

Storytime Surprise!

Solving the Puzzle of Distracted Adults

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It's not hard to find library staff complaining about distracted adults at storytime. Still, as a person who began her library career before the invention of the personal computer, I can say that being distracted is nothing new. It has simply become more convenient and obvious.

Regardless, I acknowledge the struggle. We make rules and announce them intently. This sometimes leads to confrontations or shaming. Public relations can suffer. Or perhaps we hear that we are to be more "engaging." But what is this supposed to mean? Wear a funny hat? Slip on a banana peel? With all due respect, many of us don't feel comfortable being clowns. And storytime should be about the stories, not us.

Happily, there is a simple way to get adults (and kids) to pay more attention. While it's not 100 percent effective—nothing is—it involves no embarrassment, either to audience members or to ourselves.

What's the secret? Inject elements of surprise into your storytime.

Think of the best storytime books—they all have elements of surprise built into them. If you think of your storytime as one big overarching story, you will already have a feel for when those elements of surprise need to appear.

Just as in those stories, it is not necessary to be surprising at every single moment. Simply by inserting it now and then, either by plan or when needed, you encourage everyone, young and old, to re-engage. The human mind is naturally curious and you can use that to your advantage.

Here are some practical ways to incorporate elements of surprise into your storytime.



The Storytime Apron

I wear an apron with large pockets at every storytime. Before each storytime, I insert one or more carefully chosen objects that relate to a story or a theme (if I have one). For example, if my storytime is about the joys of eating vegetables, I might have a carrot in my pocket. Finger puppets or small toys also work well; the object doesn't have to be real.

My apron has three pockets—red, blue, and green, and before pulling out the object, I announce which color pocket it will come from to heighten the suspense and the focus. It makes a strong impression; one day, a baby who came regularly to my storytime blurted out "pocket, pocket" at the sight of my apron. Those were the first words I ever heard her speak.

If you do this ritual every week, children learn to look forward to the surprise. While adults may only be mildly curious about the pocket itself, they learn to anticipate the pleasure that it gives their children. They want to pay attention to you so that they can experience this surprise with their children.

If you don't have an apron, a special box or bag can also work. I like the apron, though, because I don't have to fumble around



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for anything; the pocket is right there at my hip. Also, because I come out wearing the apron, curiosity is aroused right from the start of storytime.

Flannel Boards

Who introduced the first flannel board to storytime? I have no idea. Yet, even though countless forms of flashy media have been invented since then, flannel boards still haven't lost their effectiveness. They are portable, versatile, and inexpensive. I made my own board in about fifteen minutes by gluing a piece of light blue flannel to an artist's canvas board. You can print out images and glue flannel on the back to quickly and easily make the pieces stick to the board.

Flannel board pieces move around. That in and of itself catches attention. But in addition, most flannel board stories and rhymes contain small surprises. The Shape Story from Littlestorybug.com is a personal favorite.¹ You can find lots and lots of flannel board ideas at Flannel Friday.²

Flannel board games draw even more attention because the outcome is unpredictable. For example, the sock game challenges children to recognize matching pairs. Sock-shaped pieces are pulled out of a "dryer" one at a time.³ For babies and toddlers, I simplify it to just three pairs. I even composed a song to sing when a match is made. You can find it on the Association for Children's Librarians website.⁴

Little Cat is a game that you can adapt in many ways.⁵ A tiny cat piece is hidden under different hats. This game is a big hit with everyone. I have several versions: a dog hiding under cogs, a carrot under those same hats, and a car under stars. A special edition version with a bird hiding behind library cards (glued onto different-colored pieces of felt so they stick to the board) is great for library card sign up month.

The Song Cube

If a storytime audience doesn't have a core of regular attendees, I stick with standard, familiar songs. For most adults nowadays, music is for listening to; participatory singing does not come naturally. If you sing a song they

don't already know, then maybe for them it is even a good opportunity to check messages.

Behold the song cube, a 4-1/2-inch foam dice cube.⁶ A clear pocket on each side enables you to customize it. I chose six very familiar songs and wrote the name of each song onto a card that I inserted into a pocket. When it's time to sing a story, I let fate have its way. I pull out the song cube and toss it into the middle of the floor. Whatever song comes up is what we sing. The attention-grabbing power is awesome. Even adults can't help but watch the cube as it rolls to a stop.

Once you have snagged attention momentarily, you have a chance to get everyone singing. All my songs include movements: clapping, rowing, twinkling fingers, and more. These movements naturally cause adults to put away their phones so as not to drop them. You don't even have to ask. Having done that, you have made it so that it takes more effort to pull the phones out again than it is to pay attention to you.

You can select your own song favorites, but mine are *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, *Bingo*, *Row Row Row Your Boat*, *Head Shoulders Knees and Toes*, and *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* (less familiar but very catchy). The sixth song is a counting song that I made up; it uses the tune of *Clementine*. The lyrics are "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 . . ." and so on, so people can handle it.

Stories

Of course, stories should be the heart of every storytime. A surprise ending, a funny rhyme, suspense, a plot twist—these are elements of any good story, and you should be looking for these elements in the stories you select.

Humorous stories are inherently surprising. Be aware, though, that humor is age-sensitive. What toddlers think is surprising and funny is different from what second graders find to be so. There are very few books that all ages find to be funny to the same degree, so know your audience.

Books that have a surprise on each spread are especially good for those audiences that are having trouble staying focused on you. While you don't want all your storytime books to be like this, having one on hand for every storytime is another way to keep the surprises coming. &

References

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