



THE MAGIC OF SENSORY STORYTIMES

“If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.” —Ignacio Estrada.

By Michelle Lee
MS, Human Development and Early Childhood Disorders
Fort Worth Library, Texas

One in six children in the United States have developmental disabilities (Boyle et al., 2011), including autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, sensory processing disorder, and learning disorders. Although these children and their caregivers often want to share in the fun stories, silly songs, cute crafts, and social interactions at storytimes, they may believe library programs aren’t open to them. Through sensory storytimes, you can welcome these families with programs that support their children’s love of reading and enhances their learning.

A Safe Place

Children with developmental disabilities or sensory processing disorders can find it challenging to stay focused and on task or to transition from one activity to another. Their caregivers often worry that their children’s behavior will disrupt the learning of other children, or they may want to avoid the judging eyes of other parents (and even the librarian) when their children’s behavior is out of sync with those around them. Caregivers have told me how uncomfortable they felt when their child wasn’t able to sit criss-cross applesauce for thirty minutes, how other parents gawked at their child when she squealed long after other children quieted, and how they were heartbroken and embarrassed when they were asked to leave in the middle of a storytime because of their child’s behavior. Because of these experiences, these families may avoid library programs altogether. By offering a program that recognizes the specific needs of this population, you can create a safe place for them.

Sensory Storytimes

Imagine you are at a magic show. Think about the difference between sitting in the audience and being the on-stage volunteer.

All of the volunteer's senses are engaged as she squints under the bright stage lights; smells the magician's spicy cologne; sees and touches the dark, velvety emptiness of the hat; and hears the roar of the audience applauding when a fluffy white rabbit jumps out of the hat. Sensory storytime invites all children to be like the volunteer, experiencing each story through multisensory activities.

Another important feature of sensory storytimes is that they provide an environment where all families can feel secure and relaxed because they know they are in the company of peers. They know that if their child is noisy, distracted, or distraught, they will continue to be welcome.

Here are a few recommendations on how to structure a sensory storytime:

- Be consistent. Have a regular routine so participants know what to expect and when transitions will take place; visual schedules can help children learn the routine.
- Use registration. Limit the number of participants to foster a familiar social atmosphere.
- Simplify. Reduce distractions in the environment by holding storytime in an enclosed room, removing colorful area rugs and ticking clocks, and covering windows.
- Be flexible. Remain calm when children act in ways that fall outside of

social norms; if a child is having a difficult time (e.g., screaming, rocking, banging his or her head), maintain your composure. Calmly and quietly ask the child's caregiver to intervene, because she knows what works best with her child.

In addition to establishing a structure and space for your sensory storytime, you may also need to make some adjustments to the content of your typical storytimes. Here are a few recommendations to help in your planning:

Books: Focus on the Fun

Great sensory storytime books include repetitive phrases, interactive story lines, a limited number of characters, rhyming or rhythmic text, and bold illustrations. These elements work together to create opportunities for your audience to imitate actions, sounds, and emotional responses.

Props: Focus on the Feelings

Think back to the magic show analogy: How do you move your storytime attendees from the audience to the stage? You bring the show to their laps! One way you can do this is providing each child with his or her own set of manipulatives to follow along and act out the story while you read. For example, give children their own flannel board sets. Another technique is to give each child a "piece"





of the story that they can give to you at the appropriate time in the story (e.g., the porridge bowls, chairs, and beds from *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*).

Props should be made from a variety of materials to enhance the sensory experience: slippery spaghetti worms; tissue-paper butterflies that gently float; scratch-and-sniff flower stickers; fuzzy, die-cut teddy bears; real spoons and bowls; or yellow feathers. You can also include full-group “sensory surprises” as a way to focus everyone’s attention at once (e.g., gently mist your audience with a spray bottle when it rains in the story).

Activities: Focus on Sharing

You can incorporate collaborative activities into your

sensory storytime to target social emotional development. Collaborative activities are designed to encourage the children to work together, share, and play with each other. One of my favorite collaborative activities is drawing a supersized animal on contact paper and then providing materials to decorate it. For an owl, I gave the children brightly colored feathers and pieces of orange foam for the beak and feet. When planning activities, remind yourself that the process of interaction is what is most vital, not the end product.

Research shows that “the human brain has evolved to develop, learn and operate optimally in multisensory environments” (Shams & Seitz, 2008). Sensory storytimes

can provide a welcoming environment for children with developmental disabilities and their caregivers, while nurturing a love of reading and enhancing literacy skills for all children.

References

- Boyle, C.A., et al. (2011). Trends in the prevalence of developmental disabilities in US children, 1997–2008. *Pediatrics*, 127(6), 1034–42.
- Shams, L., & Seitz, A.R. (2008). Benefits of multisensory learning. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12(11), 411–17.

Learn more about how playtime enriches early literacy learning with the Very Ready Reading Program at www.demco.com/veryready.