

Once Upon a Wall

Storytime Mural Project Increases Engagement, Attendance

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When I first started my position as one half of the team responsible for preschool storytime in summer 2017, attendance at our Friday morning program for kids ages four to six was stagnant and low. Later that summer we also learned that Friday mornings would no longer be a consistent time slot, at least not in fall 2017.

We had several options—make the storytime a once-monthly event, change the day or time, or eliminate the program. Luckily our storytime was given a second chance, along with a new name, day, and time, but it was up to us to prove this was the right move. Here's how my partner and I not only increased attendance from almost nothing to often twenty or more children a week, but also encouraged repeat attendance from the same families.

We knew we needed to make the program more visible—to have something to draw families in other than just the calendar. We also wanted the children to see their progress, so every time they came to storytime they would have something specific to show for it.

Finally, we wanted to make storytime a memorable experience for both the children and caregivers. Our goal was to give them something to look forward to, talk about to others, and stick with them for more than one day. We decided to create a mural on one of our walls that we would add to every week at storytime. In meeting all three of our goals, we also helped redefine our storytime.

We have chosen to base our semester builds—the term we use for the wall project during each storytime semester—on well-known folk stories or fairy tales. This helps introduce the kids



A dragon comes to life!

to classic stories and helps draw in parents and grandparents, since most of the stories are familiar. It also ties well into our name, Once Upon a Time Storytime.

For our pilot build, we chose *Jack and the Beanstalk* because it was a very straightforward semester build, growing the beanstalk every week. At the first storytime, we told the story and then gave each child a paper magic bean they could plant on the wall.

Throughout the session, the beanstalk grew and grew, eventually reaching the clouds and finally the giant's castle. To really hammer in the memorable part of our goal, we made a big production out of the final storytime. We retold the tale but had a coworker play the part of the giant over a microphone from outside the room. We heard a large crash, and then emerged from the storytime room to find gold (bags of plastic coins) at the base of our beanstalk. The children could not believe their eyes. How had all of this gold mysteriously appeared? They each got to take home one sack of gold, which made the experience even more exciting.



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A storytime mural project helps kids bring stories to life.

How did we do it? This project essentially cost us nothing since we used materials we already had available at the library. We die-cut various shapes out of colored paper, used leftover poster board to make the castle and white tablecloths for clouds on the final storytime of the semester. We also had leftover gold coins, found in a cupboard, that we wrapped in tissue paper to use as the giveaway.

When we realized that the semester build project was working, we became more ambitious. We brought in different

materials to tape to the wall—like scrapbook paper, sparkle sheets, Christmas bows, doilies, and more. When we did dragons for a semester, we used tissue paper to create fire breath and metallic bows for his treasure horde, and during our *Hansel and Gretel* semester, we used sparkle paper to make gumdrops for decorating the gingerbread house.

We spend small amounts of money on the project, usually to have an exciting last storytime of the semester, but largely all of our materials are readily available at our library.

We've also altered how we end the storytime session. We still like to have a memorable and exciting event, but it has become more about the kids getting to do something, rather than us putting on a production. For example, when we did *The Princess and the Pea*, we had the children lie on a sheet of paper decorated as a bed to see if they could feel the pea (a two-inch wooden ball) beneath the mattresses.

For *The Little Red Hen*, we ended the storytime semester by allowing the kids to make bread dough and butter. Each child then got to take home their homemade butter and a store-bought bread roll. (The butter was made simply by putting cream into small jars and then shaking them for about fifteen minutes. We did some shaker songs to help motivate the preschoolers to shake.) Since we knew we wouldn't be actually baking the dough the kids made, it didn't have to be a perfect recipe. So, we set up stations where they could mix dry ingredients (like flour, salt, and yeast), mix water and flour to create dough, and knead the dough. Everything in this elaborate finish cost less than ten dollars.

All of the work that went in to creating and implementing this program truly paid off. In the first year, attendance not only increased dramatically, but many of the same families returned to storytime throughout the entire year. We have also begun our second year of the project, and though we are not seeing the same families as the first year (many of these kids started school in the fall), the families that have been coming are once again becoming regulars. We could not have asked for a better result. &