

# Storying and deaf children

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*We were at the farm and there was lots of goats and one was a very big goat and he was a naughty goat and he did try to get my ice cream and he made me jump and my ice cream fell down and got dirty and there was germs on it and I cried. Goats shouldn't eat ice cream because ice cream is for children not for goats and I didn't like it.*

Harry (4 years)

At four, Harry is already a storyteller. In this example, he shows that he can set the scene, identify the characters, describe a sequence of events, explain causes and outcomes and comment on the content of the story. Gordon Wells (1986), having studied young children at home and subsequently as they entered school, argued that the experience and skill of storying was key to later educational achievement. Why should this be the case and what are the implications for deaf children and their parents and teachers?

The ability to create stories in the mind is crucial to development and learning (Engel, 1995). There are two main aspects: communicative and cognitive. Stories enable us to communicate our experiences, knowledge and feelings to other people. We obtain feedback from others on our stories and build up a representation of experience that is shared with others in our family and community. Harry is likely to have received information about the habits of goats, advice on what to do next time and sympathy for the loss of his ice cream from other family members, while the story will become part of the family's shared history: 'Do you remember when Harry went on the nursery trip to the farm...?' Additionally children create stories together in play and this is an important means of building relationships.

In addition to the social and communicative importance of stories, they are a key way in which we all make sense of the world and our place in it. From a young age we identify events and their sequence in everyday life and try to make sense of these. Parents story events for us in anticipation and recall: 'We are going to the shops and then....' 'Remember this morning when ....' We are able to distance ourselves from the events and examine both these and our own role in them. We start to create a sense of ourselves through these stories. We are also enabled to deal with emotional

experiences by standing back from them. When Harry tells the story about the goat it is not as frightening for him as it was at the time. In the same way, fictional stories about fear, loss and other powerful emotions can help children to understand feelings and, through repeated tellings of the same story, gain a sense of control and order. Children will act out familiar stories and create new ones, gaining an understanding of different perspectives and other lives. They also learn that there is a range of possibilities in the way the story develops and that a story may not always end the same way.

If parents and children share a language, then adults can model stories both directly with children and indirectly by using them with other people in everyday life. If there is little access to the language then these opportunities will be limited. Peer group story-making may be limited, also, if all children do not share language skills. A deaf child in a mainstream nursery may appear to be playing in the sand tray in the same way as the hearing children. Closer inspection, however, shows that whilst all the children are hiding and finding objects in the sand, only the hearing children are making a story from the actions. Adults will need to be proactive in helping deaf children develop both understanding and use of storying in a range of contexts.

Teachers of the Deaf can encourage parents to model stories using pictures, facial expression and gestures as well as signed or spoken language. They can play with their children, acting out events or stories from television or books using props such as sofa cushions for a boat. They can recall events and make up novel scenarios using small world materials and they can support children's understanding of stories in books using objects they find themselves or those in storybags.

Teachers of the Deaf may well find that children they support have limited experience of creating their own stories when they enter school. A playful, creative approach on the part of the adults can encourage the child to be imaginative. Props can be used to develop shared stories. A wooden doll and a plastic spider, for example, can be used to explore actions, feelings and to develop a number of different scenarios. Children can act out stories they have been told and also need to be supported to develop alternative endings, another event in a series or a new story. If they have had limited storying experience, then deaf children may find it difficult to meet age-level expectations in writing. As access to a range of fiction has been found to be the best way to develop children's writing of stories (Barrs & Cork, 2001), then it is essential that deaf children have whole texts at an appropriate level read to them. Additionally the chance to act out the stories can be invaluable in aiding understanding. Children may need the support of small world materials and puppets to develop their stories before they can be expected to write imaginatively.

Many deaf children are confident and creative storytellers. The celebrating and nurturing of these skills needs to be undertaken alongside the development of the language that encodes their stories.

### References

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### Interesting.....

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Anon contributor!



The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) is the UK charity dedicated to the protection of the marine environment and its wildlife.

In 2001, with funding from Cheltenham & Gloucester plc, MCS was able to establish a marine turtle conservation programme which aims to secure a safer future for endangered marine turtles in the UK and abroad. Six of the worlds seven marine turtle species are now listed as either endangered or critically endangered and the MCS is supporting marine turtle research and conservation projects around the world in order to try and help save the turtles.

In the autumn of 2002, building on their joint efforts to protect marine turtles, Cheltenham & Gloucester teamed up with the MCS to organise a poetry competition for 4-11 year olds. Entitled 'Celebrate the Sea', it aimed to get youngsters thinking about the precious marine environment that the MCS works to preserve. The poems prove that the younger generation today is inspired to consider the environment for the future.

The book of poems is available for £3.50 (incl p&p) from the Marine Conservation Society . Alternatively, you can register to take part in one of the fundraising activities for turtles and the book will be yours free of charge! For more information about school fundraising for marine turtles, give MCS a call, ☎ 01989 566017 visit [www.mcsuk.org](http://www.mcsuk.org) or email [turtle@mcsuk.org](mailto:turtle@mcsuk.org)

