

# The Art of Storytelling

*In Early Learning and Care Settings  
From Clare CCC - Jan 2020*



*“The Irish way of telling a story is a complex and elaborate one, complete with wild exaggerations, a certain delight in improbable fantasy, and a heightened sense of drama.”*

*Rashers Tierney*

## **SUPPORT FOR:**

**Children:** creativity, imagination, communication

**Families:** rituals, connection, communication

**Practitioners:** connection, learning, listening, peacefulness and excitement

## **INTRODUCTION**

Monica Spencer came to us at Clare County Childcare Committee a few months ago to tell us about the Creative Youth Partnership programme which is part of the Creative Ireland initiative. We were intrigued by her passion and interest in supporting the youngest of children to engage in the creative arts and have their voices heard. We were only delighted to support her endeavours. With lots of discussions around; **creativity, imagination, communication and ways of representing ideas** we landed on **oral storytelling** as an area of further exploration. In our first meeting, I remember we sadly asked the question “Is oral story-telling a lost/dying art of Irish heritage?” With a little bit of research into storytelling, finding the amazing speakers we had at the Woodstock Hotel in Ennis in late November 2019, as well as so much interest in joining the experience from practitioners in early years, this all made for great reassurance that storytelling is certainly alive and well and in very good hands.

The art of storytelling can be linked significantly to a key aim in Ireland’s Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: Aistear.

**Theme:** Communication    **Aim:** Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.

**Learning goal:** In partnership with the adult, children will; share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving, and responding to these experiences.

Story-telling is an ancient and valuable art, adored by many here in Ireland and embraced by all. “Stories are never-ending journeys, hidden gifts or [imaginative] memories, all waiting to be told”. The Storyteller Agency. We know each early learning and care practitioner has his or her own unique way of approaching storytelling. Below I will share some insight and reflections from listening to the speakers at our storytelling event in the hopes of adding to your repertoire of knowledge.

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## WISDOM FROM STORYTELLERS

At the beginning of the Storytelling event, we acknowledged the wonderful work of Vivian Gussin Paley, an American Kindergarten teacher and author, who believed stories are especially important in the early years and who offered great advice to early years practitioners on how to be an effective storyteller with groups of young children. As Vivian Gussin Paley died in August of 2019, I felt it was particularly important to remember her on the storytelling day and continue spreading her words of wisdom.

One of her books: *'The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter'* was published in 1991, in it, she wrote: *"A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day. The children at least have their play, but I cannot remember what is real to the children without their stories to anchor fantasy and purpose."* If you are unfamiliar with her work, I recommend you seek some out. Explore her 'Helicopter Storytelling' concept with people like Trisha Lee from Make Believe Arts: *"In its simplest form children dictate their stories which are written down verbatim, exactly as they are told. The group then gathers around a taped out stage and the stories are acted out."* See 'Helicopter Storytelling' in action through the Youtube links at the end of this document.

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## GETTING STARTED WITH RUTH MARSHALL

Getting started with storytelling when you don't think you know-how, can be daunting, Ruth put us instantly at ease. She set the scene and gave us a magical storytelling experience, feelings of stillness and peace. Feeling the sounds with her Tibetan bowl, a bell and a pentatonic xylophone, taking pleasure in the sight of her storytelling table with a candle and items from nature all helping to *"create a bridge from our ordinary world to a place of wonder."* Storytelling calls for us to be absolutely present with the story. In this,

it is a present, a gift to the listeners. We bring our whole selves into that moment, and together, teller and listeners delight in the wonder and magic of make-believe,

To start, pick a story you already know, one with an easy plot, little to no character development, and plenty of repetition. Tell it to yourself first Ruth said — in the shower, preparing dinner, on a walk through the woods, in the car — until you feel like you have a good sense for the sequence of events. Then, tell away! The most important piece of advice on how to get started from Ruth is to start! Don't be afraid to tell the same story over and over, (children deepen their understanding with repetition), but if a story just isn't working, leave it aside and try something new. Ruth really made me feel storytelling is a profoundly intimate and personal way of connecting with children.



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## BEING INCLUSIVE WITH ANN HALLIGAN

Nearly all people wish to be happy and to be understood, including each child, no matter their gender, background, religion, ethnicity, ability/disability and family structure. Sometimes to get to a place of understanding we are each faced with challenges. The introduction of persona dolls into an early learning and care service empowers children and practitioners to explore some of the challenging realities of their life in a safe, secure way.

Ann said, “we are all different, that is what makes this place a great world to live in.” She introduced us to some of her persona dolls who all have their very own identity. Each of their personas developed over time, Ann knows them. In a story circle, she speaks with each one as a real person, listens to each one, and celebrates each one's individuality. She “weaves a story around the children's lives, the issues that are coming up for them the problems they have as little children which may seem minimal to us but to them they're hugely problematic.” Thereby, openly respecting and engaging with difference, dispelling myths and stereotypes in a group conversation and supporting a fairer more inclusive world. Believing in the competence of young children they can readily absorb the hinted at truths and lessons within the stories they hear. One must devote a lot of time to implement a tool like persona dolls into their day-to-day play with children but the rewards far outway the efforts. Kindness, respect, compassion, and love in perfect harmony.



## CREATIVE ENCOUNTERS WITH JANE HAYES

Jane invited us to reflect on a theme or narrative that is informing the creative experiences children are currently engaged with. Reflecting on observations made and experiences of interest to introduce a key idea and then build on it through varying age-appropriate experiences including movement, visual art, music, science, drama and more, “To link a couple of those

elements together in developing a story with a beginning, middle and end.” Developing a theme or story over time through varying mediums children are provided with more opportunities to process what a story tells them.

Look around your service or home you will be amazed at what resources you may already have at hand that can enable you to both tell and create imaginative stories and for children to act out their own stories. Curiosity can be created from the simplest of resources, e.g. a bag of fabric scraps with varying textures make a great backdrop to telling a story with toy animals, or inanimate objects. Create your own ‘story boxes’ or ‘mystery objects boxes’ – these work well with small groups and larger groups. Each child can dip in and find an object that peaks their imagination to take them on a story-telling journey. Adults can theme these boxes to support the emergent curriculum or to prompt discussion of a current non-fiction issue. Open-ended props like adult clothes, clippy cloppy shoes, and hats can further facilitate the processing of stories alone or with friends, giving everyone the opportunity to be involved and share ideas. Props provide children with the resources to revisit stories at their own pace.



## NATURE FOCUS WITH NORA CUSTY

Nora conjured up a story utilising aspects of nature in the mind of a child. What's going on outside right now? What is the weather like? How strong is the wind? Stories told in and about



nature can encompass a wide range of story types and styles. Pick an animal or plant you see every day. Here in the west of Ireland that might be a donkey or a fox; maybe a blackberry plant or a dandelion. Give a child a peek into those living things day. *"In storytelling, there doesn't need to be a big dramatic event, just the events of their day. Told like you might tell a child what you did yourself that day."* Sara Renee Logan. Or as Nora encouraged, to invite the child, ask the child to tell the story of a living thing or a place in nature and see where it goes.

I learnt when you tell stories, when you involve children in telling their own stories you are effectively sending the message that everyone can tell a story, and that they don't need to own or read a book, that they don't need to own and operate a high tech piece of equipment. Through your initiative and willingness to simply give it a go you are letting the children know that you value stories, made up or told. You also send the message that they too can tell stories, and that you are interested in hearing them. *"What better thing to talk about, use your voice for, than a story you get to make up yourself, a sense of agency and only the child knows how or when it ends."* Evelyn Davis

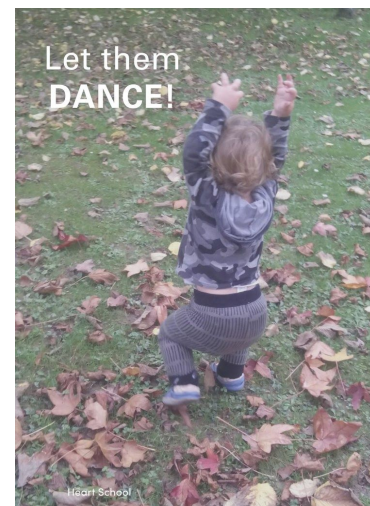


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## GET MOVING WITH MARIAN RODGERS

A moving child is a learning child. Active movement in various ways prepares the brain to

think; to learn and grow. Marian takes young children on action-packed adventures through various landscapes as different characters. Children can turn into many kinds of animals, dogs and cows in a farm, monkeys and giraffes in a jungle; they *walk, jump, run, hop, skip, bend, tiptoe, pose, roll, twist, freeze, throw, catch, kick, clap, crawl, squat, creep, hold* and more as the story progresses, whatever action that suits the character. *Numeracy, questioning and interaction, contrasting speeds, sounds, volume, pitch* can also be added, and much more as the adventure goes along. To go on an adventure consider all the special features of a relatable landscape and add action to suit the active needs of children. Marian's secret to story-making seems to keep it *"short, sweet and interactive."* Adding action to real-life experiences is something thoroughly achievable in any early learning and care service or home.



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## OLD IRISH WITH EDDIE LENIHAN

Ireland has a rich heritage of folk tales and fairy stories dating back over thousands of years. From the Ireland Calling website we can see many of them include great heroes like the legendary warrior Cuchulain or the mythical giant Fin McCool. There are also great love stories like that of Fair, Brown and Trembling – the Irish version of Cinderella. Some have happy endings, but there are also tales of great tragedy such as

The Story of Deirdre. Many Irish stories feature leprechauns and their magic, sometimes to comical effect as in the Field of Boliauns, but sometimes dark and sinister too. Eddie put it to us to embrace the sometimes “*grotesque*” or “*scary*” within stories and even share stories without happy endings. What do you think? How could this be carried out in a respectful way with young children?

Eddie showed us how a story, told aloud, from one person to another or to a group, is alive. It grows and changes to meet the needs of the listener. It can be dramatic and calm. The storyteller adds gesture, sound, movement, they can engage all the senses, from a sense of smell to touch, to where a person is in space and more. All stories, new or old, should engage the imagination.



## FACILITATING ORAL STORYTELLING

In your early learning and care setting or home there are many options for oral storytelling:

### Use picture books with no words

### Gather a collection of traditional tales/stories that can be re-told and include children as characters

- Billy Goats Gruff \*Cinderella
- The Elves and the Shoemaker
- The Enormous Turnip- (*I love this one*)
- The Gingerbread Man
- Goldilocks and The Three Bears
- Jack and the Beanstalk

- Little Red Hen
- Red Riding Hood
- Sleeping Beauty
- The Three Little Pigs
- The Princess and the Pea
- The Magic Porridge Pot
- Snow White \*Hansel and Gretel
- The Ugly Duckling \*Puss in Boots
- Rapunzel \*The Emperor's New Clothes

It is, of course, important to be conscious of the message a story gives; is the message accurate or stereotypical? Who is represented and how? ‘*Do all girls need to be rescued by a man?*’ If you choose to tell a traditional tale it is important to engage in discussion with the children to support them in critically thinking about fairness and stereotypes.

### Collection of more contemporary tales that again can be re-told as oppose to read

- Where the Wild Things Are
- Rainbow Fish \*Frozen
- Owl Babies \*The Snowman
- We're Going On A Bear Hunt (*I really enjoy getting active with this one*)
- Tiddler \*Elmer
- The Very Hungry Caterpillar
- Handa's Surprise
- Brown Bear Brown Bear
- Charlie & the Chocolate Factory
- The Tiger Who Came To Tea
- Alice in Wonderland
- The Lighthouse Keeper's Lunch
- Owl Who Was Afraid of the Dark

Children are naturally curious from the moment you begin telling a story, either a work of fiction or a real-life experience. Use props to support if you need.

### Props

- puppets, large hand or finger puppets
- stuffed animals, little figurines, baby dolls, vehicles, wooden blocks, even pets
- story stones painted images onto stones
- wooden circles with images burnt onto them

- laminated pictures with magnets on the back for ease of display on a magnetic board
- story boxes – a random mix of items pulled out one by one to create a story
- loose parts/open-ended resources



If oral storytelling is new for you and for the children you are working with it may take a while for them to become fully engaged in the experience and that is ok. For very young children, make the stories short and simple. For older children, you may wish to involve them in helping you get set up for a storytelling experience. It is likely that not all children will be interested initially but capture those who are into it and others will join along when they desire. Let the children know this is new for you and invite them in on your learning journey.

As you build your oral storytelling skills remember the most wonderful stories can happen in the most random and unplanned places and times, no need to save them up for 'mat time' or 'circle time'. Mix up the items if using a story box and mix up the story prompts, add a CD/media player, place it in different places inside and out, add a candle and rug under a table, go up a tree, be as limitless as your imagination and you will be amazed and delighted with the story magic created. It is especially fun if children create their own stories and even older children can illustrate their characters; these can be laminated and used for retelling. Oral storytelling may be repeated or changed over time depending on children's interpretation and imagination.

*"What an astonishing invention is this activity we call fantasy play."*

*Vivian Gussin Paley*

To conclude, words from my favourite oral storyteller with young children, Evelyn Davis, based in New Zealand. Found on Facebook under the name 'Storytelling Threads'. She does a lot of work with Helicopter Storytelling too. *"Any story that can involve the children is great. And pretty much any story can be adapted to be suitable to use in an oral storytelling context. Adapting stories to include colours, objects, words, experiences, memories, cultural traditions, etc. that **bring the story alive for each child**. You can add gesture, you can add sound, you can invite them to add gesture and sound,... and they can learn the moment when they should howl like a wolf, hammer like a little pig, or shout like the magic rooster... And all one's favourite storybooks also lend themselves to re-telling with the aid of a few props. Know though, you already are a storyteller and need very little help to fine-tune what you already do."* Evelyn Davis



*"Each teller adds their own seasoning."*

*Ruth Marshall*

Anyone can tell a story anywhere, any place and any time. It is one of the most enriching creative, imaginative and communicative experiences for children. Give it a go!



## FURTHER READING & EXPLORING

### BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter by Vivian Gussin Paley

Princesses, Dragons and Helicopter Stories: Storytelling and Story Acting in the Early Years by Trisha Lee

Child of Wonder: Nurturing Creative & Naturally Curious Children by Ginger Carlson

The Last Words by Robert MacFarlane and Jackie Morris

### WEBSITES AND WEB LINKS:

Invite Ruth Marshall to your service: [storytelling](#)

Invite Marian Rodgers from Clare Sports Partnership to your service: [Get Active](#)

Trisha Lee from Make Believe Arts: [MakeBelieve Arts: Home](#)

See Trisha on Youtube: [Helicopter Stories](#), [Letting Imagination Fly](#) AND [Trisha Lee - Helicopter Stories - Storytelling and Story Acting in the Early Years Keynote](#)

Evelyn Davis Storytelling Threads found on Facebook: [Storytelling threads - Home](#)

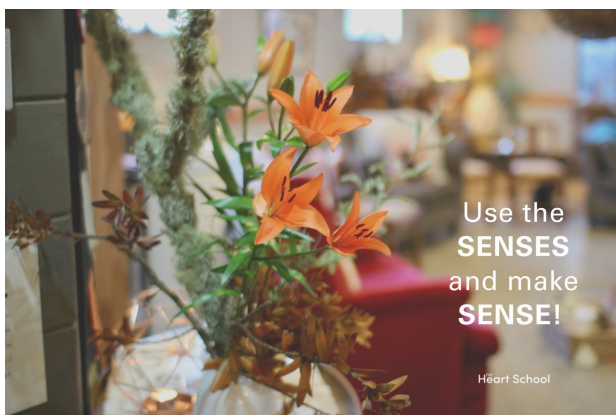
LINC Making the Story Experience an inclusive one by Rachel Ryan: [Making the Story Experience an Inclusive One](#)

The Online Waldorf Library: [Choosing Fairy Tales for Different Ages](#)

Aistear Siolta Practice Guide: [Group stories - Using the 'story-pot' method \(3-6 years\)](#)

All images with quotes inside are by:  
THE HEART SCHOOL find them here:

<https://www.heartschool.nz/blog>



*"The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge, it is imagination."  
Albert Einstein*

*Formulated by Dee Finn, Jan 2020*