

# Toddlers' Storytime

Bonnie S. Fowler

My parents tell a story about my younger sister when she was two years old. Many nights when bedtime arrived, the lively two-year-old was simply not ready to settle in for the evening. For these occasions, my parents developed a game which they called "Run to Mommy." The rules were simple. My father sat in the living room with Susan in front of him, and my mother sat in the kitchen, a few rooms away. Dad would say to Susan, "Run to Mommy, Susan. Run to Mommy." Susan would run with all the might that a two-year-old could muster to her mother from whom she would receive a huge hug. Then my mother would say, "Run to Daddy, Susan. Run to Daddy." Back into the living room she would run where again she would receive a huge hug, this time from her father. The whole process was repeated again and again. "Run to Mommy" then "Run to Daddy," until young Susan wore herself completely out and was ready for bed.

With this and other similar tales of a two-year-old bombshell in the back of my mind, I read with some trepidation the article by Juliet Kellogg Markowsky, "Storytime for Toddlers," *School Library Journal*, May 1977. In her article, Ms. Markowsky advocated having storytimes for the very young, namely two-year-olds. She reasoned that children this young can benefit from the group experience and from the introduction to literature. She urged librarians to consider this traditional service for their younger patrons, and she offered some guidance in the actual programming.

After reading the article, my staff and I began to consider the possibilities and the difficulties with toddler programming. Our Headquarters Library held regular storytimes for three to five-year olds, and we had a fairly strict rule that a child had to be at least three years old to register for the storytime. The staff knew from past experience that twos were not mature enough to participate in the approximately forty-five minute storytime programs. Two-year-olds became bored and fidgety during programs prepared for older children. In fact, in our community, as is true in most communities, there were not many opportunities, other than nursery or day schools for two-year-olds. Most programs were geared for school-aged children with a few activities for three to five-year-olds. Yet, we reasoned, twos are capable of some simple group activities and their parents are willing to involve them in these activities. With careful selection of materials and activities, and thoughtful preparation of materials to interest the children, we thought a toddlers' storytime worth a try.

Upon the basis of our own library experiences and with the encouragement offered in Ms. Markowsky's article, we began a program for two-year-olds and their parents. It was called "Activity Time for Two Year-Olds" in order to distinguish it from our regular storytime. After two years of working with these groups, we are ready to recommend Activity Time and to urge its use to any library. The program has provided the library with new users, who visit the library long after Activity Time is over, and it has

provided staff with a new and challenging dimension to the library's traditional services.

Basically Activity Time includes two or three short story or concept books with an activity between each story and an activity at the beginning and end of each program. Books must be short and simple, including ideas familiar to the children. The illustrations should be large and eye appealing, but not too busy. Stories with an active plot such as the folktale, "The Turnip," or Eric Carle's *A Very Hungry Caterpillar* are received with more interest than those that have less tangible action. At the end of this article is a list of twenty-five books we have found useful. Flannelboard and puppet stories hold the children's attention well, although the story must be short.

The choice of activities is as important as the choice of the stories. Activities might include fingerplays, nursery rhymes, songs, and pasting and coloring activities. Activities such as planting seeds in egg cartons or paper cups, creating paper animals or paper hats, or making simple musical instruments might be used. Usually a combination of spoken or sung activities and of arts and crafts activities is used effectively in our Activity Time. However, it is important to remember that these activities must be carefully planned in order to keep the children interested. A wildly active activity will yield wildly active children who are not ready to calm down for another story.

Active or not, two-year-olds themselves are at an interesting maturation level. They are beginning to strive for autonomy, to be their own person, to say "no," and yet they still need and rely upon their parents for comfort, protection and companionship. Thus, they approach Activity Time with a very cautious interest, never straying too far from their parent but still very interested in the storytellers and in their offerings. This cautious interest does not, however, extend towards the other children attending Activity Time. Unless the children already know each other from some other experience, they are not really interested in one another. They do not talk or play with one another. Each child acts independently of the others without very much mimicking or interchange.

Many of these maturation concepts are reflected in the way the children respond to Activity Time. The children prefer to sit near their parent, but they also like to wander around away from parental control, sometimes during the middle of a story. When this random wandering takes place, it should be ignored by the storyteller as much as possible. The children usually wander back into place, sit down and resume listening to the storyteller. The children also like to watch more than they like to do. Sometimes the storyteller may be the only one doing a fingerplay while the children quietly and intently watch. When the fingerplay is repeated, the children will begin to join in. Further, the children will ask or answer questions of their parents or the storyteller, but they will not talk with the other children. Thus, there is not usually a noise problem that exists with groups of older children. However, twos' attention spans are short and easily distracted and the storytellers' sensitivity to this is crucial to achieving a good program. Finally, because they feel comfortable with the familiar, repetition is essential. The same fingerplay at the beginning of each program is received enthusiastically after the first program's introduction. Immediately the fingerplay focuses the children's attention upon the storyteller, puts the children at ease with the familiar, and reminds them of the storytime that is about to start.

In addition to the repeated fingerplays, there are other techniques that can be used to achieve an effective and interesting Activity Time. Some of these involve helping children to keep their attention upon the storyteller. Our Activity Time's publicity requests that each child be accompanied by a parent or adult helper. We explain that some of our activities are too difficult for two-year-olds to execute by themselves and that the storytime is a shared experience of stories and activities for parent and child. It is preferable for the parent to sit with the child during the program in order to help with activities and to a slight degree, in order to monitor the behavior of the child. Often these parents have younger children that they must bring along to the program. More often than not, the babies sleep right through the program and offer no distraction. Children are given nametags (necklace or taped nametags work better than those pinned on) so that the storyteller can, when necessary, call them by name. It is also a good idea for the storytellers to wear nametags to help parents and children learn their names. Nametags can be collected at the end of each program for use at the next program. Nametags might also be displayed on a bulletin board or window (for example, tags could be the leaves on the Activity Time tree) in order to publicize your program and interest the twos on their next visit.

Other techniques for maintaining an interesting Activity Time concern the actual program itself. Time of the program is important and should include a variety of fast and slow-paced items. The whole program should last twenty to thirty minutes, depending upon the maturity of your audience. Flexibility and common sense are key elements, as they are when working with any group. If a story is not working well, stop in the middle of it. If the children want to do something again, do it again. If the children do something unexpected, as they usually do, keep calm. During one of our programs, the storyteller realized that the children near the back of the group could not see the illustrations in the book she was sharing. Without a word to the children, she stood up so that those in the back could see the book. Within a few minutes, without a word, every child also stood up, a simple mimic of the storyteller. Instead of interrupting the story to tell the children to sit down, the storyteller sat back down and held her book higher. Immediately and quietly, all the children also sat down.

The usefulness of repetition must be mentioned again. Even an entire story can be repeated without losing the children's attention. For example, when a flannelboard is used, the children can place the characters on the board during the second telling, or when puppets are used, children may enjoy the puppet show more if they are already familiar with the story. A further example of this love of repetition is demonstrated in the way the children want to take home the stories that they hear at Activity Time. It is important always to have the books that have been used, as well as any others related to the topic, readily available for check out by parents and children. Another child-pleasing aspect is the handmade item that the child can take home. It is not necessary for the child to take away something from every program, but those items that are taken home are cherished (and carefully guarded by the children while they are still in the library). In fact, parents also appreciate "take aways" such as lists of further activities or the words to some of the songs and fingerplays used in the program. Parents also appreciate and

use booklists aimed at their very young. Finally it is a good idea to have "side attractions" for the children to see and use during the times before and after the Activity Time. Toys, live animals, and interesting displays can capture their interest so that their whole library experience is an enjoyable one.

It is difficult to share in an article the enthusiasm of parents, children and staff for the Activity Time programs. We have parents who week after week tell us how wonderful the programs are, and we have children who week after week ask if we are going to play the musical instruments or use the puppets again this week. Both of these responses are cherished by our staff. I heartily urge you to begin two-year-old story with activity programs. They will bring new patrons into the library. They will introduce young children to the wonder of books and other library materials. And they will challenge the librarian and the added dimension of presenting stories to very young children.

**Bonnie S. Fowler is head, children's department, Forsyth County Library.**

#### SUGGESTED TITLES

- Burningham, John. *Mr. Gump's Outing*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971.  
Burningham, John. *The Rabbit*. Crowell, 1975.  
Burningham, John. *The Snow*. Crowell, 1975.  
Carle, Eric. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Collins, 1969.  
Carroll, Ruth. *Where's the Bunny?* Walck, 1950.  
Crews, Donald. *Blue Sea*. Greenwillow, 1979.  
Crews, Donald. *Freight Train*. Greenwillow, 1979.  
Domanska, Janine. *The Turnip*. Macmillan, 1969.  
Ets, Marie. *Play With Me*. Viking, 1955.  
Galdone, Paul. *The Three Bears*. Seabury, 1972.  
Galdone, Paul. *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Seabury, 1973.  
Hutchins, Pat. *Rosie's Walk*. Macmillan, 1968.  
Keats, Ezra Jack. *The Snowy Day*. Viking, 1962.  
Kraus, Robert. *Who's Mouse Are You?* Macmillan, 1970.  
Krauss, Ruth. *The Carrot Seed*. Harper & Row, 1945.  
Mother Goose. *Mother Goose Rhymes*.  
Nakatani, Chiyoko. *My Day on the Farm*. Crowell, 1977.  
Nakatani, Chiyoko. *My Teddy Bear*. Crowell, 1976.  
Nakatani, Chiyoko. *Zoo in My Garden*. Crowell, 1973.  
Nodset, Jean. *Who Took the Farmer's Hat?* Harper & Row, 1963.  
Petersham, Maud. *Box with Red Wheels*. Macmillan, 1949.  
Reiss, John. *Colors*. Bradbury, 1969.  
Reiss, John. *Numbers*. Bradbury, 1971.  
Rojankovsky, Feodor. *Animals on the Farm*. Knopf, 1967.  
Williams, Garth. *The Chicken Book*. Delacorte, 1970.