

8. Story Basket:

How it is Done...

With this method, the story comes out of a basket. I have one special basket designated for this exciting activity. Whichever story I tell, comes out of that basket. Everyone recognizes it and gets very excited when I bring it out. It is always covered with a piece of fabric so that nobody can see what is in it. You have every item arranged inside so that you know where to find things by touch. You can peek in if you need to of course, that only heightens the curiosity. You usually have the children's full attention. Everyone is glued to what is happening.

I start by bringing out a piece of fabric. I let it glide through the air, holding it at two corners, and let it rest before me on the floor where I have all the children around me. As you lay out the fabric you say, "Once upon a time..." and start the story. This is a very important part because the children will know that the cloth stage is where the story will happen and that this is your space.

I always practice the story at home before I present it to the children. This is where you find out if something works or not. I usually tell the story to my daughter Nisha, and together we iron out story lines or strategic moves. Now that you have the stage and all the items in the basket under a cloth, the story can begin.

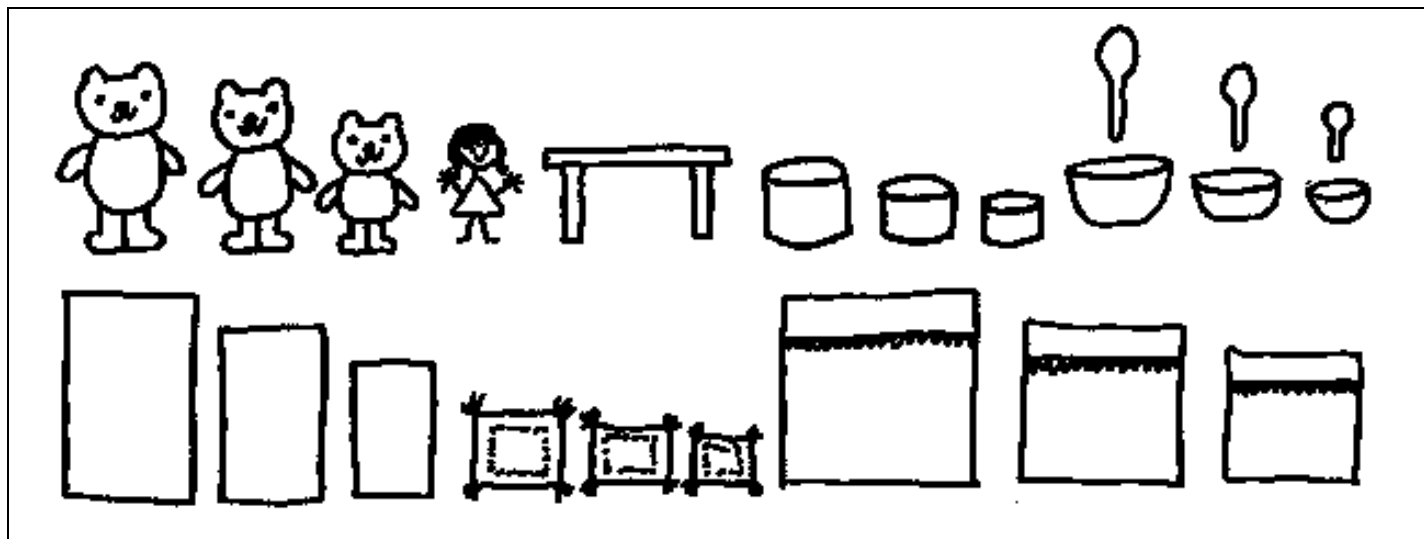
As you tell the story, you bring out people, animals or stage props and move them around according to what is required. With the bear's story, you can bring out a green fabric stage and say, "once upon a time there was a forest and in this forest there was a little house." Now you can lie out a smaller different colored square of fabric to signify the house. "In this little house lived three bears. There was big Papa bear, medium Mama bear and teeny weenie Baby bear." Bring out the bears as you speak. "The bears had a table." Bring out the table. "They had chairs. There was a big chair for Papa bear... etc." Let the whole story unfold as you remember it in your own words and comments and the children's interaction. You can ask questions or let the children speak some of the repetitive sentences with you. I usually end a story with, "and they lived happily ever after."

You present the story in an orderly, courteous way, with some humor, eye contact, good mimic and the right sequence to go along with it. When the children go to play the story for themselves, they will imitate you in action and words. If you treat an object very specially and with importance then the children will pick up on it. They will then be gentle with the objects and make sure that nothing is broken or lost. The basket will have a special place in a story corner where things can stand without falling over. You might make certain guidelines for the story corner. For example:

- Not more than two people at a time.
- Keep items in the story corner.
- Make sure all items are in the basket when you leave.



You could have a little checklist with pictures pinned in the story corner for the children to look at as they put things back into the basket. Like this:



I always keep all items for one story together in a see through bag and include a sheet with the story written on it. In this way, they are easily accessible. Especially as a teacher of small children it is great to have these stories handy. Sometimes, you are unable to prepare an activity, or it might be raining and the children are restless. If these situations occur, you can pull out a story and pass the time in a satisfying way.

How to Make a Story Basket:

Fabric: The color of the piece of fabric you use in the introduction of the story is chosen according to your theme.

- For an ocean: blue or purple tones.
- For a forest or meadow: green tones.
- For some stories you can take any color and match it harmoniously with the other items. I usually do not take colors that are too bright fluorescent since this should be a calming activity, where everyone should concentrate.

The size of the cloth should be at least 24" x 24" (60 x 60 cm). Mine are not always the same. It depends on how wide the fabric is when you buy it. I have taken pieces of old shirts or dresses as well. I usually use plain fabrics, because as soon as you use a patterned cloth it interferes with what is happening in the story and you do not see the characters and the props well. Fabric with a very small flower pattern on it will also work. You can use it as a beautiful meadow full of flowers. In my garden story, it also works well because it blends well with the other colors. Sometimes I go to the bargain table in the fabric store in order to get new ideas. This is where I found the shiny, yellow see through cloth that signifies sunshine in my garden story. For the owl story I found black and blue combined and knew right away that this would have potential for a night story. I always cut along the thread so that you can make a fringe around the edges if you do not want to sew a small hem. You want the fabric piece to look tidy; you do not want threads to be hanging everywhere. You can take all different shades. For example you can use a lighter green for the spring story as for the summer story. There are beautiful mauves, pinks and yellows. You can make a real piece of art with all the other colors you add and blend in one story.

The three bears story is very easy to put together. You will probably find all the items you need around the house and will not need to buy anything. It is great to put the story together with the children's help. They would probably be thrilled if you took their teddy bear for the story. The children will have ideas and look for things themselves. You can sew little pillows with them, go to the bush to cut some stumps for chairs or let them make bowls out of play dough. With the children's help, the story will become more special and the learning steps will be extended. In a family, the older children can make and present a story for the younger children. If you have a buddy system at school, the older children can make the story for their buddies. For Goldilocks and the Three Bears, you need the following:

Bears: Three teddy bears, three different sizes.

Goldilocks: I used a finger puppet with a piece of dowel to make it stand up. You can use any little blonde girl from the dollhouse or toy box.

Table: Any piece of wood or cardboard with two blocks to rest on will do. Use a table cloth if you want to.

Chairs: Here you can cut three different thicknesses and lengths of logs or take little boxes, blocks or make Lego chairs.

Bowls: Plastic, play dough etc.

Spoons: Cut out of cardboard or plastic coffee can lids.

Beds: Three mattresses, different sizes (stiff fabric pieces). Three pillows of different sizes (real pillows with stuffing or just fabric squares). Three covers in different sizes (blankets out of fabric).

Build your confidence by being inventive and making things with little and very simply. You can take matchboxes, toilet rolls, Popsicle sticks etc. to make almost anything. The simpler it is, the more a child can relate to it and get a feeling of "I can make this too." Modeling clay or play dough can be used for many things. On the other hand, you can make little pieces of art by embroidering the pillows, making little patchwork quilts or dressing up the bears. This could make a beautiful gift from a grandparent. Maybe Grandpa could make the chairs? It is incredibly satisfying - it beats watching TV.

I have invented most of my story baskets myself. For small children, it can be something very simple, preferably with a repetitive element. If I found a cute or suitable critter or object, I would design a story around it. You can change things too. If you do not have a horse, you might have a cow, or, if you do not have an alligator that would scare everybody, you could use a cold wet frog that is not so exciting to sit beside either! You find some interesting things at garage sales or liquidation stores.

I hope that after reading the story basket section in this book, your imagination and enthusiasm will burst with new ideas. It is my hope that you will not just copy the stories and other toys, but that you will have many ideas yourself and try them. Many stories are suitable for this method.



What Children Learn and How they Learn through Story Baskets

With personal interaction, we can tailor-make activities to the children's needs. One of the big things when working with small children is that we are flexible. As a matter of fact, it is a great necessity. TV on the other hand is not flexible, I find it very overpowering.

As you do story baskets or other activities, you get into situations where you get a little bit of unrest and fidgeting amongst the children. I get them focussed by asking a question. This is the nice thing about personal interaction. We can bring them back on track with a smile, with our eyes and by giving them a feeling of belonging. We can say things like:

- “Oh, I wonder what is going to happen next?”
- “Did you see what Goldilocks just did?”
- “Let's have a little nap with Goldilocks.”
- When the bears go for a walk in the forest you could get everyone to stand up and hold out their arms like the trees for the bears to walk through. There are untold possibilities.

As a parent or caregiver we are connected to a child. We listen to and understand his or her needs. In this way, we are able to gradually fulfill and work on important steps of development. Here we can plant seeds in the right season, cultivate them, water them, watch them grow into a healthy little plant, with a little pruning here and there, putting in a stake to help it grow straight and then watch it bloom and bear fruit. On the other hand, with too much TV too many seeds are planted and nothing will grow properly. Everything will crowd each other out, taking away from each other the nutrients needed to grow healthily. Nobody is there to help cultivate, prune or stake the plant, it is often left to itself. With little or too much water, plants will shrivel up or get flooded. There is little blooming and not much fruit. Often the fruit is bad and the pests will thrive on a sickly plant. There is no healthy execution of events to take place for normal development.

Let's stay connected to the child.

Children love to play with the story baskets themselves. For many, it becomes an outlet for frustrations, sadness, confusion and joy they are experiencing at certain times in their lives and in their families. Do not be surprised if the child puts Papa bear to bed with a spanking or if Mama bear cannot leave the table without finishing her porridge. Many children are dealing with tremendous crises and a basket story can at least lessen the pressure on them a bit. It can be real therapy and many times may even show us what is ailing a child.

Story baskets work well when teaching another language. You do not just read a story, there are always actions that go with it. Even if children do not understand, they are still interested and understand most of it by the action that is happening. As you touch an item, you say the word that goes with it. With this and eye contact, the basket story is very effective. You can repeat the words or sentences, or even get the children to repeat the words as you hold up the items.

You can use many things from nature. There is untold wealth in nature, waiting to be used. Moss for nests, hay, shells, driftwood, rocks, sticks, flowers, seeds etc. It is important for us to connect the children to nature and show them its beauty as much as we can. We can make them feel special by using items that they have found in nature themselves.

If you are a creative, stay at home parent and have preschoolers or kindergartners, you might be able to tell stories in your child's classroom. Some teachers are very open and would really appreciate it. It would also be very special for your child (a "look at what my mom or dad can do" situation).

I do not want to repeat myself too often, but you know yourself by now that a lot of other learning applies to the basket story too.

- Creative thinking
- Coordination
- Consequential thinking
- Imagination
- Language skills
- Science lesson
- Small motor skills
- Stage skills

How a Story is Born

I believe that our main focus should always be the children. We should be tuned into the children's needs. Our frame of mind should be fashioned so that we can become an instrument of help for them. We want to prepare them for life. We don't just want to keep them busy all day so that they will stay out of our hair!

The potential of a child is mind-boggling. How can we bring out the best in them? By putting a story together, you speak to the child in many ways. When you work with a child as a parent or caregiver, you really get to know the child. You know what attracts them, how they respond to things and how they must touch things to explore and find out! By using this curiosity, this inability to keep hands off, this attraction to color, things that are cute, things to be cuddled, owned and explored, we trick the children into learning. We can add the magical and the fascinating and always sprinkle on some humor. I think it is important that a story is simple enough for the child to relate to it.

There should always be a good measure of reality in it.

Too many people nowadays are living in a fantasy world. Reality and truth will give us freedom, not only the fulfillment of our own desires! So as your mind gets into this mode, that is directed to the child's wellbeing, mingled with excitement, sincerity and lots of love for the child, all you have to do is open up your creative thinking, throw in a few cute critters, have specific order, a good moral, nice colors and there is your story!

***** Try It! *****

