

PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING

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Storytelling scares more new teachers than perhaps any other facet of teaching. The prospect of having to capture the interest of squirming children and then sustain that interest for the duration of a story seems like a greater challenge than many people are ready to face.

Effective storytelling is a skill that anyone can develop by practicing a few simple principles:

1. Have Confidence in Your Story

- ◆ Why is this story worth hearing? Ask yourself this question to be sure you are clear on the value of the story to your class. People will listen to a story that offers them a benefit.
- ◆ Ask yourself: What is the most interesting thing about this story? What are the features of this story that compel attention? What will my class be drawn to as they listen?
- ◆ A few moments spent answering these questions can help you build confidence in the value and appeal of your story. When you are confident that the story has value and appeal, then you will be less concerned about your storytelling ability.

2. Prepare & Practice Your Story

Four essential steps should be taken in getting ready to tell any story:

- ◆ Identify where the story is going. If you are clear about the purpose of the story, you will be less likely to wander off track. Our curriculum provides a lesson focus to help you identify the story's main point.
- ◆ Outline the story or read identifying the major events that occur. Review the story facts enough so that each point in the outline will remind you of the details involved in that event.
- ◆ Practice telling the story aloud using your outline to prompt you from one main point to the next. Tell your story to someone in your family, to a tape recorder or to yourself.

3. Capture Interest at the Start

- ◆ A good beginning is essential, because it is much easier to capture an audience than it is to recapture them after their attention has wandered. The surest way to kill interest is to ask, "Does anybody remember last week's story?" If this week's story connects in any way to last week's story, you can jog your children's memories as you proceed.
- ◆ The best way to begin most stories with children is through some type of experience interesting to everyone in the group. This experience needs to connect to some aspect of the story. The younger your children, the more crucial it is to start a story with a reference to something in their own experience:
- ◆ Ask a question about something you know your children have seen or done. For example, to introduce the story of the wise men who followed the star, ask children to briefly tell of a time they looked up into a nighttime sky.
- ◆ Involve your group in a readiness activity that prepares them for the story: A game that reviews information taught in previous weeks can help bring those who were present as well as absentees to a common level of information about events preceding today's story.

- ◆ Drawing a picture of a typical problem situation can get children thinking about the dilemma faced by the person in the story. Listening to a tape of a song can introduce children to concepts that are illustrated in the story. A sensory (touch, taste, smell, etc) experience can arouse interest in some facet of the story.

4. Identify Children's Level of Familiarity with the Story

- ◆ Teachers face two opposing challenges in telling Bible stories to most groups of children. On one hand, there may be aspects of the story that are totally unfamiliar to children in your class. Customs, terminology, objects, relationships can all cause misunderstanding and confusion if not clearly explained.
- ◆ On the other hand, some children have heard many of the Bible stories and may express boredom at the prospect of hearing it again. An effective teacher keeps both these factors in mind in planning how to present a Bible story.
- ◆ First, identify any aspects of your story you feel may be unfamiliar to at least some children in your group. It is usually easier to deal with these before actually telling the story narrative, rather than interrupting the flow of the story and make an explanation. Second, explain why you feel the story is worth hearing again.

5. Focus Your Story

- ◆ If you have ever tried to tell a joke, and then forgotten the punch line, you can appreciate the need for a clear point to every story. No matter how skillfully you tell a Bible story, it will have little impact unless the point of the story is clear to you and your class.
- ◆ The stories in the Bible were intended to cause people to think and then respond. No story was placed in Scripture just to provide entertainment. The stories should always lead us to consider our own lives in light of the example we have studied and then act on that consideration.
- ◆ Some teachers get so involved in filling their stories with interesting tidbits and descriptions that when they come to the conclusion no one is too sure what the story is all about. Most first and second graders, and many older children as well, cannot recognize the point of a story on their own.
- ◆ The teacher must make the point of the story very clear to the children. To make sure the point does not get lost, tell the story so that *the point is the focus of all that happens. If more than one main point is illustrated by a story, it is best to select one and emphasize it. One good idea, clearly communicated, is better than several good ideas that no one remembers.
- ◆ As a general rule, the longer the story becomes, the harder it is to keep it focused. Therefore, keep your story brief. A good rule of thumb for a beginning teacher is to limit your story to one minute for each year of the children's age. If you have more than one age level in your class, target for the middle of the group, but be ready to shorten the story if the younger ones become restless.

6. Plan Your Story Sequence

Every story have five essential ingredients, each of which is needed in order for the story to make sense to children.

- ◆ **Setting:** Where did the story take place? In most stories this is the least important of the five factors.
- ◆ **Character:** Who is main person in the story? If the main character has an unfamiliar name of occupation, take a moment to introduce hem or her before starting the story. Present enough details about this person to help your audience care about what happens to him or her.
- ◆ **Beginning Event:** What happened to the main person? Something has to happen to set the main character in action and to get the listeners interested in what he or she is going to do. The event should always be expressed in terms that make it relevant to the audience.
- ◆ **Action:** What does the main person do in response to the beginning event? If the audience is interested in what happens to the main character, they automatically want to know what he or she is going to do in the situation you have presented.
- ◆ **Result:** What happened as a result of the main character's action? If you are teaching younger elementary children, present five parts of the story in their chronological order. If you teach older children, you may occasionally want to vary the order of the story parts. Also, your stories may be longer and have several cycles of events, actions and results.

7. INVOLVE YOUR GROUP IN DISCOVERY

- ◆ A good storyteller also included opportunity for children to use their Bibles either before, during or after the story presentation.
- ◆ Help each child to: Locate the passage where the story is found. Even first graders can be helped to accomplish this task. Locating the passage in the Bible not only give the child the sense that the story is really from the Bible, but also begins to build confidence in learning to handle the Bible.

Read something the Bible says. Rather than just asking a child to read a verse, ask the child to find some specific piece of information in the verse: a person's name, a word, a phrase, a statement, an answer to a question. Often the child who claims to already know the story will be surprised with something he or she reads in the Bible.

Understand what he or she has read. Not until third or fourth grade do many children begin to read for "sense." Patiently guide children in this task by asking questions such as, "Can you think of another way to say that?" or "How would you explain that verse to a friend?"