Every Child a Talker

'Hippo's Bath': an interactive story experience

We are used to sharing stories with groups of children, and then following them up with activities based on the story. But what about starting with the activities first, and ending with the story?

Children with communication needs, or those learning English as an additional language, often don't get as much out of group storytime as we would like. This is often because they just don't understand the vocabulary involved in the story. So it can be helpful to introduce the vocabulary first, through child-initiated and adult-supported activities.

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 to make it accessible for all children?

The 'waterhole' is an old tin bath, and the plastic bottles (one for each day of the week) are of different sizes, and can be ordered from big to small. They are also familiar for children because of their shape, colour and labels (Coca Cola, Fanta, Fruit Shoot, Ribena, milk, baby formula milk, shampoo, Fairy Liquid etc).
The animals are large hand puppets, and a set of small plastic animals.

So we have all the ingredients for some fun activities to introduce the children to the vocabulary:

- Play with all the puppets on the floor. An adult can support the play and help the children learn the animal names and noises. Use a set of photo information books to talk about what the real animals look like, and to find out about Africa.
- Hide all the animals under a cloth. The children take turns to put their hand 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. Share information books with the children as they play.

- Water play, using the tin bath (or if you haven't got a bath, use your water tray.) Use the plastic bottles to talk about the different shapes and sizes as you play. Can they recognize what was in the bottle? Which one is biggest, smallest, and can they put them in order? Can we count them? Etc…

- Play '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.

- In small groups (and particularly with children needing support with language) act out the story, so they are familiar with the sequence of events.

  After a day of these games (and anything else you can think of, including large paintings, drawings, taking photos of the children with their favourite puppet, singing songs like 'Daddy's taking us to the zoo tomorrow', 'Walking through the Jungle', and a 'days of the week song') you will all be ready to share the story with the whole group.

  Storytime always works best if all the adults join in. With all the children, share out the puppets and help the children to act out the story with you.
  Using these ideas, all the children should be able to participate, and they will have learned a lot in the process!

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