouth found that the size of the space has an impact on the children who use it. Through careful observation of the way children used the spaces available, they noticed that some children like being in a really tiny space big enough for just one or two. These children also liked enclosed areas.

Staff added this swing to their outside space which offers a perfect place to satisfy these needs.



Consider your own environment:

- How does the space look, sound and feel?
- How do children use the space?
- Where do they go to make and tell stories?
- What sorts of spaces do they like?
- What is really needed in the space to support the activity?



Emmeth Children's Centre, Norfolk has adapted the Forest School Approach. They have created a simple and informal seating area with logs, where children gather to chat and story make. The space can also accommodate a big group for a storytelling session.

Consider your own environment:

- Is your space fit for purpose? Be clear about what you want for the children.
- How do your outside learning spaces support storytelling and story making activities?

Woodside First and Nursery School developed an enclosed storytelling space by adding some natural rush rolls to a harsh metal frame, which softened the area. (See main photograph, front page) They arranged the railway sleepers in a U shape, to encourage interaction and have found that children congregate there, engaging in conversation. They also use story props to stimulate storytelling and story making.

Consider your own environment:

- Look at the way that your outside spaces are arranged. What could they be saying perhaps unintentionally to the children?
- How could you rearrange spaces to make them more supportive of interactions? Think about the positioning of seating in particular.

Rosemary Lane Nursery School in County Durham has developed a Storytellers' chair area, built in the corner of their garden space. Staff found that adding a pergola over the area made it cosier and more inviting. They added some low seating using logs in front of the chair for the audience to sit on while listening to the story.

Another example of a perfect space for storytelling and story making is this willow structure. It offers a cosy, semi-private place where children can feel relaxed, secure and able to enter into their imaginary worlds.



Consider your own environment:

- What kind of spaces can you create to give children opportunities for thinking, reflecting, sharing and extending their inner worlds together?
- How can you create safe places which enable children to enter into their play free from a sometimes inhibiting adult presence?

St. Mary's Primary School in Slough, has developed, with Creative Partnerships, a whole school project which focuses on Tales from Around the World. The nursery children have developed a series of tree hangings, linked to an African story about Grandma Nana. Nursery teacher Seema Badyal says that the children have used the story to stimulate role play in the outside area. Having a space dedicated to a particular story has had a huge impact in terms of extended story making.

Consider your own environment:

- Create a space to highlight and extend a story over a period of time. Children love returning to an area to retell and add to a familiar tale.
- Think about how your favourite books could inspire temporary or permanent changes to your grounds.



Final comments

Thinking carefully about the role of the physical environment and then making informed changes based on observation of the children's use of your outside space, offers the opportunity to make a huge difference to the quality of interactions and children's ability to engage in storytelling and storymaking activity.

Resources

Websites:

www.creative-partnerships.com
Creative Partnerships is the Government's flagship creativity programme for schools and young people, managed by Arts Council England and funded by the DCSF and DCMS.

www.forestschools.com
For more information on Forest Schools: a Danish idea which aims to develop skills in a natural outdoor classroom context.

www.literacytrust.org.uk/rif
The National Literacy Trust's Reading is Fundamental scheme produces a storyteller's list of recommended authors and storytellers.

www.sfs.org.uk
The Society for Storytelling website includes a publications page (printed and audio) and a related links section to lots of other storytelling websites.

www.story-lovers.com/listofstories.html
Contains hundreds of categories and thousands of stories, suggested by professional storytellers, librarians and practitioners from around the world.

www.storyquest.org.uk/home/top-tips.php
A useful page of tips for preparing and telling a story.

www.talkingtales.org.uk
Storyteller Kevin Graal's website.

www.timsheppard.co.uk/story/storylinks.html
Storyteller Tim Sheppard's website includes links to online story sources, annotated and categorised for easy reference. There is an informative section about traditional storytelling around the world.

Publications

The Communication Friendly Spaces Toolkit: Improving Speaking and Listening Skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage by Elizabeth Jarman ISBN 1 85990 428 9. This toolkit provides a collection of research, case studies and comment on creating positive learning environments. It combines theory and good practice from settings across England and Wales. A DVD, made in partnership with

Teachers TV, showcasing settings featured in the toolkit and an audit workbook to support staff teams with review and planning to improve their environments are also included. Order by calling 0870 600 2400 (£10 ref A 2120)

Grandma Nana by Veronique Tadjou, Millet Publishing Ltd. ISBN-13: 978-1840592856

About the author of this Playnotes

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