

Making Tell Me A Story Work: Lessons Learned



Developing the Tell Me A Story Materials has provided us with many experiences to learn from. The following is an effort to share some of the lessons we have learned from working with early childhood professionals trying to effect positive change in creating a more expressive environment in their classrooms and programs.

A commitment to change requires leadership and collaboration. Changing existing practices takes time and energy. In order to make sure that time and energy can be designated to the desired outcome, it is important to have the commitment of program and classroom leadership. The Tell Me A Story Materials are designed to focus a majority of support on the teachers facilitating Circle Time, but that support cannot have an impact unless supervisors and program directors are also dedicated to the task of improving the expressive environment. We encourage all administrators to familiarize themselves with the Tell Me A Story Materials and read the short papers provided in order to be better prepared to support the effort of change.

Circle Time must be supported in order to flourish. Circle Time is often designated as a time to “multi-task.” Through observation and discussion, we have found that in addition to running Circle, teaching teams are engaged in a number of activities including cleaning, preparing food, assisting children in the bathroom, and talking with supervisors. We have learned that in order for Circle Time to improve, it must be a priority and an area of focus. This requires teaching teams to review current practice (as demonstrated in the second Tell Me A Story workshop: Getting the Most Out of Circle Time). Reviewing the current list of Circle Time responsibilities is a useful way to decide what tasks can be rearranged in order to support Circle Time more fully. Teaching teams may also need more discussion and guidance in order to develop strategies that respond to their classroom’s unique needs.

In order to target Circle Time as an activity for improvement, teaching teams and supervisors must agree on the steps to be taken in that effort. Set a variety of short-term and long-term goals based on the unique needs and strengths of each classroom and in order to acknowledge all levels of growth and success. Supervisors should consider making Circle Time a regular activity for observation and discussion. Take notes in order to keep track of change over time and the outcome of new strategies. Make time to follow-up with discussion of these observations with the teacher teams in order to revisit and revise the goals set.

Teachers need additional opportunities to discuss integrating books with social-emotional themes at Circle Time with team members, a supervisor and/or a mentor. Self-reflection and shared reflection build professional competence. Investing time in regular meetings to this purpose can support meaningful change in practice. It can also provide opportunities for staff mentoring and building model practice for other staff members to observe.

Incorporate culturally relevant books with social-emotional themes into the classroom curriculum on an on-going basis. Regardless of any other plans for improvement, thoughtful selection and use of high quality children's books about emotions and social situations is an important investment to the classroom. Pay attention to the variety of themes covered and give special consideration to providing books that are culturally relevant to the children in your classroom group. Also remember that change takes time. Like any area of professional development, running an expressive Circle Time and sharing books effectively is a skill learned through trial and error. Children also need practice in exploring invitation for discussion. Like any other area of development, children will express themselves at different rates and in different ways. Therefore the more books shared, the greater the chance of building professional skill, child engagement, and confidence.

Learn from the children. The children in your classroom are truly your greatest guides in improving Circle Time. Be sensitive to their preferences to stories or characters, even if they do not match your own. Pay attention to the social and emotional themes they are discussing and exploring in their conversations, play, and interactions. Investigate books on the themes that seem most meaningful to the children. Consider other accommodations such as breaking the traditional circle formation and cross-legged seated position to allow children to sit more comfortably.