

Listening to the Rhythm of Our Youth

In the Middle Magic



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As a storyteller, there is no greater joy than seeing a child's face light up as you tell a story. There is no greater satisfaction than watching your passion for storytelling grow in young people as they experience the magic and share it with others.

Early adolescence (ages 10-15) is often a difficult time. Youngsters' bodies mature faster than their brains and their emotions ricochet between immature children and sophisticated adults—often in the same five minutes. They are gawky, insecure, self-conscious, boisterous, withdrawn, funny, worldly, street-wise, and an absolute joy. These youngsters are willing to try anything. Their peers have the greatest influence on their choice of dress, speech, music, and attitudes. Often there is no place where these kids are accepted or allowed to express themselves as individuals. Not every youngster is athletic, musically inclined, or popular enough to be in student government. A storytelling club welcomes all students regardless of ability or interest. The only requirement for membership is attendance and participation. Cooperation rather than competition is the rule.

Having discovered the power and magic of storytelling, I wanted to share this experience with my students. At first, my goals were small. I wanted my students to experience the sense of accomplishment that I felt telling stories. When she heard of my plans, my mother, who was in a nursing home, wanted my storytellers to entertain the residents. In the spring of 1987, I advertised the first meeting on the morning announcements at my school.

The Chatterton Talespinners began with ten students. I was disappointed, but this was a blessing in disguise.

Talespinners turned out to be a place where jocks, joiners, nerds, and strays, all with secret gifts and talents, came together to support and encourage one another, and to grow in poise and confidence. Do not be discouraged by small numbers. To quote a popular movie, "If you build it, they will come." Talespinners grew from ten students to an average of 25.

It was my hope that kids would feel better about themselves by participating in a storytelling club. I found it did this in ways I could not have imagined. Brandon (not their real names) was gawky, awkward, and annoying. He had difficulty putting his ideas into words, but he persevered. Billy took him under his wing, nurtured and mentored him. Through Billy's example, the rest of the group encouraged Brandon as well.

Are you ready to embark on a miraculous journey to touch and perhaps change lives forever? Here are important factors in building a successful storytelling club.

Set Goals and Objectives

Consider why you want to create a storytelling group, what you want the group to accomplish, and the steps needed to accomplish your goals. One of your goals should include a performance. Storytelling is a performance art. Your members need to know their efforts will result in a visit to a preschool, kindergarten class, family performance, bookstore, senior center, or other venue.

Establish Rules

Rules help meetings run smoothly and encourage members to treat each other with respect. Most importantly, rules help to create a safe environment where everyone feels accepted and where members are free to

try things without fear of ridicule or disapproval. State your rules in a positive manner. Rules need not be burdensome or oppressive.

Structure Meetings

Having a plan will assure that you accomplish what you set out to do. Social time helps build community. Allow the members to visit during the first ten minutes. Take attendance. It may be difficult to end the sociability so use a ritual opening to begin each meeting. A song, poem, special light, call and response, bell, or simple welcome will set the tone and bring everyone to order.

Young storytellers need to hear stories if they are to become good tellers. Always include a story in your meeting, especially in the beginning. Telling a story after the ritual opening assures that you will not run out of time. Tell stories yourself, bring in an experienced teller from outside, or invite returning or former members to share a favorite tale. When the story ends, have the group briefly discuss what made the story come alive. While you want them to enjoy the story, you also want your students to become aware of storytelling techniques and performance.

After the story, conduct an activity or lesson in which everyone participates. Arranging the members in pairs and small groups assures that everyone will have a chance to be heard. Devote the first few meetings to activities that encourage members to become acquainted. As meetings progress, select activities that will help students choose, learn stories, and practice the stories they will tell to an audience. Your storytellers will need practice and feedback.

After the activity, spend time reflecting on what went well and what was learned. It is important to have your storytellers talk about what they have experienced. This is a convenient time to remind your members about preparations for the next meeting. Conclude the meeting with a ritual closing; blow out the candle, sing a song, recite a poem, or speak to the good and welfare of the group.

Performance

Make a checklist of everything you need to do to prepare for the performance. Do you need permission slips, do you need to arrange for transportation, send invita-

tions, or flyers? Have you checked the school calendar to make sure there are no conflicts? Keep phone numbers and other pertinent information about upcoming performances handy. Do not forget to contact the newspaper and invite the administration.

Rehearse stories with a microphone. Discuss appropriate performance attire. A group outfit insures that your tellers will look professional. Dressing the part reinforces confidence. Never let someone perform who is not prepared. Appoint an emcee to tell about the group and introduce the tellers.

There are a myriad wonderful places to perform. Each audience has something special to offer your storytellers. Pre-school and lower-elementary audiences gape open-mouthed at the "big kids." Young children are a forgiving audience and accept developing tellers who are not quite polished. Older adults and seniors enjoy the storyteller as well as the story. They are a warm and encouraging audience. Provide your students with questions that elicit stories from the seniors.

After the performance, celebrate your success. Find something positive to say about each storyteller and encourage praising of one another. Discuss what could be improved, but do not dwell on it. Use the excitement to spur your group to work harder, improve, and learn new stories.

Storytelling is not for everyone. Do not be discouraged if some of your students drop out. Young teens may not want to devote the time it takes to learn storytelling skills. Decide how much effort you will spend persuading wayward members to come back. Allow a child to leave gracefully. Let him know that he is a terrific kid and that he is welcome any time.

As your year draws to a close, spend time evaluating the year. What changes will you make next time? Throw a party; pat yourself on the back. You did it! Your storytellers learned to cooperate, appreciate, encourage, and support one another. You can rest easy, secure in the fact that you have kindled the storytelling flame. In the words of Jane Yolen, "Touch magic... pass it on!"



Judy Sima (www.JudySima.com) is a retired school librarian, storyteller, and a leading authority on youth storytelling. She has been featured at conferences and festivals, schools, and libraries across the country. She co-authored the award winning *Raising Voices: Creating Youth Storytelling Groups and Troupes*.