Beginning with Peekaboo — Storytelling as Interaction

by Robert Munsch

Neugebauer children grew up on Munsch stories. We first heard them on audiotapes on car trips, and then sought them out in printed format. Their hilarious plots and boisterous lines and motions lured us into the stories and led to family games which were based on our favorite lines. So we were delighted when Robert Munsch agreed to share some of his insights on storytelling:

Peekaboo, the most well-known interactive game for very young children, involves a prescribed set of words and actions. It doesn't work very well if just the words are used, or if just the actions are used. It is an interactive sequence which demands both words and actions for the child to enjoy the situation. In fact, actions without words may arouse fear in the child, rather than delight.

There are many finger plays for young children which work upon this same principal. The child's interest is held by the physical actions that go along with the words. This type of play makes a great deal of sense because young children become adept physically much sooner than they become adept verbally, and they learn and experience things physically before they learn and experience things verbally. So, the physical aspect of the story can be looked on as a sort of crutch which eases the child to the verbal element.

There is, however, another way of looking at this. The stereotyped verbal and physical interactions which adults use with young children are probably a form of imprinting that lets the child become attached to the adult and the adult become attached to the child. The mixture of the verbal and the physical which work in unison to support the attachment. So, finger plays for young children can be looked upon as the outgrowth of the genetically imprinted sequences which begin the attachment between adult and child. But what happens when the child becomes three, or four, or five?

Two things happen when the child grows older. In some situations, the verbal separates from the physical and becomes a part of the world of books. The illustrations in books, the visual message, replaces the physical interaction of earlier stages. However, kids of this age group still love physical and verbal imitation set in an interactive sequence.

One of the most popular circle time stories is **Going on a Lion Hunt**. It uses the very elementary calling back and forth between the teacher and the audience as well as the mirroring of physical gestures. Once again, the use of physical gestures makes the verbal element accessible to children who would not otherwise be able to follow the plot. It's one thing to tell a child you are going on a lion hunt, but it's another thing to have the child wap his hands and imitate walking, or stomp his feet and imitate walking; it helps the child get the message.

With three to five year olds, left-over elements from adult-child attachment processes can be used to modify and expand what is essentially an attempt at verbal plotting. And this is, in fact, what I try to replicate with many of my simpler stories. The theory, stated quite simply, is this: a plot which works verbally with older children can be united with a participation sequence which works with younger children, therefore widening the possible age appeal of the story. Three year olds, who would

not be able to follow a complicated plot, will nonetheless sit quite happily, as long as they are rewarded with a familiar interactive sequence of which they can be part.

This same form of interactive sequences probably existed in traditional fairy tales which are now found only in verbal form in books. The reason for this is simple. The participation elements, verbal games, rhythmic chanting, slapping, and imitation which work so well with young children as part of the story are generally impossible to write down. They do not translate well into written language.

So, the translation of traditional tales into a written format acted as a filter. The music, the cadence, the gestures all dropped out. Parents and teachers who want their bookreading and storytelling to work must now put the music and cadence and gestures back in. It is interesting to watch adults read **Three Billy Goats Gruff** to young children because, if they want it to work, they instinctively reintroduce back into the story the element of participation and imitation on the part of the child.

So, what is this leading to?

Two points.

When reading stories to young children, it is possible to replace the visual element by the pictures, upon which we now rely so heavily, with physical and verbal imitation. Let's take **Goldilocks and the Three Bears**. Instead of having "There was a girl named Goldilocks that was walking through the forest," we could make it like going on a lion hunt.

Goldilocks was walking through the forest, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, she saw a house that had a door and she said, "Aaaaaaaaaa door!" She got a little closer and said, "Aaaaaaaaaa door!" (If you do this right, the kids will be saying "Aaaaaaaaaa door!") *Goldilocks said, "Let's open the door." So they opened up the door, "Creek."*

It's possible to turn **Goldilocks and the Three Bears** into the same sort of story that **Going on a Lion Hunt** is, without in any way changing the plot. In fact, doing it in this format expands the plot so it is now available to children who otherwise couldn't follow it.

Almost any story for children has elements which can be made into repetitive patterns which the children will imitate: walking, opening doors, and saying *hello* are all repetitive elements that children love to imitate if given the chance.

Let's look at one of my own stories — the one called **Mortimer**. If read in the book form, it is not immediately apparent that it is, in fact, an interactive sequence — a participation story. In the following version of the story:

1. **The sections that are printed in bold have gestures which go along with them.**

2. Underlined sections are ones that the children tend to start repeating on their own without having to be told to do so.

3. **The sections that are in bold and underlined have both verbal and physical imitation.**

So, it would go like this.

Mortimer

One day Mortimer's mother took him up the stairs to go to bed — **wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap.** She opened up the door and threw him in bed and said, "Mortimer, be quiet."

Mortimer shook his head: **Yes, yes, yes, yes.**

So the mother **shut the door** and went back down the stairs **wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap.**

As soon as she got to the bottom of the stairs, Mortimer sang:
Clang, clang, rattle bing bang;
Gonna make my noise all day.
Clang, clang, rattle bing bang;
Gonna make my noise all day.

Mortimer's father heard that noise and he came up the stairs — **wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap, wap.**
And so on . . .

The second point from this discussion is to expand the idea of what constitutes a story. Because of the filtering effects of written language, we have taken a

Beginnings

story to mean words. This works fine with older children and adults because for those people that is what a story is. But for young children, intermediate between the physical world of the baby and the verbal world of the adult, story means a mixture of these two worlds. We do children a disservice when we only serve them a homogenized and shortened view of the realm of fantasy.

Bob Munsch is a Canadian storyteller and author. His best known books are ***Love You Forever*** *and* ***The Paperbag Princess****.*