

Storytime Evolved

What is the “New Normal” for Storytimes?

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To talk about how storytime has changed as a result of COVID-19, it's important to talk about how it has stayed the same. Talking heads drone on about the “new normal,” and I don't think that this is new. The evolution of storytime was already in motion. At most, COVID-19 accelerated it.

Storytime will always be storytime, regardless of whether it's in person or online. However, how successfully that happens is up to you and your colleagues. And that is my story.

As COVID-19 gripped the nation in March 2020, my library in Madison, Ohio—a community of about nineteen thousand people—had to abruptly pivot to video for our storytimes and other programs. As fate would have it, I had requested some video equipment from our Friends group (a major source of funding for programs in our library) that arrived in February 2020. Hastily, I threw things together and following all the guidelines for copyright and fair use, a fellow administrator who was the former children's librarian and I started recording videos for our Facebook Live and YouTube channels, recording fifteen to twenty videos per session. It definitely helped that I had a video production background from a previous job.

We produced Bedtime Storytime that ran every night at 7 p.m. for eight weeks while we had a skeleton crew of mostly administrators working in our library.

By June 2020, it was clear COVID-19 wasn't going away anytime soon, and our children's librarian, Kylie Coy, had families sending her emails and stopping by the drive-through window telling her how much they and their children missed her and missed storytimes.



Children's Librarian Kylie Coy is ready to begin her interactive Zoom storytime.

I would like to believe every library has a much-loved children's librarian like Miss Kylie, but in June 2020, Miss Kylie was not just an adored library employee, but her storytimes represented to these families something comforting and familiar, or conversely, they were reminded by having no storytime of what they were missing due to COVID-19.

The question became how to make things familiar and as close to the same as possible, without being together. Miss Kylie created storytimes in a bag. Her in-person storytimes prior to COVID-19 had a set of songs that were used each week, and often they involved manipulatives as well. Instead of using the same bean bags and shakin' eggs from the box in the storytime room, everyone picked up a bag at the drive-through window of everything they needed for a Miss Kylie storytime, but from home. She even had a vial of bubbles in each bag to take the place of the beloved bubble machine spewing bubbles into the storytime room every week to the delight of children and parents.



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Librarian Shawn Walsh sits on the production side of online storytime. He can handle the technical side of interactive Zoom storytime while another librarian does what she does best.

At this point, it's important to note that Miss Kylie was a devotee of the mid-century children's television show *Romper Room* when she was a child. While the show has been off the air for almost thirty years, this is important because the hostesses often called out names of people they could "see" watching at home, and Kylie remembers that her name was never called, even though she watched every time. And to this day she remembers being disappointed as a child. But now Miss Kylie had the chance to right the injustices done to her by the *Romper Room* via her own storytimes done over Zoom!

In June 2020, Miss Kylie and I were in the storytime room again. Now it was the studio with lights and microphones. This wasn't an ordinary TV studio set-up. This was designed for Miss Kylie because while I or another staff member ran the Zoom, letting people into the room, muting crying children, etc. she still wanted to see all her storytime friends. So, she had her own monitor in front of her with all the kids in their "Zoom boxes." This way she could see her friends and talk to them by name. However, it turned out to be a good and bad thing!

In the early days of the pandemic, we all logged into Zooms early to make sure everything worked and we were ready to go. It didn't take long for parents and a few very smart preschoolers to figure out that if they got logged into Zoom five to ten minutes before class started, Miss Kylie was there and they could talk to her all by themselves. It was private Miss Kylie conversation time, and her friends missed her.

Eventually we started only logging Miss Kylie on three minutes before storytime because longer than that and either preschoolers' stories got very convoluted, or everyone ran out of things to say and sat staring at each other in silence. The three-minute rule

continues today, but there is also a three-to-five-minute time at the end of storytime for children to talk to Miss Kylie, especially if they got on Zoom late and the stories and music had already started. Everyone needed time to talk to Miss Kylie!

As summer turned to fall, we created new supply bags. Now they included laminated paper with Velcro animals or other things that the children could put on and take off as part of the rhyme. With each season the supply bags changed, and with each season more people joined the Zoom storytimes with Miss Kylie. By the end of 2020, she had as many children and adults attending her virtual programs as she had the previous year when everything was in person.

During the early part of 2021, she had slightly more people attending her programs than at the same time in 2020 because now people could still attend storytime if one of the kids had a cold or if the roads were yucky. It was about this time Miss Kylie discovered that she had some people attending storytime who never picked up supply bags. Not a lot. Maybe three or four families. It turned out when she contacted them that they didn't live anywhere near the area. They had heard about Miss Kylie from a friend or discovered our program listing online and decided to join her.

As we neared the first anniversary of the pandemic and then the first anniversary of online storytime, Miss Kylie thought she would change up some of her music and activities. While some of her original online storytime participants had ultimately decided online storytime wasn't for them, a new crop of families who had only known Miss Kylie online were growing.

But these little ones were not happy with Miss Kylie's changes. In an in-person storytime, usually the leader can tell when a song

On Equipment

Want to set up a studio for your own virtual programming? Here are some considerations regarding equipment.

Sound. When doing an online storytime or any Zoom event, sound is important because you have no idea what the audience on the other end has available. Multiple microphones provide the best possible sound collection. Setting up the presenter with a lavalier-type microphone with a fuzzy wind screen can make a significant difference in hearing the speech coming from the presenter. Also consider a cardioid microphone, ideal for music both live as well as recorded. Lastly, depending on your setup, you might want to invest in a shotgun style microphone mounted on a camera. This is a directional microphone and can help with the presenter being farther away from the camera. Lastly when you have multiple audio sources having an audio mixer helps you not only listen to the sound but also adjust it to get the best possible output.

Video. While most cameras will work, what may make the difference in your storytime presentation is having a document camera available to the presenter. Instead of holding a book up at a distance from the camera (more accurately simulating an in-person storytime), the presenter can use a document camera allowing the book to take up the entire screen for the participants. If you end up using both a regular video camera and a document camera, you might want to involve some sort of video mixer to easily switch between video feeds.

Lighting. Think about backdrops and lighting. We use a black backdrop so that makes presenters and their props stand out. On video, you are competing with many external distractions, so it's important to draw the audience in. With lighting, most places will use a three-point lighting setup; we have two upper lights shining on the presenter and two lights illuminating the front of the presenter. This brightens things up and removes any shadows.

or story is starting to bomb, but with everyone online, it's a bit harder. Through winter 2021, some of the storytime groups were participating in a rhyme that had a number of animals with it, and the at-home participants had these animals attached to wide Popsicle sticks, and they would wave each animal as it came up.

Sadly, I didn't get to see this happen in person, but another colleague running Miss Kylie's video noticed that on two consecutive weeks, and a few weeks into the new storytimes without this animal rhyme, at the point in the storytime that the animals rhyme should have come, animals on wooden sticks were getting waved in front of the screen like 1960s protest signs. Elephants and other zoo animals were bouncing along while Miss Kylie was reading a completely different story.

As hilarious as an uncoordinated protest lead by two-year-olds over Zoom is, it does illustrate another thing we learned. The person running Zoom is also paying much closer attention to what is happening in front of the cameras of the various attendees. That person's job is to call Miss Kylie's attention to things she may not be seeing because she's reading a book or doing something else. That day the Zoom person called Miss Kylie's attention to the protest happening during her story, and she was able to tell the two girls that she saw their elephants and other animals and yes, she would return to doing the animals rhyme that used the stick animals.

As planning for fall 2021 came around and mask mandates were getting lifted, our library wondered if it was time to return to

only in-person storytimes. Several parents and grandparents had talked to Miss Kylie about their concerns that online storytime might stop. For different reasons, this worked really well for their families and in-person would not.

Our decision was to offer both an in-person and an online storytime. Children and their families who hadn't had success with online storytime returned for in-person events; other continued online. And storytime attendance numbers across both formats maintained their pre-pandemic levels or grew slightly.

When the Omicron variant came through in late 2021 and early 2022, all storytimes went back online, until in-person classes resumed in February 2022.

At this point, we now have a permanent studio space and a new storytime room. The pandemic has taught us the importance of concurrent online and in-person programming. And now Miss Kylie is a star both of in-person programs and on TV. She has been asked by one preschooler if she makes a million dollars because she's "on TV." She has had another little one be totally shocked at seeing her from the waist down. She does have legs! On Zoom, Miss Kylie is seated behind a table.

The future continues to be a hybrid situation, but we are seeing more occasions, outside of pandemics, when it would be advantageous to be completely online. Doing what is best to connect with the youngest library patrons is still what storytime is all about. &