

Early Interest in Stories

During the third year the normal child comes to enjoy stories and to be able to sit quietly whilst listening to them. That is to say he is developing a capacity for awakening sequences of mental images in response to the speech of others and without continual reference to concrete objects and the here-and-now.

At this early stage the story must refer constantly to things, actions and events with which the child is very familiar, if he is to follow and enjoy it. The kind of language will be only one step removed from that which normally directs his activities.

Matter of fact stories about children like himself and the sorts of things he himself has experienced. Dressing, having breakfast, going shopping, new shoes, puddles, visitors etc., are the stuff that suitable stories for the under-fives are made of. Frequent reference to the same features and ideas, a certain amount of straightforward repetition, as well as the repeated telling of favourite stories, allow the child to anticipate the events sufficiently to aid his coping with increasingly long and complex grammatical constructions.

For the more slowly developing child the time to start deliberately introducing stories if they have not happened spontaneously, is when he has reached a language understanding age roughly equivalent to that of a normally developing child of three years or so.

An intermediate kind of story which can be attempted a little earlier and may help the transition from the restless older infant to the quiescent listening child involves the use of toys to play-act the story being told simultaneously, and so involves the child's vision as well as the inward eye of his imagination.

Puppets or little animal human figures etc., and apparatus that has already been used at earlier stages of language development are very suitable to support the action of a story. A useful set-up is a street of shops which can readily be made from a sheet of cardboard. This can provide a setting for a great variety of everyday adventures as finding a parking space for the car, looking both ways when crossing the road, shopping for various things, meeting people etc.

For example a story might run like this:

Going Shopping

Jane is a big girl and is going to the shops for her mummy. She is to buy some butter and sugar, a loaf of bread and some fish. She walks along the pavement. She is very careful not to go too near the edge of the pavement because of the motor cars. Jane walks along to the grocers shop. She pushes open the door and goes inside. "Please may I have some butter and some sugar for my mummy?" Jane says to the shopkeeper. She puts the butter and sugar into her bag and goes out of the shop.

Then she goes to the fish shop. She pushes open the door and goes inside. "Please may I have some fish for my mummy?" Jane says to the shopkeeper. She puts the packet of fish into her bag and goes out of the shop.

The baker's shop is on the other side of the road so Jane goes to the zebra crossing and waits until it is safe to cross. Then she walks quickly across and on to the baker's shop. She pushes open the door and goes inside. "Please may I have a loaf of bread for my mummy?" Jane says to the shopkeeper. She puts the loaf of bread into her bag and goes out of the shop.

Now her bag is very heavy and she hurries home as quickly as she can. But she remembers to wait at the crossing until it is safe to cross. Then she walks quickly across the road ... and along the pavement ... round the corner to her own house.

Mummy is very pleased that Jane has managed to get all the things ... the loaf of bread, the sugar and the butter and the fish.

All through the story each statement is followed by the model of Jane carrying out the little piece of action. The story can be lengthened, the speech be made more complicated, and greater feats of imagination expected of the listener as he matures.

Once the child has learned to listen and watch such a simple little story without fatigue we can begin to expect him to listen to an ordinary story. For example a suitable early story might go as follows: -

Notice that such a story form suitable for a child aged 3 – 4 years contains some 600 -1,000 words and a vocabulary to include genitive form, e.g. 'Granny's', and pronouns, such as 'his' and 'their'; alternative forms e.g. 'mummy/mother'; adjectival qualifiers, e.g. 'little', 'furry', 'tall', 'steep'; adverbial qualifiers e.g. 'properly', 'carefully', 'excited'/'excitedly', 'close to', 'behind', 'round and round', 'backwards and forwards', etc.

A Visit to Granny

This is a story about John who is (three years old) just like you and lives in a little house called 'Green Gates'.

He lives in the house with his mother, his daddy and his (big sister Susan), and a tiny, furry animal with whiskers called Tinker I expect you've guessed yes Tinker is a little kitten a pussy cat.

Yesterday, John went with his mother to visit his granny and they went on the bus/in the car, because it was too far for them to walk. John was very excited about going to see his granny and he chattered and asked questions all the way.

"Why doesn't Granny live in our house?" "Shall we have doughnuts for dinner?" "Where is that man going?" And most times he didn't wait for his mummy to answer before he asked yet another question.

Soon they got to Grandmother's house and there was Granny herself standing in the garden waiting for them. She kissed them both and made a cup of tea for mummy and a glass of orange for John. Then she said, "Perhaps John would like to go into the park after dinner?" Granny looked straight at John as she spoke, and she smiled for/because she knew that John always went to play in the park when he came to visit her.

John's grandmother lives quite close to the park and just behind Granny's house is a special little Children's Corner with swings and a roundabout and a slide.

After dinner they all went for a walk across the grass and through the trees to the pond. At the pond they rested for a while and fed breadcrumbs to the ducks. Then they went to the children's corner with John running excitedly ahead/on in front.

John always had a spin round and round on the roundabout, and then sat on the little wooden seat of the swing whilst his mother pushed him backwards and forwards But John had never been on the slide. "What about having a go on the slide today?" suggested his mummy.

John desperately/very much wanted to go down the slide but he was a little frightened of it. It seemed so tall and the ladder looked very steep. John's mother didn't really wait for an answer but led him to the foot of the ladder and helped him to climb up. He climbed up the ladder very slowly putting his feet carefully on to each step and holding on tightly to the rails (at the sides). Then he sat at the top with his legs dangling down the slide and very slowly slid himself forward until he was sitting in the chute itself. He was just a little bit nervous and wouldn't quite let go of the sides, and so he went down very slowly with/in little jerks.

"That was very good John but next time you must let go and go down properly," said mother and led him quickly round to the steps again. This time John climbed quickly up to the top of the ladder and he leaned back, let go and went down properly. Sw...i.....i.....is.....sh and he was at the bottom. He sat up with a big grin/smile on his face and swung his legs down on to the ground where the grass was all worn away.

There was mummy smiling at him. "Just one more go on the slide,' she said 'and then we must go home, for Susan will be coming home from school soon."

They kissed Granny good-bye and went home to tell Daddy and Susan and Tinker ("Do you remember who Tinker is?") all about their lovely day at the park.

I don't think they had doughnuts for dinner but I'm sure that they had something very nice ...

THE END

The Parcel

Every morning at breakfast-time John watched out for the postman. First he would peer/look through the window to see the postman/him come down the street, walking along and wheeling his bicycle with a big bag/sack of letters on the handlebars.

Then John would run (ran) to the front door to wait for the letters to come sliding through/spilling out of the letter hole in the front door. Sometimes some of the big letters would get/got stuck in the letter hole and John pulled them on through very carefully until the little flap closed/shut again with a snapping sound.

This morning instead of pushing the letter through the slot in the door the postman rang the bell/doorbell. John was very excited because this usually meant that the postman had a package which was too big to go through the letter slot.

John waited while his mother opened the door. "Good morning Postman" said John's mummy. "Good morning Mrs....." said the postman, "there's a parcel for Master John today".

John peered round the door and there was the postman still holding a big parcel in his hands.

When the postman was gone John carried his parcel into the dining room and placed it carefully on the table.

The brown paper covering was fastened with string and John was so excited that he wanted to cut it/the string with scissors. But his mother said "No," John must be patient while the knot in the string was untied properly.

Mummy loosened the knot for John so that he could get his fingers under the strings to pull them apart. The first time he pulled he only made the knot tight again but his mummy helped him again/once more and soon the string was off.

It fell onto the floor where Tinker was waiting but John was far too excited and curious to notice. The mischievous kitten caught up the string and began to toss

it about and to chase after the ends. He would soon have had it in a great tangle if Mummy hadn't taken it away from him/that naughty Tinker.

While John was unwrapping the brown paper his mother carefully tied the string into a neat little bundle and put it away in case she should need to make a parcel herself.

Now John flapped the wrapping paper back and there was a lovely blue cardboard box and when he lifted the lid he found inside an enormous red spinning top.

Geoffrey Waldon