

Storytime, Three Ways

From Razzle-Dazzle to Library Giants

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Once upon a time, I worked in adult services at my large urban library. I thought about library storytime as most adult services librarians do—which is to say (1) not very often and (2) mostly something done to entertain wiggly kids I rarely interacted with.

I had vague notions that storytimes involved children’s librarians as circus ringmasters of sorts, singing and reading stories and doing skits with puppets. In other words, I had a one-dimensional conception of storytime, or what I’m calling Storytime Number One—a razzle-dazzle good time for children that involves songs and reading books. I also vaguely remembered seeing children’s librarians lugging puppets and craft supplies and, once, a tub of animal crackers, into the storytime room.

But then . . . my whole library world changed, and with it, my understanding of storytime. When my large urban library closed for renovation, I was shuttled off to a small suburban branch library. Two weeks before moving there, I was cheerfully informed that I would be doing baby storytimes.

Of course!, was my first wry reaction. *I’ve been almost exclusively working with adults for ten years, so naturally—babies!*

Fortunately, my philosophy has always been some version of, “blessed are the flexible because they will never get bent out of shape,” so I was game. If babies needed the storytime razzle-dazzle, then I would razzle-dazzle babies! I would get out the books and the puppets and maybe a tub of animal crackers (*do babies eat animal crackers?*) and set about re-creating the kind of storytime I vaguely understood.



Librarian Laura Raphael and her little literary friend Lydia.

Fortunately, I was introduced to a different kind of storytime, which I’ll call Storytime Number Two, by my new temporary manager. She had a background in children’s services, and one of the first things she said was, “You know that storytimes aren’t primarily about the kids, right?”

She quickly informed me that while it was important to connect with children in storytime (thus the puppets, and the songs, and the razzle-dazzle of Storytime Number One), our larger goal as children’s professionals was to teach parents and caregivers to help children develop literacy and language skills.

With her bibliography in hand, I went on a deep dive, starting with ALSC’s Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) initiative materials and expanding into the incredible world of early literacy enhanced storytimes that my library colleagues had developed over the years.



Laura Raphael earned an MA in English Literature from Northeastern State University as well as an MLIS from the University of Oklahoma. She has worked in public libraries since 2001 in various capacities, most recently as Children’s Services Coordinator for the Tulsa City-County (OK) Library system. Storytime remains one of her favorite professional activities, and she still remembers every word and action to “A Tooty Ta Ta.”

Oh, and then I planned and executed my very first baby storytime! My first attempts at providing early literacy tips were shaky and either too short to be effective or too long to be interesting, but with time, practice, and, most importantly, the guidance of my online early literacy librarian friends, I started to get it.

Sure, my rendition of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” would never win a Grammy, but now I knew that storytime wasn’t a performance, and that it was the singing itself that counted—that babies were learning the sounds of the English language, and that, with my help, parents would begin to understand that singing was a foundational part of literacy and how to incorporate songs throughout the day.

I cannot overstate how understanding storytime as a place to demonstrate effective early literacy practice and to share these ideas with parents (Storytime Number Two) completely transformed what I did every Wednesday morning from 10:30 to 11 a.m. during my Central Library exile.

Every week was an opportunity for me to learn more and share what I was learning with the big people in my storytime room.

I incorporated the opening welcome patter of Betsy Diamant-Cohen’s *Mother Goose on the Loose* program and quite a few more of her features—“We hit the floor together, because it’s fun to do!” the drum, the scarves, and “Shoo fly, don’t bother me!”

But furthermore, I knew *why* these elements were great for the growing brains of my babies (it didn’t take long for the babies in my borrowed storytime to become *my* babies in *my* storytime), and I was able to explain so and inspire adults to repeat at home.

Those were heady days, learning new things and trying them out. I read my way through *Storytimes for Everyone!* by Saroj Ghoting and Pamela Martin-Diaz—twice, three times—and was inspired by their insistence that art experiences should be art *experiences*, not Pinterest-ready crafts.

I discovered the blogs *Storytime Katie* and *Abby the Librarian* and fell in love with their creative approaches to reaching adults as well as children. And Jbrary! Oh, Jbrary, how I love thee!

My biggest triumph came toward the middle of my second year at my temporary home. By then, it wasn’t temporary anymore because I had finished my MLIS, had fallen in love with children’s services, and was promoted to a “real” librarian position at the same library, doing preschool storytimes. One of my favorite preschoolers, Lydia, with help from her dedicated mother, “wrote” a book and read it to me. Her mother said that she practiced “reading” to her doll, which she named Miss Laura. (*I am getting teary-eyed just thinking of it. This is*

another thing I did not understand when I was working exclusively with adults all those years—the intense connections you can make, and how heroic and large children’s librarians are in the minds and worlds of our smallest customers.)

I was sure I had crossed over into the great Library Storytime Singularity, combining Storytime Number One (so much fun!) with Storytime Number Two (so important to children’s literacy and adult knowledge).

Of course I was wrong.

Fairy Tales and the Rule of Three

A few years into my children’s librarian journey, I had the opportunity to transition to my library system’s children’s services coordinator position. I was giving up my daily youth librarian duties but replacing it with a systemwide focus of training children’s staff at all twenty-four of our library locations. What excited me most was helping children’s staff understand both storytime theory and practice—in other words, here was my chance to share Storytime Number Two with my colleagues.

If fairy tales have taught us anything, it’s that the best stories have elements of three, so I should have known that a Storytime Number Three was on its way. In this case, it revealed itself to be a tool for systemwide professional growth and staff engagement.

The more I worked with children’s staff, the more I realized that the preparation of storytime itself was an excellent way to grow as library professionals dedicated to children and families.

After all, it had worked for me! Planning storytimes, and trying to make them better, was an essential part of my growth and development as a paraprofessional and then professional children’s librarian when I first started out.

Not only did it make me more aware of library resources, it also sharpened my knowledge of literacy development and theory and allowed me to see the ways public libraries were vital connectors and supporters of early literacy in the community. From my early days with *Mother Goose on the Loose* to my later encounters with such online tools as Daily Vroom and books like *Mind in the Making* and *Thirty Million Words*, I became more accomplished and knowledgeable, and I wanted my staff to have the same experience.

Welcome, Library Giants!

Thus began my embrace of Storytime Number Three, and the opportunity it provided for children’s library staff and librarians under my direction to grow as professionals. Storytime

Number Three allowed me to see that storytime wasn't just about storytime—it was about making staff better, and, in turn, the library's early literacy programs and services better.

Practically speaking, this means that, while I regularly train children's staff (both as a group and one-on-one) and bring in a lot of outside trainers to talk about various children's development topics, the biggest and most important change is that children's staff are turning around and training each other.

Through a frequently updated storytime database and at regular staff meetings, they share their favorite early literacy tips, books, and approaches. They conduct topic-specific staff workshops. They debate early literacy issues and help one another solve common problems.

It is a beautiful thing to see and be a part of, because the razzle-dazzle of Storytime Number One has wonderfully morphed into the engaged and engaging employees of Storytime Number Three.

I think of them as library giants: powerful individuals who regularly make a profound difference in the lives of our families.

They may stay in children's services forever . . . or they may take the skills and passion and autonomy they are developing into management roles in the library. And as engaged as they are, their engagement is also creating engaged communities. In fact, parents and caregivers consistently tell us, through

regular Public Library Association (PLA) Project Outcome surveys and other ways, how much they value our early literacy enhanced storytimes and services.

Storytime Singularity

When I moved into my latest position from the on-the-ground children's librarian job, I gave up the joy of doing a weekly storytime, and I won't lie—there are times I miss it pretty intensely.

But one of the compensating joys is getting to see my colleagues in action during my regular storytime observations. This is where the Storytime Singularity—from razzle-dazzle to early literacy to professional development—is most apparent.

As I observe my children's staff during storytime, I consistently see children having a blast, parents getting solid early literacy support, and staff who know that they are professionals.

In other words, Storytime Number One, Storytime Number Two, and Storytime Number Three became perfectly coordinated and integrated, a very neat trick indeed.

You may have already discovered this amazing trifecta yourself, but if not, I invite all children's staff to do so. Fortunately, you have some of the best tools in your hands right now—the resources of ALSC and its members. &