



Storytelling Notes:
for People Working With Young People or
Children with Special Needs

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Have you decided to entertain, energize, encourage, calm, teach and guide a group of children or young people you work with by telling them some stories?

First, catch your story!

Choosing your Story

If you want other people to enjoy your story, you need to enjoy it yourself. It sounds obvious, but it can be easily forgotten if you are looking for a story to fit in with a particular theme, season or mood. So, first and foremost, choose a story you love. Then there are one or two other factors to think about if you are working with children or young people with special needs:

Choose a story with a simple structure and some repetition

This will make it easier for both you as a beginning teller and the children as beginning listeners, with possibly limited concentration spans. Simple stories can still be exciting! I find if a story has a strong pattern of repetition, listeners will get pleasure from this pattern without necessarily understanding everything that is happening in the story. This means that a story with a strong pattern is good for a group of children of mixed abilities.

Stories of these kind include old favourites such as:

The Three Little Pigs

The Enormous Turnip

The Little Red Hen

These are all favourites with younger children, but there are many folktales with a strong, easy-to-follow pattern that will appeal to older children or adults as well. Try looking at scary stories, where repetition builds the suspense (The Sprightly Tailor for example). Aesop's Fables appeal to a large age range as well (e.g. The Boy who Cried Wolf, The Lion and the Mouse).

Choose a story which has a rhyme or song repeated through it

Children who have trouble following the details of the story can still enjoy the song or rhyme. A wee song that occurs over and over can be like a stepping stone, helping you and the listeners through the story – a little resting place. Many stories include rhymes or songs but if the story you have chosen doesn't then you could always add one in. Playground rhymes, skipping rhymes or nursery rhymes are always popular.

The Little Red Hen might chant as she works:

*Impty, dimpty, tipsy, tee
I shall have some bread for tea*

or Little Red Riding Hood might sing as she goes through the woods:

*Eeny meeny macker racker
rari rie domi nacker
chicker bocker lolli popper
om pom push*

Good sources for rhymes are *This Little Puffin* by Elizabeth Matterson and *The Kingfisher Playtime Treasury* by Pie Corbett.

Choose a story that everybody can join in with

To begin with, it will help both you and your audience if you choose a story that encourages participation. Simply listening is hard work – if your audience has something to do they will find it a lot easier. This is especially the case if you know that some people in your audience will tend to be a bit noisy – if you can get even a few of the group chanting, singing or clapping along with you then any other noises will be less of a distraction. Do especially encourage any other adults present to cast their inhibitions aside and join in with you. Sometimes you might want to teach a song or rhyme or action before the story starts, other times the audience will 'catch' on as you go along.

Add in some props

You can make things easier for your audience by giving them something to look at whilst they are listening. Your props don't have to be complicated – a piece of blue cloth can be the ocean, a green cloth can be a field. Raid the toy box for dolls and soft toys to use, or make some very simple puppets out of paper and card or wooden spoons.

Keep your props in a box, basket or in the pocket of your pinny – the children will be rapt, wondering what is going to appear next.

Remember that movement can very useful for holding a child's attention, but too much movement is tiring on the eye. Puppets, for example, rather than jiggling continually should do their little dance and then be still. Even the simplest cut-out paper puppet on a stick will be entrancing if it has hair, feathers, legs or tentacles made of shiney paper or ribbons that waft and shimmy as it moves.

Finding your Story

Story collections that are written for tellers rather than readers are very useful such as:

- *Three Minute Tales* by Margaret Read MacDonald, or any of Margaret Read MacDonald's collections. These are American books unfortunately, so not so easy to find here;
- *A Band of Joining-in Stories* by Pat Thomson. Lots of audience participation! Pat Thomson has some other good story collections as well.

Also have a look at the other resources from the Scottish Storytelling Centre, for example the *Early Years Starter Pack* written by storyteller Bea Ferguson. This has a good selection of tales ready for telling.

Otherwise it is good to find collections where the stories are written simply, without too much flowery language – these are easier to 'translate' into stories that can be told rather than read. A good collection of Scottish folktales in this vein is *The Folk Tales of Scotland: The Well at the World's End and Other Stories* by [William Montgomerie](#) and [Norah Montgomerie](#).

Learning your Story

- 1) First reduce your story to its 'bare bones': five sentences or so that tell the facts of the story. Tell this short version to yourself.
- 2) Then take time to imagine each scene from the story. See the characters and the landscapes in your mind's eye. What is the weather? What are the characters wearing? What time of day is it? What can they smell? Or feel? See as many details as possible; you won't necessarily want to tell all these details to your audience, but the more you have imagined, the more real it will seem to the people listening. Once you have made a little film in your mind of the story, 'play' this film to yourself as often as you can – when you are falling asleep at night, or when you are waiting for a bus. You are memorising the pictures of the story, rather than the words. Tell this longer version of the story over to yourself.
- 3) Pay particular attention to any rhymes or chants. Learn these well and they will be a sort of safety net for you to fall into when you are telling the story.
- 4) Tell your story! And keep telling it, over and over! Try to take the chance to tell it as often as you can. So, for example, if you could tell it three times over to three small groups, do that rather than once to a larger group. Telling a story the third time is so much easier and more fun than telling it the first time. You will find the story 'settles' inside you, and you can start to have fun with it.

Here are a selection of some of my favorite stories to tell:

The Tailor's Coat

Once upon a time there was a poor tailor. His house was full of cloth – beautiful, beautiful cloth. But none of it was for him. It was all waiting to be turned into clothes for other people.

Then one day he looked out of his door and there on his doorstep was a big bundle of beautiful red cloth – a present for the tailor.

Well, straight away he took that cloth inside and he spread it out on his big table and he got out his scissors. And he began to snip.

Snip, snip, snip. Snippety, snip, snip...

And out of that cloth he made a...coat.

A wonderful coat. He loved that coat. He wore it in the Spring and the Summer and the Autumn and the Winter. He wore it and he wore it and he wore it...until one day it was all worn out.

And he was just about to throw it away, when he had an idea. He spread the coat out on the table and...he got out his scissors and...

Snip, snip, snip. Snippety snip snip.

Out of that coat he made a...waistcoat.

Oh, what a waistcoat it was. He was so smart in that waistcoat. He wore it to all the best parties. He wore it and he wore it and he wore it...until one day it was all worn out.

And he was just about to throw it away, when he had an idea. He spread the waistcoat out on the table and...he got out his scissors and...

Snip, snip, snip. Snippety, snip, snip...

Out of that waistcoat he made a...hat.

Well, he loved that hat. He wore it in the sun and the rain and the wind and the snow. He wore it and he wore it and he wore it...until one day it was all worn out.

And he was just about to throw it away, when he had an idea. He put the hat on the table and...he got out his scissors...

Snip, snip, snip. Snippety, snip, snip...

Out of that hat he made a...hanky. A handkerchief.

He sneezed in that handkerchief and he sneezed in it and he sneezed in it, until one day it was all worn out.

And he was just about to throw it away, because there's nothing you can make out of a teeny-tiny hanky...when he had an idea. He got out his scissors...

Snip, snip, snip. Snippety, snip, snip...

Out of that hanky he made a...button. His lucky button. He had that button until he was an old, old man.

But one day that button was all worn out. And he was just about to throw it away, when he had an idea.

This time he left his scissors in his pocket.

Out of the button and the hanky and the hat and the waistcoat and the coat and the beautiful cloth he made a....**story!**

And that is the story I have just told to you.

Notes on telling

This old Jewish tale is very popular amongst storytellers. It works well with a wide age-range and is a great story to for encouraging audience participation.

I usually ask the children to get an imaginary pair of scissors out of their pockets before the story begins (first finger and index finger held up together). We practice snipping with our fingers (if children find it hard to 'snip' with their first finger and index finger they can use their thumb and first finger instead). I then check how sharp the children's scissors are (touch the tip of their 'finger scissors' and wince with an "ow!"). The children put their 'scissors' back in their pockets for the start of the story and then we all get our scissors out together for the 'snip, snip, snip...'

Pause when you get to 'he made...' and encourage the children to guess what the tailor has made each time. It's a good story to re-enforce concepts of 'bigger' and 'smaller' (you couldn't make a t-shirt out of a hanky etc.). You could also pause after 'he was just about to throw it away...', as once the children see the pattern of the story they will be delighted to continue ahead of you with: 'he had an idea'.

Adding in props

If you enjoy sewing (or know of a parent or granny that does) you could make a little set of cloth and clothes to use with this story. A simpler idea would be to cut coat, waistcoat etc. out of paper (a sheet of wrapping paper could give an interesting pattern). Put all your wee

props in a box or basket where the children can't see them, then instead of telling the children what the tailor made each time, pull it out with a flourish and let them tell you.

'The Sprightly Tailor' is in *Celtic Fairy Tales* by Joseph Jacobs. It is also available on the web at www.kidsgen.com under 'fables and fairytales'.

For another version of this story, see 'Just Enough' on the Healing Story website, in their 'Treasure Chest'.

The Merman's Sock

Once a fisherman was out at sea when a great storm came.

The waves got higher and higher and higher, and a voice sang in the wind:

*Cold, cold, cold
cold, cold, cold*

Was he imagining it? Suddenly out from the waves rose an old man, with a long grey beard. A merman. The fisherman was terrified.

*Cold, cold, cold
cold, cold, cold*

sang the merman.

The fisherman tore off his woolly hat and flung it into the waves.

*Cold, cold, cold
cold, cold, cold*

sang the merman.

The fisherman tore off his woolly scarf and flung it into the waves.

*Cold, cold, cold
cold, cold, cold*

sang the merman.

The fisherman took off his boots and ripped off his woolly socks and flung them into the waves.

The merman disappeared, and the fisherman sailed home.

Weeks and months passed, the fisherman was once more out at sea. The sun was shining, the sea was calm.

But the fisherman heard a voice, the merman's voice.

*Turn around, turn around
Sail right back*

*Turn around, turn around
Sail right back*

So the fisherman did. He turned his little boat around and sailed right back to harbour, wondering all the while if he was doing the right thing. Just as he reached the harbour a terrible storm came, huge waves and howling winds, lightening and thunder. But the fisherman he was safe and warm and dry.

And he lived happily ever after.

Notes on telling

This is a Danish folk tale, taken from a version by Cathy Mosley (for her original version look at www.h-net.org/~nilas/seasons/Mermansock.html). It is an example of a tale which although simple is not too 'babyish'. Depending on the age and mood of your audience you could emphasise the scary side of the story, or the humorous. For example, you could allow the audience to suggest other articles of clothing that the fisherman throws into the water (it won't take long before someone suggests pants!).

Adding in props

Have a bag full of clothes for tossing in to the waves. In a smaller group it would be possible to tell this tale sitting in a circle with a large piece of cloth (preferably blue and silky) held between everybody. The cloth is the sea and can be made calm or stormy to illustrate the story (it is used in a similar way to a parachute when playing parachute games).

The Lambikin

Once upon a time there was a wee lamb, a wee woolly white lamb. And one day he set off to his Granny's house. His Granny's house was right on top of the hill.

Now he hadn't gone very far when he met a jackal, and the Jackal says to him:

*Tip tap tup
I'll eat you up*

The lamb, he just gave a wee jump, turned around, landed down on his four black hooves and said:

*To Granny's house I go
Where I will fatter grow
Then you can eat me so -o - o*

Well, thinks the jackal, he is a very wee lamb. He would make much more of a meal if he was a bit bigger. So, he lets him go.

And by and by the wee lamb meets a vulture. And the vulture says:

*Tip tap tup
I'll eat you up*

The lamb, he just gave a wee jump, turned around, landed down on his four black hooves and said:

*To Granny's house I go
Where I will fatter grow
Then you can eat me so -o - o*

Now the vulture likes his lambs fat, and this lamb is really a bit scrawny, so he lets him go.

On up the hill goes the wee lamb, and by and by he meets a tiger.

*Tip tap tup
I'll eat you up*

That lamb he just gave a wee jump, turned around, landed down on his four black hooves:

*To Granny's house I go
Where I will fatter grow
Then you can eat me so -o - o*

Now the tiger, he thinks this lamb is a bit skinny looking and will actually taste a lot better when he's fatter, so he lets him go.

And the lamb he goes on up the hill, all the way to Granny's house right at the top of the hill.

"Granny, granny, granny," says the wee lamb, "I have promised the jackal and the vulture and the tiger that I will get fat."

So Granny, she starts baking. She bakes drop scones and fruit scones, gingerbread and banana bread. Jam roly poly, apple pie and rhubarb crumble. Chocolate cake and coffee cake and Swiss roll. Millionaire's shortbread, rocky road and fairy cakes.

And the wee lamb eats. He eats it all. And he gets fatter and fatter and fatter until he is **really** fat.

Then it is time to go home, and the wee lamb remembers the jackal and the vulture and the tiger all waiting for him out on the hillside. What is he going to do?

He looks around...he sees Granny's butter barrel. Granny keeps her butter in a little wooden barrel. But she's been doing so much baking that the barrel is empty now.

The lamb, he climbs right into the barrel – it's a bit of a squash, but he gets himself in.

"Granny, granny. Put on the lid," says the wee lamb.

So Granny puts on the lid.

"Granny, granny screw it down tight," says the wee lamb.

So granny screws it down tight.

'*Granny, granny, tip me on my side,*' says the wee lamb.

So Granny tips the barrel on its side.

"Granny, granny, give me a push," says the wee lamb.

So Granny gives the barrel a push and the barrel begins to roll down the hill.

And the lamb sings inside the barrel:

*The butter, the butter
Lots of margarine
A barrel full of butter
Is what you have just seen*

The barrel rolls right past the tiger, and the tiger is a little suspicious because he's been waiting for the lamb to come back down the hill.

*The butter, the butter
Lots of margarine
A barrel full of butter
Is what you have just seen*

The tiger, he hears the song coming from the barrel and he thinks: "That must be all right, just a barrel full of butter."

And the barrel rolls on down the hill, right past the vulture. The vulture is a little suspicious because he's been waiting for the lamb to come back down the hill, all tender and juicy and fat.

The butter, the butter
Lots of margarine
A barrel full of butter
Is what you have just seen

The vulture hears the song coming from the barrel and he thinks: "That must be all right, just a barrel full of butter."

And the barrel rolls on down the hill right past the jackal, and the jackal is a little suspicious because he's been waiting for the lamb to come back down the hill. He's been looking forward to a fat little lamb for supper.

The butter, the butter
Lots of margarine
A barrel full of butter
Is what you have just seen

The jackal is still suspicious.

The butter, the butter (louder this time)
Lots of margarine
A barrel full of butter
Is what you have just seen

The jackal is **still** suspicious

The butter, the butter (very loud!)
Lots of margarine
A barrel full of butter
Is what you have just seen

Now some say that the jackal wasn't fooled for a moment and went tearing right after that barrel. But others say the wee lamb rolled all the way home, singing:

The butter, the butter
Lots of margarine
A barrel full of butter
Is what you have just seen

And the wee lamb lived happily ever after.

Notes on telling

This is an Indian folktale which I have adapted to make it less gruesome (in the original the lamb hides in a drum made from his dead brother's skin!)

This is another good story to encourage participation. If you not keen on singing, you could change Lambikin's song to a shout of: 'Eat me when I'm fatter!' and the butter barrel could chant: "I'm a little butter barrel. I'm a little butter barrel. I'm a little butter barrel." Often it is enough just to pause and look encouragingly at the audience before the song or chant, but if they are reluctant to join in you could encourage them: "Come on let's help the lamb roll down the hill..."

Adding in props

This is a great story to add some puppets or toys in to. You could try telling the story as it is to start with and then tell it again, improvising with whatever toys or puppets you happen to have. Anyone sweet and cuddly would do to replace the lamb and anyone fierce could replace the jungle animals. If you are using the toys yourself, you could bring them out of a big bag as they appear in the story, so that each new one is a surprise for the children.

Alternatively you could let the children role-play with the toys as you guide them through the story with your narration. If you are working with larger numbers the children can do this in groups – a group of gentle animals can move through a 'jungle' and meet various different groups of fierce animals (be sure to lay down strong boundaries at the beginning that the puppets/toys don't fight or chase, otherwise you may find that participants can get a little too enthusiastic!).

Other versions of this story and similar stories can be found at www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html under 'e' for 'Eat me when I'm Fatter'.

The Quilt (a calming story)

There was once a wise monk who had given away everything he owned. Everything except his quilt.

But one day a man from the village came and asked the monk if you could borrow that quilt.

"Of course," says the monk. "Of course you may borrow it."

So the man takes the quilt.

Weeks go by. Months go by. Winter comes. The monk is getting cold. So he sends a young man from the monastery to go and fetch back his cosy quilt. But when the man finds the right house and spies the quilt, it looks so cosy and inviting that he just lies right down under it and falls fast asleep.

Well the monk waited and waited. At last he sent another man after the first. But this man, when he found the right house and spied the quilt with the first man lying underneath fast asleep, well it looked so cosy under there that he just lay right down and went to sleep too.

The monk, he waited and waited. At last he sent another man after the first two. But this man, when he found the right house and spied the quilt with the two men lying underneath fast asleep, well it looked so cosy under there that he just lay right down and went to sleep.

So the monk, he waited and waited. At last he sent another man after the other three. But this man when he found the right house and spied the quilt with the three men lying underneath snoring away, well it looked so cosy under there that he just lay right down and went to sleep.

So the monk he waited and waited...[continue as above for as long as you wish!]

At last the monk decided that he had better go himself to fetch the quilt.

He found the right house. He found the quilt. He found all the other people fast asleep.

And it looked so cosy under there that he just lay right down and fell fast asleep.

Notes on telling

It is nice to get children excited with a story, but it is also nice to be able to calm them down! This story is great to tell at the end of the day or to wind up a story session. It is an adaptation of a story by Margaret Read Macdonald in *Three Minute Tales* called 'The Tinkling Bell'. For other stories of this type look at www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts2.html#n under 'u' for 'Unfinished and endless stories'. It is a nice story to act out with a small group of children and a big blanket.

Adding in props

This is another story that is good for acting out with toys. Don't worry which toys you use – any animals or dolls will work fine. Once you have all the characters tucked up under a blanket, you could continue with the song, 'There were ten in the bed'!

Telling Stories to Children with Complex Special Needs

Everyone can enjoy a story. It may not be the narrative the child enjoys so much as the 'music', the rise and fall, rhythm and shape of it. It may be sitting in a singing, humming, clapping circle that he or she enjoys. Or perhaps they may enjoy a wee puppet dancing on their lap, or a fairy flag flying...

Here is one approach to storytelling with children who have complex special needs:

The Wish Fairy

Once there were three sisters.

The little one was sweet, the middle one was kind, but the eldest she was greedy.

These three sisters went to visit the wish fairy, over the stepping stones to the island where the wish fairy lived.

The little one went first

*Stepping over stepping stones
one two three
stepping over stepping stones
come with me.*

All the way to the fairy's house, where she asked for her wish – a little wee teddy bear.

She carried her bear right back home.

*The river's very fast
And the river's very wide
We'll step across on stepping stones
And reach the other side*

The middle one went next.

*Stepping over stepping stones
one two three
stepping over stepping stones
come with me.*

All the way to the fairy's house, where she asked for her wish – a little red fire engine.

She carried her fire engine right back home.

*The river's very fast
And the river's very wide
We'll step across on stepping stones
And reach the other side*

The oldest one went last, the greedy one.

*Stepping over stepping stones
one two three
stepping over stepping stones
come with me.*

All the way to the fairy's house, where she asked for her wish – a Mars bar, two comics, a Barbie, some Lego, an iPod, a mobile phone and some bubble gum.

But all the fairy gave her were some clothes pegs.

*The river's very fast
And the river's very wide
We'll step across on stepping stones
And reach the other side*

She carried those clothes pegs right back home, then she hung up the washing.

And she was never so greedy again.

*Stepping over stepping stones
one two three
stepping over stepping stones
come with me.*

Notes on telling

If possible, tell the story to a small group (under ten children) and have the children sit in a circle. The teller can move from child to child during the stepping stones rhyme, possibly touching each child on the hand or cheek, if appropriate. It would be a good idea to use actual props for the teddy, fire engine and pegs. Then you could 'visit' each child with the props on the 'journey home', letting them feel the props as you go. Of course you can change the suggested wishes and use whatever you happen to have handy, but try to choose something that will be interestingly tactile.

If other adults are present in the room it will greatly help the storyteller if they sit with the children in the circle, and join in and clap along with the rhymes. This helps to create a momentum for the story which can otherwise be difficult to generate if the audience is not able to join in vocally.

Here are some other suggestions for stories that would work in a similar way:

- 'Coyote's Rain Song' by Margaret Read Macdonald in *Three-Minute Tales*
- One of the 'Runaway Pancake' type stories (listed under 'c' for 'chain tales' on the website www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html). For this story you could make a simple pancake or gingerbread card puppet on a stick and take the puppet round your little circle of listeners. The children's names could be used instead of the animals in the story. e.g. I've run away from John and Tyler and Luke and Sue and I can run away from you I can!

A toy animal could be used to 'eat' the gingerbread boy or pancake in the end. Again if all adults help with the rhymes it will make the telling much more appealing.

- 'The Lion Hunt' by Pat Thomson in *A Band of Joining-in Stories*

See also ideas for telling 'The Merman's Sock' story above.

Conclusion

Hopefully, with the help of some of these pointers, you will find your way to a story you love. Choose a nice simple one, perhaps with a rhyme or song in it or one where you could add in a toy or teddy. Tell yourself the story, live with it for a while and when you are ready start telling it and have fun!

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Macdonald, Margaret, *Three-Minute Tales*
August House, 2004

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Transworld Publishers, 1996

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www.aaronshep.com

www.storyarts.org – their 'story library' has a good selection of short folk tales and Aesop's fables.

www.healingstory.org – interesting collection of stories in the 'Treasure Chest'

www.timsheppard.co.uk – the 'Frequently Asked Questions' section in 'Tim Sheppard's Storytelling Resources for Storytellers' is very good.

www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk/festival/scottish_storytelling_tell_story_day.asp
- Bea Ferguson Early Years Starter Pack resource