

The Storytellers' Top Ten

A National Literacy Trust Membership resource

Storytelling sits at the heart of literacy development. Hearing stories, reading stories, retelling and creating stories should, of course, underpin our school curriculum, but storytelling has other benefits too. As a creative, non-threatening and engaging tool, storytelling can help build relationships, foster a sense of community and support parental engagement.

“Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.”

Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*

Explore our 'Top Ten' ideas for using storytelling to build bridges with parents and families.

1. Pupils as teachers

Invite parents to come along to school to learn how to tell stories and you may find you have few takers, however friendly, well intentioned and encouraging you try to sound. But, substitute yourself as teacher for a group of pupils, and suddenly storytelling takes on a different tone. Start simply with class assemblies enhanced with art work, story maps and music and with confident, pupil storytellers guiding their parents, the barriers fall away. Approaches like the communal storytelling element of Talk4Writing are ideal to build pupil confidence and bring alive the action, making stories memorable and easy to retell. Instead of the more traditional format of a stage and audience, encourage story circles where pupils are arranged seated in a circle looking outward and parents in a surrounding circle facing their child – a great way to make the whole experience more personal and fun.

See this case study on [Talk4Writing family storytelling](#) for inspiration.

See also the 'hear, map, step, speak' process of learning a story orally explained by the team at [Storytelling Schools](#) using teaching videos.

2. Uncovering the hidden artist

Creative story-writing workshops sound a scary proposition for parents but introducing techniques like story mapping can have a much more positive response. Armed with a simple familiar story, collaborative work between parents and pupils to create a story map together to help represent a favourite story encourage talk and storytelling in a far more relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. Often you will uncover the dark horse of a parent with previously hidden artistic talent who takes story mapping to a whole new level. Once the basics have been mastered, story mapping can be used not only to retell familiar stories and even to collect favourite family stories but also as a simple planning tool to create and invent new stories together.

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See experienced storyteller Chris Smith explain one method of [creating a story map](#).

3. Story corners

Developing the school environment can be a lovely focus for parents to take the initiative and get involved in the life of the school. Task parent groups to create simple story corners where pupils will feel encouraged and comfortable in reading and retelling stories. A cheap mosquito net, decorated with ribbons and hung in corners of the school and classrooms, complete with a few cushions and resources for story mapping can be effective and fun to set up.

4. Magical places

Put the call out for practical parents good with wood, landscaping or gardening skills and challenge them with the design and creation of willow story tents, outside seating, or even a more ambitious mini amphitheatre to create communal spaces ripe for storytelling.

5. Unusual invention

Whole class or school story invention can be a great way to encourage story making. There are many ways to stimulate invention and create a buzz about story making across the school community.

Display an unusual object in a prominent place or introduce it at a whole school assembly, send an image of the object home and challenge families to create a story around it. Questions to prompt discussion can help such as: *Who did it belong to? Where was it found? What happens to it when touched? Is it a portal key? Does it possess magical qualities? Etc.*

Unusual images work just as well or short films as story starters held on the school website to prompt ideas for story.

6. A whole-school story

Whole-school experiential stories can be run across an entire term or even school year with parent help. Unusual characters can appear in the playground with messages to decipher, clues can be left, challenges set. Engaging parents in planning, acting out and delivering such experiences can be a brilliant way to stimulate story writing and bring families into the planning of a creative and engaging curriculum.

Ideas for this type of whole-school story can be explored along with other experiential learning opportunities by looking at the [Everybody Writes](#) area of the BookTrust website.

7. Story Sacks

Resourcing and creating story sacks can be a super way to retell favourite stories. Informal workshops and coffee mornings can be the perfect place to work on developing sacks with parents before sending sacks home to support storytelling.

8. Simple structures

Providing parents with simple structures can help encourage oral story invention at home. Storytelling is an art which doesn't come naturally to all but with a few simple plot patterns and common story structures, we can share the tools of storytelling with parents. Simple common plots like those of Christopher Booker's book, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why we tell stories* (Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, Voyage and Return, Quest, Comedy, Tragedy and Rebirth) can be shared and examples given. See further information [here](#).

For great ideas on modelling the use of simple structures see Alan Peat's fun story game '[Boxing Clever](#)'. This can be modelled in assembly for parents and instructions sent home. Parents may, in time, feel confident enough using such a structure to work in school perhaps running small oral storytelling groups for classes.

9. Your own 500 words

Competitions are a brilliant way of encouraging parents to get involved so why not run your very own 500 words story competition perhaps with all entries anonymous but submitted by parents this time. For inspiration and an idea of the possible power of simple short stories, take a look at some of the amazing images from the [Strangers Project](#), stories collated by Brandon Doman who simply asked the question of complete strangers, "What's Your Story?"

10. Twenty-Eight Ways

For more creative ideas to celebrate and tell stories with parents, (28 in total!) see our superb StoryQuest resource from Kate Norgate of [The Crick Crack Club](#) in association with Children & the Arts.