

**PRINCIPLES OF ORAL NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT:**

**for Teachers**

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**NARRATIVES**

Some children with language problems have difficulty in understanding the language of narratives or stories. Narrative plays an important part both in everyday social talk and within the school curriculum. We

relate events that have happened to us on a daily basis and are also able to create and understand fictional stories. Most school-aged children are familiar with the concept of 'stories' through repeated exposure to books, television, and children's stories. However they may find it difficult to structure made-up stories or tell true-life 'stories' about themselves.

Narrative therapy gives the child a framework that can be applied to both real and made up stories. It aims to help them organise narratives and to ensure the child realises what information is required by the listener to allow the story to make sense. This analysis is based on '**story structure**' or '**episode structure**' and applies most clearly to narratives about goals and events. It applies to oral story telling as well as writing. Many of these ideas are adapted from 'Speaking and Listening Through Narrative', a pack of activities and ideas based on the work of Becky Shanks, further developed in collaborations with Helen Rippon, published by Black Sheep Press, 67 Middleton, Cowling, Keighley, BD 22 0DQ.

## **STRUCTURE OF STORIES – THE EPISODE.**

We often think of stories as having a **beginning**, **middle** and an **end**, and these have been further defined to help us teach children all the parts of a story. A 'good' story combines these components in predictable ways, and develops the middle section into **episodes**. An episode must have at least an **event** that triggers the action, an **attempt** to deal with the event, and a resulting **consequence**. There are further optional components, and episodes can be strung together.

### **THE BEGINNING**

- The beginning usually gives the **setting** of the story that tells us *WHO* the narrative is about, (the **character(s)**) and *WHERE* and *WHEN* the story takes place.
- *WHEN* can range from the very specific (*at 10 o'clock yesterday*) to the more general (*once upon a time, last summer*).
- Similarly, *WHO* and *WHERE* can contain very detailed information, or can be brief. Both '*Once there was a little boy who was very naughty. He was always getting into trouble at school. The teachers always had to get his mum and dad in. The boy was called Jonathon and he was six.*' and '*Once a boy called Jonathon did a naughty thing.*' tell *WHO* the story is about.

### **THE MIDDLE**

- The middle section of the narrative is where the story actually happens. It is where the central plot of the story occurs and where the exciting bit happens. It can be defined by a sequence of three parts. Each part must have one essential component to form a 'good' story, and each has an optional component.

- WHAT HAPPENS – 1. There must be an **initiating event** that acts as a trigger for doing or thinking something. It is an event or action or perception that causes the character(s) to do something. This is an essential component of a 'good' story. For example, a *WHEN, WHO, WHERE*, setting like: *'One day, Susie the squirrel went to her friend's house for tea.'* can be followed by the **initiating event** *'But her friend didn't know where the nuts for tea were buried'*.

- The initiating event might or might not be followed by the character's **internal response** to the event – how they feel or what they think. For example, *'They were very sad'*.

- WHAT HAPPENS – 2. Following this there must be one step and there may be another.

- There may be the character's **plan** of what to do next; for example, *'They wondered how to get some more'*.

- There must be an **attempt** to deal with the initiating event. This is usually the action that the character carries out because of the initiating event. For example, *'So Susie dug up some of her own nuts'*.

- WHAT HAPPENS – 3. This details what occurs as a result of the attempt. It must incorporate the outcome or **consequence** of the attempt, which may involve success or failure. For example, *'Susie and her friend had a delicious tea'*. There may then be a **reaction** by the characters to the consequence. For example *'They felt warm and cosy'*.

## THE ENDING

- There may then be a final ending to the story. This is an additional sentence not an essential requirement. This is often where the general moral of the story is given, or it is used to give a neat finish. For example, *'Susie was glad she had shared.'* It helps to signal 'the end' to the listener and can become conventional; for example *'They all lived happily ever after'*.

## MULTI - EPISODE STORIES

Most familiar stories have more than one episode, making them longer and more complex. This idea is introduced once a child has understood the principles of an episode, but it is important to ensure that the most basic narrative structure (where the 'middle' is composed of one episode only) is understood first.

### Episode Structure

The complete structure of a narrative episode is therefore:

#### *BEGINNING*

**When, Where, Who.**

At least one of these is usually present

#### *MIDDLE*

**What happened - 1**

**What the character did about that - 2**

**What happened then - 3**

Well-formed narratives need all of these 'middle' elements.

#### *ENDING*

**This tells the listener that the story is now complete.**

It is not always necessary to have a separate 'end' as the 'What happened' – 3 section may give enough information.

For each story the child should be asked if an additional ending sentence is required.

## HELPING CHILDREN TO CONSTRUCT NARRATIVES.

Some children may need help to construct stories. The aim of narrative therapy is to increase a child's awareness and use of the sequence required to form a complete episode.

This is tackled by:

- increasing awareness and use of beginning, middle and end of a story
- explaining that the 'beginning' is often composed of three parts –

who, when, where

- explaining that the 'middle' is always composed of (at least) three parts
- explaining how to conclude a story
- using visual prompts to aid awareness of narrative structure
- developing an increasingly complex narrative structure
- encouraging reflection on stories that are heard and read.

To begin developing narrative, adults tell stories to the children using prompt cards, and children are asked if they can identify the key components of the story:

- who it is about ('main character')
- where it took place
- when it happened
- what happened
- what the character did about it
- what happened next/in the end

Once the components of the story have been identified, the child is given one of the cue cards and 'fills in' that part of the story at the right moment.

Once all of the labels and cue cards for different parts of a narrative have been introduced and understood, specific work on each part of the narrative begins.

## **BEGINNINGS**

- WHO

When children hear stories it is not always true that the character is the first thing they will hear about. However, when the children are creating a story it is essential that they have someone to build their ideas and story around. Therefore the character of the story is dealt with first. They need to understand that when we tell a story it is important to say who is in the story or *WHO* it is about.

A sequence for discussing this could be:

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| STATE the AIM      | Today we are going to talk about telling stories, when we tell a story it is important to say who is in the story or who it is about.                     |
| EXPLAIN            | Telling people who is in the story lets them know about the 'character' – this is who is in the story and it helps people understand the story.           |
| GIVE an EXAMPLE    | Let's look at this story. Can you tell me who the story was about?  |
| EXPAND             | Can you think of who else could be in the story or who else the story could have been about? Or: Can you think of another story and tell me who is in it? |
| REFLECT            | We just talked about the importance of telling people who is in your story – can you remember why it is important to tell people who is in your story?    |
| PLAN and REINFORCE | Can you remember what is important the next time we tell a story? We have to say who the story is about.  |

- WHERE

Explain that not only is it very important to tell people listening *WHO* the story is about, but also where the story is taking place.

A sequence for discussing this could be:

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| STATE AIM       | When we are telling a story we need to tell where the story happens.  |
| EXPLAIN         | Telling where the story happened is important and it provides meaning to the story and tells the listener the setting in which the story takes place. The setting could be in a very specific place for example in the kitchen, or in a much bigger place e.g. Spain. |
| GIVE an EXAMPLE | Let's look at a story. Can you see where the story happened?  |
| EXPAND          | Can you think where else the story could have happened? Can you think of another story and where it happened?   |
| REFLECT         | We just talked about the importance of saying where a story happened, why is it important to let people know this?  |
| PLAN            | The next time you tell a story think what you are going to remember to put in.  |

- WHEN

Explain that not only is it very important to tell people listening *WHO* the story is about, and *WHERE* the story is taking place, but *WHEN* it happened.

A sequence for discussing this could be:

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| STATE AIM       | We are going to talk about when the story happens. This may be the time the story takes place or the day, month or year.   |
| EXPLAIN         | When we tell a story we need to let the listener know what time the story takes place.   |
| GIVE an EXAMPLE | Let's look at a story – can you identify what time the story happened?   |
| EXPAND          | Can you think of another time it could have happened e.g. day of the week, time of day etc..<br>Can you think of another story and know when it happens e.g. in the middle of the night. |
| REFLECT         | “We just looked at telling when the story happened – why do we need to do this?”   |
| PLAN            | The next time you tell a story what are you going to remember to put in?   |

### MIDDLES

- WHAT HAPPENED 1, 2, 3.

Remind children about the necessary components – WHAT HAPPENED 1. 2 and 3. i.e. **the initiating event**, when something happens to start the action (WHAT HAPPENED 1), what the character(s) **attempt** in reaction and in response to this event (WHAT HAPPENED 2), and what happens as a **consequence** of that attempt (WHAT HAPPENED 3).

A sequence for discussing this could be:

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| STATE AIM    | Now that we know who is in the story, when it happened and where it happened (the beginning), we are going to think about what happened.   |
| EXPLAIN      | The middle of a story tells us what happens and from this we find out about what started the story, what the character did and what happened because of this. This can happen lots of times in a story.                |
| GIVE EXAMPLE | an Let's look at the three parts in the middle of a story:<br>1 - a little boy had a sore tooth.<br>2 - he didn't like going to the dentist but he did go.<br>3 - he had to get a filling but it didn't hurt too much. |
| EXPAND       | Can you think what else might have happened in the story? For example, what else might happen to start a sequence of events (like a sore leg, not a sore tooth) or a change to what happened at the dentist.           |
| REFLECT      | We thought about three parts in the middle of a story. Can you remember them?  |
| PLAN         | When we tell a story what events happen in the middle? What does each part tell us?  |

## **ENDINGS**

An additional sentence that signals the ending tells the listeners that the story has stopped. Children's stories often give a general moral here. We need to explain where an **ending** is required and where it is not. It is not needed where the ending is supplied in the *WHAT HAPPENED* section or where there is another episode following.

## **ADDING FURTHER EPISODES**

Once the child is able to generate stories following the three part *WHAT HAPPENED* episode structure, we can explain that two (or more) episodes can be joined together to make a longer story. This often happens when the **attempt** (*WHAT HAPPENED* - 2) is not successful and meets an **obstacle**. A new plan and a new attempt is often made, and new characters introduced.



## ADDING OPTIONAL COMPONENTS OF EPISODES

### RESPONSES, PLANS AND REACTIONS

For older/more advanced children it should be explained that it is possible to make their story better and more interesting if they tell the people listening to their story what the character is feeling and or thinking. Information about the characters' **responses**, i.e. emotions and feelings can be given at different points throughout the narrative structure, particularly just after the **initiating event** in *WHAT HAPPENS 1*. Information about what the character **plans** to do is often given just before the **attempt** in *WHAT HAPPENS 2*. Their **reactions** are often given after the **consequence** in *WHAT HAPPENS 3*. Examples can be given and discussed, and the children can have the opportunity to add to their own stories by including their characters' feelings about what is happening to them. Picture prompts can be used if the children are experiencing difficulty generating additional information.

### CAUSALITY

Stories should ideally give some explanation as to *WHY* events are happening or *WHY* characters are reacting in a certain way. This adds extra meaning to a narrative, by giving events a causal link rather than just being a list of events.

A possible way of discussing this would be:

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| STATE AIM       | We are going to think about why things might happen in a story. That means thinking about the reason why things have happened. If you know the reason for something it can help you to understand it better. |
| EXPLAIN         | We need to let the listener know why things in the story happen, or why a character does something.  |
| GIVE<br>EXAMPLE | an Let's look at a story together. Can you tell me why...happened/ can you tell me why the character did that?   |
| EXPAND          | Can you think of another reason why they did that/why that happened?   |
| REFLECT         | We have been thinking about telling the listener why things happen in the story. Why should we do that?  |
| PLAN            | The next time you tell a story, think what you are going to remember to put in it.   |

## LINKING WORDS

It is helpful to discuss vocabulary items such as *and*, *because*, *therefore* etc. and how they can be used to join up information and can make a story sound better. They become more necessary for stories that have more than one episode.

## COHESION OF THE STORY

- Stories need to give the listener enough information to let them understand the story. This means introducing new characters as they appear, and using **pronouns** and **articles** correctly.
- **Pronouns** should refer back to the last noun, using the correct number (*singular* or *plural*) and gender (*he*, *she*, *it* etc.).
- **Articles** *a/an* and *the* are used to signal 'new' or 'old' information:
- *a* – when something or someone is being introduced for the first time within the story.
- *the* – for subsequent mentions of the something/someone. For example, '**A** long time ago **a** young prince lived in **a** big castle. **The** prince was very handsome.... **The** castle was very gloomy'.

These features can be pointed out as a 'tidying up' process for coherent stories with good episode structure.