

THE MATCHES

The session around this story invites the children to devise their own story- telling techniques and will allow them to explore the concept of 'story' itself.

Explain to the children that they will be given a special task this week: to tell a story to someone else. Explain that they could tell whichever story they like but, to make things easier for them, you are going to give them a 'scary story' to tell that shouldn't be too difficult to remember. Make sure everyone is settled and ready for a story. You could dim the lights to help create an atmosphere before telling them The Matches.

Note: I first found this story in the introduction to *Favourite Folktales From Around The World*, edited by Jane Yolen (1987). She says that the story was first reported by the collector Katharine Briggs. In Yolen's book it is even shorter than mine:

'He woke up frightened and reached for the matches, and the matches were put into his hand.'

I have made explicit what is only implicit for the benefit of a younger audience. You may want to refer to Yolen's version when discussing whether it should have more description or less.

When they are ready, tell the children the following story in as lively and interesting a way as you can (without going over the top!):

The story

(I have marked in with a / the beginning, the middle and the end sections. You may want to use these for a later discussion. The children may not agree with this division.)

A long time ago there was a man who lived by himself in a big house. / One night, he awoke sweating and terrified, convinced there was someone else in the room with him. / He searched in the darkness for some matches with which to light a candle... and in the darkness, the matches were handed to him!

Task Question 1: Can anyone say back to the class what happened in the story?

This is not a storytelling task, just a plot-recall task to help embed the story in the minds of the children. You could extend this by asking them to turn to a partner and take it in turns to tell each other what happened in the story. They should correct each other and fill in any gaps. Even at this stage, some of them will naturally storytell. The next task is a storytelling activity.

Task Question 2: When you tell this story to someone, how can you tell it so that it will work really well?

In pairs or groups the children should be given a minute or two to think of different ways that they could tell the story effectively. Suggestions I have heard from some Year 3 (age seven to eight) classes have included:

- ✓ Lower your tone.
- ✓ Use more description.
- ✓ Get a friend to make some sound effects while you tell it.
- ✓ Turn it into a play.
- ✓ Turn the lights down.
- ✓ Use hand gestures.
- ✓ Put pauses in.
- ✓ Speed up at the exciting bit ('He scrambled around for some matches to light a candle...').
- ✓ Turn it into a comedy ('...and then his mother's voice said, "Are you still up, you should be asleep!"').
- ✓ Give the story an ending. (This makes an excellent discussion point: does it have an ending?)

One very interesting suggestion was that you should say when it happened so that people would know that there were no electric lights, providing a reason to the listener for why he didn't just switch the light on.

Whenever the children make a suggestion ask them to demonstrate it to the class. As the story is so short this should not be too difficult for them to do. If you want to make it solely a storytelling exercise then stipulate that they are not to change the story in any way. Whether it is a story and whether it can be improved can be a separate discussion.

Some of the above suggestions offered by the children are more contro- versial than others. It is often a good idea to engage the children in a discussion about the more controversial ones. If someone says 'use more description' or 'give the story an ending' ask the class what they think about this and allow different points of

view to be voiced, for example: (Year 3) 'It should have an ending because it's boring if you don't know what happens at the end.' / 'It shouldn't have an ending because it keeps people wondering about who or what is in the room and that's more exciting.' You could use an opportunity like this to explain a distinction between 'an ending' and 'a conclusion' (or 'a finish'); The Matches clearly has an ending but it is inconclusive for dramatic reasons.

I offer some of my own basic hints for storytelling to the children (to add to their own, if they haven't already said them):

1. Split the story into three parts: a beginning, a middle and an end (not the same as 'a finish'). Ask the children to say what these are in the story.
2. Suggest that they try not to say 'and then...' between every sentence or event. Demonstrate this by telling the story with 'and thens' and then (!) telling it without them.
3. Insert dramatic pauses between the three sections instead of saying 'and then'.
4. Try telling the story in lots of different ways to find out which way works best (list the suggestions the class has already made).

Leave them with the task of telling the story to others at home and then to report back to you the following week about how their storytelling went and about which storytelling method worked best with their audience. If they told a different story ask them to tell it to the class; avoid saying 'perform it' as this may put some off.