

TALK THROUGH STORIES

Introduction

Sophie's parents talk a lot with her as they go about their everyday lives. They talk about things they see and do, and about every story they read to her. They listen and respond to Sophie's many comments, observations and questions, helping her to understand new vocabulary, concepts and ideas. By three, Sophie's heard over 33 million words, including synonyms and a range of syntax; she's had 1700 hours of storytimes, knows many nursery rhymes and fairy tales, and in particular, has favourite stories she asks for again and again.

Harvey's parents don't talk much with him (nor did their parents talk much with them). The nine million words he's heard by the age of three are of a more limited range and mostly instructional. He's had 25 hours of storytimes.

At three, Sophie is 24 million words, 1675 story hours ahead of Harvey. Even more sadly, the gap between them grows exponentially wider each year, making it harder for Harvey to understand and learn at school. It means that, even when we've taught Harvey to read (and we'll do that quickly), he'll struggle to understand many of the words on the page.

This programme will, in particular, benefit Harvey – and all the children like him. Our aim is to provide them with the breadth and depth of vocabulary they'll need to understand the books they'll soon read for themselves, and the conversations and discussion they will have with their teachers and friends. Time is not on Harvey's side, so we needed to plan specifically and systematically.

In a nutshell, this is how *Talk Through Stories* works:

We help children love the story first and, when they know it well, we teach them to use the 'Tier Two' words from the story in everyday contexts. (Tier Two words are words that children are unlikely to hear in everyday conversation, but will encounter in stories and teaching as they progress through school.)

We choose a book for *Talk Through Stories* for three reasons:

1. You are likely to have it in your school.
2. You are likely to love the story.
3. The story includes eight relevant Tier Two words that we can explore in more than one context.

Some of the books are more challenging than others. If you love the story and think your children will enjoy it, then it's the right one for them. It is not a cumulative programme, so you can alternate challenging with less challenging stories.

There are many wonderful stories we haven't chosen; we know you'll read many more stories to your children, over and above the ones we've chosen for *Talk Through Stories*.

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In designing the programme, we've drawn upon Isabel Beck's approach (*Bringing Words to Life*, Chapter 4). The teaching sequence below has been researched over many years and has proven to be successful in increasing children's vocabulary.

- Read the story.
- Contextualise the word within the story.
- Have children say the word.
- Provide a student-friendly explanation of the word.
- Present examples of the word used in contexts different from the story context.
- Engage children in activities that get them to interact with the words.
- Have children say the word.

Our most challenging job, once we'd created the full blueprint, was writing the sentences and questions. We used Blank's Levels of Questions, a verbal reasoning model by Marion Blank, to help us think about the questions we ask children. For example, questions about facts and events (concrete information) are easier to understand and answer than emotive responses/reasoning (abstract information).

If you do decide to write any of your own units, here are some more things you'll need to think about!

- Think of a range of familiar contexts for children – get inside a child's mind!
- Make the sentences sound natural – write sentences that a child could say.
- Write sentences that are short enough for children to hold onto. Stick to one main idea per sentence.
- Make sure the word couldn't easily be replaced with its opposite: embed the word in a situation that provides the context.
- Stick to one Tier Two word per sentence, and try to avoid using a Tier Two word to explain another Tier Two word.
- Try out potential responses to open questions – how many can you come up with? If only two, change the question.
- Read the sentence aloud to check it flows well.
- Create a sense of irony and fun – for both children and teachers.
- Make sure the sentences build a picture – show, not tell.
- Make the examples concrete and use different nouns – people, animals, places. Use the names of children from your class to personalise.
- Think about how a pronoun might be misinterpreted.
- Use a variety of sentence constructions, but keep them simple.
- Avoid double negatives.
- Avoid slang or colloquialisms – unless in the story.

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Organisation

Plan every day:

- o 20 minutes for Storytime
- o 10 minutes for Vocabulary time (at a different time to Storytime)

Classroom management:

- o Sit on a low chair
- o Select Spotlight children
- o Remind children that you will use Magnet eyes, TTYP (Turn to your partner), MTYT (My turn Your turn) (See the Glossary, below)
- o Ensure children sit in the 'V to see', making sure that every child can see the book easily.

Storytime is one week ahead of Vocabulary time for each story.

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|---------------|--|
| Week 1 | Storytime for Story A |
| Week 2 | Vocabulary time for Story A Storytime for Story B |
| Week 3 | Vocabulary time for Story B Storytime for Story C |

Storytime activities – one week

These activities follow the same structure every week.

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|--------------|---|--------------|---|
| Day 1 | Introduction Read the story What's the problem? | Day 4 | Join in the story How is the problem solved? |
| Day 2 | Re-read the story | Day 5 | Nice or nasty? Quiz the character Share at home |
| Day 3 | Favourite phrases Favourite phrases every day Freeze-frame feelings Which is the right sentence? | | |

If children are already very familiar with the story, you can follow the timetable below:

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|--------------|---|--------------|---|
| Day 1 | Re-read the story What's the problem? Favourite phrases Favourite phrases every day Freeze-frame feelings | Day 2 | Which is the right sentence? Nice or nasty? Quiz the character Share at home |
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Vocabulary time activities – one week

These activities follow the same structure every week.

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| Days 1–4: two words a day | Review from the story When might you? When might someone say...? Agree or not? Words to use through the day | Day 5: revision of all words | What's the word? Because... |
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