



Every Child a Talker

**Building a path to a story:
Approaching sharing stories together,
from a slightly different angle.**

It is common practice to base our termly planning round a theme or topic. To give the topic a focus we often share a story with the children, and then involve them in various activities based on the story. From these activities we cover the six areas of learning. So we might start by sharing the story of 'Handa's Surprise', by Eileen Browne, and then have a fruit tasting session, make fruit kebabs, squeeze our own fruit juice, and play with African animals in a 'jungle' we have made in the builders' tray etc.

This is usually a very effective way of developing children's learning. However this makes a very big assumption: that all the children will enjoy, understand and be inspired by the story in the first place. My experience is that many children do not get as much from storybooks as we might expect. This can be because the story may be difficult to understand: possibly because it is outside the children's experience, they may not like or recognise the illustrations, or they may lack the language skills to be able to make sense of a story. Or perhaps they are learning English as an additional language, and just don't have the vocabulary to follow what the story is about.

So how can we make sure that all children get the most from the exciting activities that we have planned, as well as enjoy the story? One way is to plan activities related to the story **before** we share the story together. Choose some core words and ideas that you want all children to explore: (six is a good number to start with). Then plan activities and open-ended experiences round these words and ideas. As the children play and explore, they will begin to build up an understanding of the central ideas and words in the story. (As long as we get involved and support and chat with them). When they are ready, we can then share the story with them individually, and as a group. And from there we can develop more words and ideas.

How does this work? Let's take for example the story of 'Handa's Surprise'. Handa is a little Kenyan girl who goes for a walk to see her friend, with a basket of fruit on her head. On the way different animals steal a fruit at a time, without her realising it. Just before she reaches her friend's village, she passes underneath a tangerine tree and lots of tangerines fall into her basket. When she shows her friend they are both very surprised. It's a simple story, and most children will be familiar with some of the fruit and animals: like *bananas*, and *elephant*. But there are some unusual ones that they will all need to learn; e.g. *antelope*, *guava* and *tangerine*.

At Smarteez Nursery in Bedford, with children aged nine months to four and a half, we planned a 'Handa's Surprise Fun Day' for children and parents, using our new approach.

Planning to share 'Handa's Surprise' from back to front

First we decided on the main ideas we wanted all children to experience, in order of importance:

- *Tangerines* (as opposed to *oranges*, which most children knew)
- *Basket*
- *Fruit*, (and the names of as many fruits as possible, (including *banana, orange, mango, avocado pear, passion fruit, and pineapple*)
- *Africa*
- As many *African animals* as possible (including *monkey, elephant, giraffe, lion, zebra, ostrich, hyena and gorilla*)

Next we decided on the activities we would involve the children and parents in:

- Fruit tasting
- Making fruit kebabs
- Making fruit juice
- Making animal masks
- Finding large animal puppets and cuddly toys hidden in the trees and around the garden
- Listening to African music
- Sharing information books about Africa and African animals
- 'Small world play' with plastic animals in the sand tray and in a tray of hay.

And especially for the younger children

- Hiding the animals inside and under baskets
- Sharing 'noisy' information books about African animals
- Playing musical instruments in time to the music
- Eating the fruit at tea time

And especially for the very youngest children

- Putting lots of tangerines in baskets and taking them out again (this was great fun!!)
- Playing musical instruments in time to the music
- Eating the fruit at tea time

When we had shared these experiences we ended the morning with an interactive storytime, where children joined in with the puppets and real fruit. We were all thrilled with the children's responses to the story, which had been brought alive by all the activities that had been leading up to it.

We had done all this in a day, but in another setting we might have spread all these activities over a week, having the story at the end of each day. As the story is repeated, the children become more and more involved, until they know the story, it's ideas and it's vocabulary completely! The babies may not be able to share the story, but they are involved at their own level, developing their experience through lots of repeated sensory activities and musical experiences.

To explore these ideas further, see: *Building a path to a story 2: Hippo's Bath*
Building a path to a story 3: Duck in the Truck

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