



Every Child a Talker

Building a path to a story 2: 'Hippo's Bath'

We are used to sharing stories with groups of children, and then following them up with activities based on the stories. But what about starting the activities *first*, and ending with the story? This can be a much more effective way of making sure that all the children are involved, and that they all learn as much as possible.

Let's take *Hippo's Bath* as an example. This is a story I made up for young children.

On Monday a parrot flies to the waterhole, and tells all the animals that a giant hippo is going to come on Sunday to splash in the water and then drink it all up.

The elephant (because he is the biggest) tells all the animals to get a bottle and fill it up with water, so that the giant hippo can't have any. Each day a different animal (elephant, snake, chimpanzee, giraffe, ostrich, lion) comes to the waterhole to fill his bottle. On each day the bottles get smaller in size. On Sunday the hippo arrives, but he is not a giant, he is a baby hippo. He is very upset because there is no water left in the waterhole.

All of the animals are very sorry, and tip their water back. The animals realize that there is enough water for them all to drink and swim in, as long as they all share.

It's a simple story, but with lots of ideas and vocabulary. So how did we make it accessible for all children? At St. Mary's Primary School, in Tilbury, we planned a 'Hippo's Bath day', with activities first and the story together at the end of the day.

Our core ideas and vocabulary

- *Africa* and African animals (including *hippopotamus*, *elephant*, *zebra*, *hyena*, *gorilla*, *parrot*, *ostrich*)
- *Water hole*: as the place where African animals come to drink
- *Big, bigger, biggest, small, smaller, smallest, too much, not enough, more, less.*
- *Sharing*

Our planned child-initiated and adult-supported activities

- Playing with large puppets on the floor. An adult supports the play and helps the children learn the animal names and noises. Using a set of photo information books, we talk about what the real animals look like, and to find out about Africa.
- Hiding all the animals under a cloth. The children take turns to put their hands under the cloth and take out an animal. Can they guess what it is before they take it out? How did they know?

- Small world play with the small plastic animals. Use a builders' tray to make a jungle and a 'waterhole' (perhaps using a mirror or silver foil) with the children.
- Sharing information books with the children as they play.
- Water play, using the tin bath and a water tray. Using the plastic bottles to talk about the different shapes and sizes as we play. Can they recognize what was originally in the bottle, from its shape and the label? Which one is biggest, smallest, and can they put them in order? Can we count them?
- Playing 'Pass the parcel'. Help the children to wrap up the big puppets in wrapping paper. Talk about their animal as you do the wrapping. Can they remember what it is called? Play 'pass the parcel' with the small animals too.

What happened?

There was a lot of excitement. As we predicted, the play in the water was the original focus for most of the children. They loved the tin bath, filling the bottles, talking about what was originally in them (Coca Cola, Fruit Shoot, tomato ketchup, washing up liquid etc.) They enjoyed arranging them by size, and these activities generated a huge amount of language.

What *didn't* happen was the small world play in the builders' tray. What *did* happen was that the children spontaneously took the small animals to the digging area and began to dig holes for the animals. These holes became 'water holes', 'traps', 'caves', 'homes' and even a 'school'! This aspect of the play, which was child-initiated, completely captured the children's imaginations. As a result we were able to chat with the children about what they were doing. While they were playing we brought them information books that showed animals drinking, chasing and eating (each other!), and this took their play in different directions, as well as introducing and reinforcing the vocabulary.

At the end of the session we brought all the children together for an interactive 'show', where we told the story together. These children were mainly three years old, but were able to join in the story for almost 30 minutes.

We had decided to share these activities with the children during one day, and in the days that followed children continued with these and other activities in small groups. However we could have decided to introduce the activities for a week: telling the story as the children played, and ending the session with the story together. We could have repeated the story at the end of each day, with the children gradually shaping and developing the story, so that by the end of the week they might be telling the story with the minimum of adult support, and even making up their own stories.

In this way all of the children would have been involved at an appropriate level

To explore these ideas further, see *Building a path to a story 3: Duck in the Truck*

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