



Early Reading Connects

Before storytelling begins

It is storytelling “makeover” time at the Children’s Centre at the Mall in Luton. As part of their Every Child a Talker (ECAT) project and with the support of the Early Language Consultant, Michael Jones, staff at the centre have taken on a new approach to storytelling. Practitioner, Sarah Craigs tells the tale.



Our old approach to storytelling sessions saw practitioners doing much of the talking, it was more of a “one way” approach in terms of communication and use of props. The children were told that they were going to read a story, which the member of staff might know very well, but would be completely new to the children. The story would often contain vocabulary and language beyond the children’s understanding, especially for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). The new approach focuses on using a combination of adult-led and child-initiated interactions, allowing maximum potential for children to use their imaginations, and for small world play to be a part of the storytelling session.

To put our new approach into practice we used *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell. Before starting the story, the children were introduced to vocabulary and language that appear in the book and given time to play with the animal props. We spent time talking *with* the children. We involved every child in discussions and encouraged them to communicate their ideas and thoughts. This is something which we previously had not been doing.

The children loved the way the story session was so visual and interactive. They especially liked holding the animals and having time to play with them imaginatively before the story. A particularly popular game was hiding the animals under a cloth then taking it in turns to take one out and talk about it. They enjoyed taking it in turns to put the animals back in their box to return to the zoo. The children saw the funny side of why the zoo animals in the story would be unsuitable pets. One child said, “I wouldn’t want a monkey for a pet because they are too naughty and my mum wouldn’t like that”.



“I wouldn’t want a monkey for a pet, they are too naughty”

Practitioners saw that the key to the children’s enjoyment of a story is the activities they do beforehand. By the time the practitioner came to actually read the story with the children, they were familiar with the key vocabulary in it, had better general understanding and were, as a result, eager to listen and participate throughout. It was also good preparation for an extended discussion on pets after reading the story.

Since adopting Michael's approach, we have seen an improvement in the children’s communication and language for thinking. The staff have become more confident storytellers and enjoy these sessions with the children immensely. One practitioner commented, “I have really enjoyed doing this story and it was wonderful to see the children so involved. They really used their imaginations when they played with the animals and it was good to see the quieter ones taking part”. Another explained how the children did not stop when the story ended: “The children extended the story by creating their own environment then used the animals to make up their own narratives”. One child said, “Can we read that story again tomorrow?”

We are really looking forward to more story time sessions like these.