



## Getting started with sensory stories

An introduction to using sensory storytelling with children with neurodiversity and/or disability

**Age: 3-18**

**CFE Levels First to Fourth**

**Resource created by Scottish Book Trust**

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## About this resource

Sensory storytelling is a way of telling a narrative that uses a mixture of stories or books and sensory experiences – including touch, texture, sensations, smells, taste and visual stimuli.

For children with additional support needs, including neurodiversity and/or disability, sensory storytelling can offer a calm and relaxed atmosphere, as well as enable children to make choice, engage with and understand a story.

This resource will take you through getting started with sensory storytelling, including thinking about how to plan your delivery based on the needs, engagement and interests of your child or the children you work with.

## Top tips for getting started

There are some key things to think about when getting started, but of course can be adapted either based on your children, or the children you work with, or as your confidence improves!

We advise starting out with a picture book, specifically one with a simple narrative and not too many difficult concepts. When planning your experiences, it's worth breaking down the story in your head into three parts:

- Beginning: who is the main character and where are we?
- Middle: what is the main action or change happening in the story?
- End: how does everything get resolved?

Depending on the mobility of the children you work with, we advise keeping them close and holding up the book so they can all see the illustrations. Make sure you speak loudly and clearly – if you're using music, make sure it's low enough that they can hear you.

With props, we advise keeping them concealed so you can reveal them. This helps with an element of surprise and wonder, but also means you can take them out one-by-one and put them away. This can help children understand you're moving on to another element of the story, and also limit distractions (especially with props that might be noisy!).

When using props, either have enough or set aside enough time that each child can spend some time with it. You can spend some time going through the order of your story and props with any other members of staff so they feel confident helping the children engage with them.

## **Planning for different senses**

It's worth spending some time noticing how your child, or the children you work with, engage with stories. Engagement can take a lot of forms including:

- Eye contact, tracking, or intensely watching and following actions or props with their eye movement
- Social referencing – looking at other children's, or a trusted adult's facial expressions to gauge their reaction
- Verbalising, including making noises, repeating words or sounds, or joining in with verbal prompts
- Movement, including physically tracking a prop or the speaker by moving around or reaching out to touch props
- Focusing on a prop including holding, touching, examining or investigating its shape, texture, smell or feeling

- Physically responding, including repeating the actions of someone else (e.g. clapping, or rolling a ball back and forth)

It is also worth stating that some children may not have these visible signs of engagement. This may be due to their own capacity, including their capacity to move or vocalise, or it may be because some children need time to watch and adjust to an experience before they will react. For more information on how children with additional support needs can react to experiences, and the role of the adult, we recommend reading [Oily Cart's report "Being With' in Sensory Theatre" on their website.](#)

All children are different and will react to a story in different ways. It's worth paying attention to how the children in a group react and using that to plan what elements of a story to use. For example, with a child who doesn't engage in eye contact but likes repetition or vocalisation – you know you can include moments of call and response, or playing with different sounds they can copy.

It's also worth thinking about what senses the children you work with enjoy engaging. For example:

## Sight

Children who engage through eye contact, social referencing or visually tracking the storyteller or their prop are engaging with their sight. Think about visually engaging experiences such as:

- Letting children take their time to look at the book pages or props, pointing out different elements
- Explore the different shapes brightly coloured fabric/parachutes can make when moved
- Using things like reflective surfaces, interesting patterns or shapes

## Sound

Children who are quietly listening, repeating sounds or may have visual impairment might enjoy the use of sounds. Think about:

- Soundscapes or music – these are ongoing sounds that can flow throughout the whole story, for example the sound of waves crashing to create a beach setting

- Instruments or noise-makers – keep these aside and hand them out at key moments in the story
- Specific story noises – for example, thunder rumbling with tin foil, or a bird chirping with a bird whistle. Allowing the children to help make the sounds can help them add to the story and control how much noise they're comfortable with
- Call and response – using songs or words which children can repeat to or respond back to throughout the story

## Smell

This one can be trickier as certain smells can be quite overwhelming, but can also be incredibly evocative in terms of memory. You could consider:

- Some sensory books, especially ones about food, might have a scratch and sniff element
- Using a spray bottle with a watered-down scent – spray it into the air so it's not too direct
- Smell cubes – these are cubes that can be passed around and smelled at key points in the story

## Touch

Textures and props offer a really rich opportunity for children, especially those with visual impairment who can engage with specific elements of the story through feeling props. If you have children who engage through intense focus on props, consider:

- Gathering different textures to tie into the story – a crunchy leaf to represent a forest, a stone to represent a mountain and so on. Consider if they'll make a noise when being held – this can add another element
- The shape of a prop. For example, if you're using stuffed toys, will they have the right feeling if the person holding them cannot see them?
- Objects which can be shaken (e.g. noise-makers), or thrown (e.g. soft toys), or engaged with in a physical way

## Physical movement

As well as the traditional five senses, we also have senses called interoception, vestibular and proprioception:

- Interoception – the sense of our internal body including feeling things like hunger, or specific emotions in our body
- Vestibular – the sense of balance and spatial awareness when we move
- Proprioception – the sense of our body in the space around us

These senses can be triggered by movement and many children will feel an urge to move in specific ways either to test that sense of personal space and balance, or to calm themselves down or make themselves feel secure. Children who are moving around a space are not necessarily not engaging. Think about ways you can encourage and support movement, for example:

- Opportunities to dance or move to music
- Low-level play – being close to the ground and acting out elements of the story
- Using the outdoors to provide movement opportunities

## **Choosing your props**

Once you have a sense of how the children might engage, it's worth thinking about the following things when looking for props:

- Safety – make sure your props don't have any loose pieces which could be a choking hazard and check for allergens
- Reusability – try to balance your props so that they aren't mainly single use – this will help you tell the same story multiple times without high expenses. You can also set aside some time to explore your home or setting – notice what things you already have at home that you can use

- Cleanliness – picking resources you can easily wash or wipe clean will help with reusability

## Further resources

Some of the books listed below have been mentioned in this resource, or are a good place to start when adapting picture books into sensory stories.

*Jack and the Bean Stalk*, folk tale

*Hairy Maclary*, Lynley Dodd

*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, Eric Carle

*We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, Michael Rosen

*The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, Judith Kerr

*Katie Morag and the Tiresome Ted*, Mairi Hedderwick

*The Three Little Pigs*, folk tale

*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, folk tale

*Stick Man*, Julia Donaldson

*Peace At Last*, Jill Murphy

You can also find the following resources on Scottish Book Trust's website:

- More information about our [Sensory Storytelling programme](#)
- Our [book list of sensory book recommendations](#)
- [Sensory activities for the book LOUD! by Rose Robbins](#)