

The Helicopter Technique of Story Telling and Story Acting

Based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley

Vivian Gussin Paley is a now retired kindergarten teacher from the University of Chicago Laboratory School in the state of Illinois. Her numerous publications include 'The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter' published in 1991 by Harvard University Press and 'You Can't Say You Can't Play', published in 1993. She received a MacArthur Fellowship in 1989, an Erikson Award for Service to Children in 1987, and a Lifetime Achievement American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation in 1998. She is the author of many books describing her work with children who are just starting school.

In 2002, Vivian Gussin Paley agreed to become patron to MakeBelieve Arts.

The Helicopter Technique of Story Telling and Story Acting recognises the potential in even the youngest of children to undertake the serious role of telling, observing and acting out the theatre of the classroom.



"A day without storytelling is, for me, a disconnected day. The children at least have their play, but I cannot remember what is real to the children without their stories to anchor fantasy and purpose."

Vivian Gussin Paley – The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter

A Summary of the Approach

Introducing the technique

Telling Stories around the Stage

- Seat children in a circle around a marked out stage area
- Tell the group a few stories collected from other children (or use the example story listed below)

An example story and introductory approach

A little puppy saw a flower.

In fact, let's start there. Can you play the puppy? Will you come up onto the stage? How does the puppy walk? Can you show me? And you, will you come up and be the flower? Can you pretend to be the flower? Can you show me how it will look?

The puppy smelt the flower.

Can I see you smell the flower?

And he saw a tree.

Will you come and be the tree? How can you show me that you are a tree? Fantastic!

The puppy walked all the way around the tree, until his mother came to find him.

Would you be the mother dog coming to find him? How does the mother dog walk? And that is the end of the story. Lets all clap thank you to the story actors.

Having acted out a few stories with the class they are now in a position to move onto telling their own stories.

Introducing Story Dictation

- Collect stories around the stage from 2-3 children
- Write the children's stories word for word as they are dictated
- Repeat back the words of the child whose story you are scribing as you write
- Act these stories out immediately as you collect them



Private Story Dictation

- Introduce a story list to collect the names of the children wanting to dictate stories
- Never coerce a child into telling a story
- Always refer any plot or character suggestions from other children back to the author
- Try not to lead. Allow the story to develop and only intervene if you are unclear of the words spoken
- Do not be afraid to interrupt the child to repeat back the words, thereby setting your own pace for scribing
- Stick to one page per story rule
- At the end of the story, underline all of the characters
- Place a circle around the character the storyteller wishes to play



Acting Out at the End of a Session

- Allow 15 to 20 minutes for story acting
- No child should be forced to act in a story
- Encourage the story teller to demonstrate actions to others
- At the end of the story, clap thank you to the storyteller and the actors



The Benefits of the Helicopter Technique of Storytelling and Story Acting for children in the early years regardless of ability, EAL or SEN

It is well known that the prevalence of children with speech and language difficulties in the early years is increasing with negative and life-long effects on behaviour, literacy, social relationships and the social inclusion this brings.

To counteract this and despite the busy early years environment, practitioners are urged to plan and create conversations containing 'sustained periods of shared thinking' with their children since these lead to better language outcomes for children. As an additional pressure it can also be difficult to measure easily and effectively many of the vital component skills which underlie the confident use of language by children in the early years classroom. This is where the Helicopter Technique comes in.



The Helicopter Technique brings enormous benefits for children and adults.

- Children hugely develop their confidence, curiosity, concentration and communication skills.
- Children are given belief in the importance of their thoughts and fantasies – here is a forum where they can be 'what they want'.
- Children can learn a sense of the group and learn from one another, as both storyteller and as a member of the audience.

The technique develops children's creative imagination during acting out, thinking how to represent a 'slide' or how a giraffe might move. The process of being encouraged to develop ideas unhampered by concerns about recording stands them in good stead for later in their school careers.

"By Years 3 and 4 children can do the mechanics of writing but often can't think of any ideas". The 'Helicopter Technique' can change this state of affairs."
SENCO Westminster School

A teacher involved in a Westminster speech and language therapy project that MakeBelieve Arts worked with noted that the opportunity the technique gives for acting out feelings is much more powerful for the children than talking about feelings in a more abstract way such as reading from a book. She has been struck that when EAL children act in another child's story about feeling sad e.g. 'the princess was locked in a tower. The Princess cried', the children remembered the feelings and related vocabulary very easily.

Strong evidence for increased turn taking, attention and listening and spoken narrative skills are also evident in children who have worked with the technique over a term.

Spoken narrative skills can show spectacular gains. For example a child at one school, where stories developed from listings of nouns to verb and time phrases within weeks, was definitely helped by seeing stories acted out and gaining reinforcement of the meanings of words via the acting and her total engagement with the acting out. The teacher in this school was very impressed by how the 'helicopter' made children talk. She said: 'I was really surprised when in June the children with EAL who'd never really spoken to me all year suddenly had lots to say and told really long stories'.

The structure of the children's narrative becomes more complex with statements of character, time and place, more complex co-ordination and use of book language developing rapidly. Length of stories also often increased greatly in all classes and children who would speak very little for an example at a community clinic speech and language therapy appointment, gave stories of one A4 page regularly.

The technique has also been observed to provide a 'way in' for many children who have been reluctant to write and read. One child, who had been reluctant to write through most of his reception year at school, pretended in the summer year to scribe another child's story and then asked the therapist if she would tell him a story so he could scribe it. Children enjoy writing their own name and sometimes the date and the stories provide meaningful material to read. Eventually some children in reception attempt to write their own stories for acting.

The technique keeps a whole class of 30 children attentive because no one knows what will happen next and what the next story will contain.

'Nothing that happens in a classroom is as interesting for a child as what another child says.'

Vivian Gussin Paley



If you would like training in the Helicopter Technique, prices and availability, please contact MakeBelieve Arts on 020 8691 3803