

# Our world, our story

Children enjoy acting out and putting themselves in a story even better than hearing one. *Michael Jones* describes an exciting role-play project

**Y**oung children often take part in role-play: creating play sequences that are based on their own experiences, such as cooking, going to a cafe or shopping. As they get older, these scenes can become very sophisticated, and take on an imagined dimension, such as 'going to the shops and meeting an alien'.

We also encourage children to get involved in small-world play, usually with small wooden or plastic animals and figures. This type of play can help children to move on to creating imagined stories without objects: a skill that will be needed later for, among other things, creative writing in school.

Lisa Pepper and Sam Randall are early years practitioners leading the Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project in their setting. Along with their colleagues at Chapel Street Children's Centre and Nursery School in Luton, they are constantly looking for imaginative ways to extend children's involvement, storytelling, vocabulary development and social skills. Like other ECaT settings in Luton, supporting children learning English as an additional language is a high priority, and staff are committed to extending the language development of all children, including those at risk of language delay.

Lisa and Sam have been particularly keen to support children's use of language in imaginative play. They were able to use ECaT funding to invest in large and small puppets, and resources for small-world play. The puppets included large creatures such as dragons and sharks, as well as child-size, human-like characters that children have given personalities and names.

'Timmy' is particularly popular, and children use him in their fantasy play: putting him to bed, reading him a story and occasionally saving him from being eaten by the shark! Some children made up play routines where they included themselves in a simple story with the large puppets. They would spontaneously tell themselves the story as they acted it out – for example, 'I'm taking Timmy with me on holiday and we are going swimming.'

This was great fun, but Lisa and Sam were keen to encourage the children to create imaginary scenes and stories, in the hope that this would further increase the children's storytelling skills and use of imaginative language. This led them to give a new twist to a familiar idea, and introduce an activity that shows infinite possibilities for expanding children's play and imaginative language – as well as being relatively cheap and simple to make. Lisa and Sam explain how 'Our World: Our Story' came about.

## DEVELOPMENT

'We had been exploring using soft toys and pictures of popular children's TV and cartoon characters in play activities to increase young children's involvement and language development. Many children watch TV and are familiar with cartoon characters from films and DVDs. The children at Chapel Street love to talk about these characters, and become highly involved in group activities that feature soft toys and books depicting favourites such as Postman Pat, Fireman Sam, Spiderman and Dora the Explorer.

'We were already using "storyboards" to develop children's storytelling skills, and particularly to help them recount traditional tales

**Because the children were so excited, we knew that we were on the right track**



Chapel Street children use Gruffalo

pictures to construct a story

such as The Gingerbread Man or The Enormous Turnip. We made our own storyboard activities by drawing key characters and objects from the story, laminating them, and putting a small strip of Velcro on the back of each picture. As we told the story the children stuck the pictures on to a board with a felt surface.

'The first step in our activity was to take photographs of the children, using a digital camera. As with the storyboard pictures, we laminated them and put Velcro on the back. Then we found images of popular TV characters on the internet, and gave these the same treatment. As soon as we showed the pictures to the children, they wanted to make up small story sequences of themselves playing with their favourite characters. Because they were so excited, we knew we were on the right track.

shark. This led to story sequences such as Ashley's highly involved, 'I'm saving the boys of the world from the dragon, with the help of Timmy the Puppet.'

Next, Lisa explains, 'we took photos of nursery backgrounds and equipment, such as the playground, sandpit, the rocking horse and the train set. This allowed the children to make up sequences involving themselves and fantasy characters in a familiar environment. Our backgrounds have become more complex, with photographs taken from the internet, including clouds, the sea and mountains. This gives a lot more scope for the children to create true fantasies, such as "I'm flying with Spiderman".'

## SELF IN THE STORY

There have been some very interesting and unexpected developments. Some children take the photos of themselves and their favourite characters and play with them in the sand, or incorporate them in their play with the train track. One child built a small house made from Sticklebricks, and put a photograph of himself inside. 'The children took the activity to another level, where they were developing stories about themselves as they played. For some children, and particularly the younger ones, this was a very sophisticated activity, and a great help for their language,' says Sam.

As children could now fantasise about themselves as part of a play sequence with cartoon characters, it seemed a natural step to explore whether they could imagine themselves as being part of their favourite storybooks.

Sam and Lisa cite the example of Anousha. 'Anousha's favourite story was *The Gruffalo*, and she could recite the whole rhyming story more or less off by heart. We drew pictures of the backgrounds and the main characters from the story. As we expected, Anousha and her friend Liam used the pictures to act out the story. When we gave Anousha a photograph of herself, we were delighted to see that she took the mouse character away and replaced it with her photo. She then retold the whole story, where Anousha meets the Gruffalo and has adventures in the wood. As she told the story she replaced the word "mouse" with "Anousha" in exactly the right places. Anousha and Liam then went on to imagine each other in the story, with Anousha as the mouse and Liam as the Gruffalo.'



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## RECORDINGS

Lisa and Sam have recorded the children's stories, to share with other children, and to celebrate their achievements. 'We photographed the children as they made up their stories, and wrote down exactly what they said. We weren't sure whether to change the children's words, so that the stories were more grammatically correct. However, in the end we decided to write down their exact words.'

'Ryan's story was: "Noddy say hello to Postman Pat. Say hello Noddy and hold him hand. Elephant squish Noddy." As he has grown up he finds it highly amusing to look back on how he used to talk! We put the story in his profile so that we can see the progress in his language and vocabulary.'

'We encourage some of the older children to give their story a title and to draw a picture of it. Some will automatically have a go at writing as well. Obviously we don't want to turn the whole activity into "work", but for a lot of children this is a natural extension of their story, and gives them a real sense of achievement.'

## SOCIAL SKILLS

There are also important social dimensions to these activities. Staff at Chapel Street have been surprised at the complexity of children's ideas and language, and particularly how they talk and cooperate with each other. One little boy regularly takes out a photo of himself and puts it into imaginary scenes where he is playing with specific children. Lisa and Sam feel that he is using the photos to show what he would like to do. This provides insight into how the activity might be used to help children build relationships with each other.

A comment from Julia Miller, Chapel Street's head teacher, should finish the story. She says, 'This work has really sparked the children's creativity. I have been amazed to hear them tell their fascinating and sometimes highly involved imaginary stories. It made me realise that we need to help the children develop verbal storytelling skills as a precursor to writing them when they are older. After all, if they cannot imagine an exciting, vibrant story, why would any child be motivated to write it down?' ■

*Michael Jones is an early years trainer and writer. From 2008 to July 2010 he was the early language consultant for Luton's ECaT project. He is currently consultant for the ECaT projects in Bedford and Thurrock*



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