

## **Stories 4 ALL**

**by Laura Hills  
Susan Ralephata  
Tom Laverty**

The project has been developed as a series of sessions for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) with 6 sessions on developing communication and play/leisure time, led by Laura Hills, Speech and Language Therapist. These were followed by a further 6 sessions on story making facilitated by storymaker Naomi Cortes, which focussed on how to structure, initiate and develop stories that can be used to develop stories within a family's own culture. From the sessions 'activity boxes' containing a range of objects and equipment have been developed for use at home.

Parents and carers across the primary age range were invited to participate and this was felt appropriate given the range of abilities and the focus on very early communication skills.

### **The aims of the project were**

- To give parents an overview of different types of communication method used with pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD)
- To offer parents/carers advice and support on developing communication methods with their children
- To practice the methods 'hands on' and share skills between home and school
- To empower parents to recognise and develop their child's communication skills
- To learn how to develop simple stories within their child's preferred communication methods
- To have an opportunity to meet and share learning with other parents/carers
- To improve home-school relationships

### **The methods used**

The first block of sessions consisted of;

- An initial session on 'What is Communication' to establish a baseline and explore aspirations from the sessions
- Weeks 2 – 5 Parent/carers and children working together to explore skills including Intensive Interaction, child centred approaches to learning and play, intentional communication skills, use of objects, photographs and symbols, low technology communication aids and ways of introducing and developing communication through a sensory story.
- The final session was a parents/carers only session to evaluate what they have learnt and what they will take from the sessions and 'where to next'. It was also possible to discuss the resource pack they were given to take home.



The sessions led by the storymaker consisted of;

- An initial session on developing our own story – the stories that lie in our everyday lives
- Then weeks 2-5 parents/carers and children were working together exploring objects focussing on how their children use and respond to objects and how those objects can be used to develop simple stories using the skills outlined in the initial sessions. The skills were within a structure of ritual beginnings and endings, how to use a child's preferred method of response to engage and how to promote this within the story
- The final session was a review and discussion session on how parents/carers have found the sessions and how they will be able to use what they have learned

### **The Outcome Measures and Evaluations**

The range of measures used included;

- Baseline evaluation
- Photographs
- Skills evaluation and questionnaire after the final session
- Follow up sessions through the year on the use of the 'activity boxes'.

### **The Experience**

The initial session with the Speech and Language Therapist began for parents/carers with an exploration of ideas about communication. Most considered that it was about talking and were then encouraged to think about other ways their child communicates in general and more specifically how they communicate pleasure, discomfort, hunger, and when they are hot, cold or tired through body language, vocalisations and actions.

From the feedback each child responds differently e.g. one parent reported that her child bangs her head when she is uncomfortable, as against another child who cries and becomes agitated whereas another will pull at her clothes and scratch herself. The responses to hot, cold and tired are again very particular to the individual child and for some they rely very heavily upon the parent/carer's knowledge of their own child.

However, the underlying response to enjoying themselves is one of visible excitement expressed by laughing, smiling, giggling and for one in particular, gurgling sounds.

Overall the responses show very individualised communication styles and skills which require parents/carers to be aware of the additional methods that will support them in fostering their child's communication.

What parents and carers identified as why they attended and what they wanted from the sessions were to develop ways of communicating with their child by learning how they communicate at school. Alongside this they identified the opportunity to develop their relationships with staff at school and to meet other parents who have children with similar needs.

Parents/carers went on to say that with support from school they wanted to develop ways to communication at home that would involve the whole family in order to learn how to encourage interactions with their child.

## **Weeks 2-5**

The starting point was to encourage parents/carers to engage with their children for no other reason than maintaining enjoyable interactions together. This began with Intensive Interaction whereby the adult follows and copies the lead of the child. All of the parents were very interested in this approach and when shown how to do it were very surprised at the reactions of their children. A range of objects were used e.g. large pieces of bright shiny material, hand bells and soft balls.

Parents/carers were a little uncomfortable at first but when they observed their children enjoying what they were doing they began to get involved. This prompted a range of questions about how to start the interactions what to do next and what to do if they stop.

One parent commented 'she will never do this for me at home!' as they played a simple clapping game, she went on to say she had never followed her child's lead as she has always anticipated her needs and was surprised how her child initiated 'more' during this simple activity. As another child was enjoying having a piece of material over her head and pulling it off she spontaneously said 'again' which astonished mum and staff alike and was warmly responded to with praise and smiles.

The session was finished off with hand massage, which caused one parent to comment that she had never considered doing anything like this with her child and could see her child enjoyed it and she would be trying it at home to share time together and encourage communication. When asked what she had learned from that day's session She said that it is the little things that are the most important.

How to use symbols and photographs was introduced during these sessions and gave parents/carers an opportunity to see some of the structured means of communication used in school. During these sessions the importance of choice was introduced and this proved to be very empowering for parents as they went on to try the skills at home. Some of the comments received were very encouraging;

"I never understood why M hit the radiator all the time, but after the session I realised that she hits it because she is cold and wants it on. When it comes on she hits it once and then stops. This is her way of telling me she wants the heat on."

“I’ve learned to follow my child’s lead this means we have more fun without the battle.”

“What I have learned is to look for the little things now, I’ve always looked for big things before but it’s the small things that are important and shouldn’t be overlooked.”

“We play the hiding game at home and now all the family play with her, she laughs and laughs.”

Parents/carers reported that they were finding more and more opportunities during the day for their child to make choices and that family members were getting involved and enjoying the activities with their children.

The parents/carers had a demonstration of how objects, symbols and technology aids are used in reading stories in school and can be adapted for use at home. They commented how surprised they were at how their children responded and enjoyed being involved through the use of sensory resources and communication methods.

## **Week 6**

This was a final discussion session with a questionnaire and a round up of what parents/carers felt they had gained and would like to develop in future. They commented that;

- They found reading stories, copying their child and giving choices useful methods to interact with their child.
- The intensive interaction, objects of reference and story telling sessions were very helpful, with 2 of the parents finding homework and photo symbol sessions to be helpful.
- They went on to identify that it was good to know about photos and symbols but it was still difficult to try them with their children.
- They would like more support in developing choices with their children.
- They had a better understanding of communication methods.
- They had all received adequate information to take away with them and had achieved their goals from the initial questionnaire.
- They were looking forward to receiving one of the ‘activity boxes’.

## **Storytelling sessions**

The first session was used to explore - what are stories? Parents were invited to talk about the last time they encountered a story and the different types of stories, ranging from a verbal recounting of an experience to the reading of bedtime stories to children. It began with looking at a story from the lives of parents/carers in the recent past, establishing the idea of sharing with others and how this in itself is a story. The story for the children at William Harvey is not only in the telling but in the sharing and movement through the senses.

Stories can be shared; objects were used to create the ‘conversation’, the most potent aspect of storytelling when working with children with profound and multiple

learning difficulties. The parents/carers were encouraged to explore artefacts and encouraged to choose from a range of objects something they liked and then suggest different ways of exploring them. Next they were asked 'what does this remind you of?' For example, parents/carers were asked what a feather reminded them of, some said softness, gentleness, sleeping on a pillow and others birds others flight and travel. Thus a connection was made with the object from their personal experience and became our starting point for the sessions involving their children.

### **Interactive sessions**

#### **Structure**

Each of the sessions was used to build together a structure for storytelling as an organic process, beginning with a starting ritual or cue which parents/carers could create and use for themselves each time, this could then be coupled with an ending ritual enabling children to anticipate a coming story.

#### **Communication**

Each of the sessions used simple objects to create the space to engage. Even where there is no spoken language we can still observe the 'communication' of others, looking for the response with parents/carers learning to be 'open' taking a lead from their child as to which objects they were interested in and which they were not. The response enabled the development of an interaction which engages and encouraged their child to continue their communication, expressing likes and dislikes which parents/carers can then respond to and talk about.



**Where does this come from?  
How does it feel?  
Which one do you like?**

#### **Conversation**

Parents/carers learned to change the objects to continue the 'conversation', as their children made choices parents/carers would talk to them clarifying and reinforcing as an

acknowledgement of their choices.

Sessions started with an introduction to the parents about different kinds of stories and ways stories could develop from the random selection of objects and how the story would develop from the 'conversation' between parents and their children.

#### **Responses of the children**

The objects were selected by the parents but the real selection depended on the responses of the children which were watched closely by parents and practitioners as the children embarked on a joint exploration of the objects with their parents. Whilst objects were explored the character and associations with the object developed. The children refined their responses showing their parents whether they preferred the bells or feather or the blue cloth or the small bit of wool.

Each story began with the objects, some were soft to the touch, gentle on the ear or maybe too strange to recognise, but each child knew they were there again and again. Whilst developing the preferences and reactions of the children characterisations were given to the objects by the parents/carers, for example, little bird and big bird, for two different feathers, or space blanket for the sea or blue cloth for the sky, allowing the

children to indicate that they wanted the sky or the little bird but not the big bird.

Introduction of the story:

‘Now we are going to make a story.’ Having jointly established all the tools for the story, a short but beautifully made story ensued.



‘This is the sky,’ the blue cloth was held high up and flapped.

‘We are on a beach and can here the sound of the sea,’

X and mum put their hands in the space blanket making a swishing sea sound, Y and mum do the same. ‘Here is the sky again’.



‘Can you feel the sheep?’ a green piece of wool chosen by Y. Y’s mum makes a ‘Baaing’ sound. X feels the sheep.



‘Here is the sky again.’ The blue cloth is repeatedly flapped up and down until the story finally ends.

## One Family's journey

For two consecutive sessions the progress made by one parent and her son was heart warming.



**The first session** with Mum and J had been around establishing his favourite objects generally choosing between, shells, stones, cloth, feathers, a coconut, washing up sponge, foil, space blanket and bells. The session had established that J consistently chose the bells as his favourite object and did not particularly like it when they were taken away. Thus mum had established a firm response on which to build.

J was very interested in the bells and would choose the bells over and above anything else offered to him. Mum and J were encouraged to go through a process to explore his preference of different bells. Mum offered him first one set of bells and then took them away and made him choose between two sets and then three sets. To begin with he consistently chose the set of bells he had initially chosen, having formed a close attachment to the bells, but after



exchanging and trying all the other bells he eventually agreed to give up his original set and change to another set of bells. This pushed the communication between mum and J further on, with mum watching for J's reactions and acknowledging, not just leaving it there but going a step further. J had to trust mum that each time something was taken away, he would not be left with nothing and it would not end there, this allowed mum to swap and exchange his favourite bells. This provided a safe

engagement between mum and J whereby she was able to clarify, reinforce and acknowledge the choices J made.



**Trust then went a step further** when the feathers were introduced by mum. Mum presented a large feather and said it reminded her of a bird, when prompted by Naomi, the storyteller, mum then presented a small feather which was the small bird.



She tried stroking each feather on the back of J's hands, on the palm of J's hands, on his fingers, on his cheek, on his neck and on his forehead, to see which he liked the best.



Mum was then encouraged to put a voice to each 'bird'. J then decided that the bird with the softest, smallest feather and the little 'tweety' voice that Mum used, was the one that enthralled him. Mum and J had then progressed to a different level of shared experience and 'make believe'. J chose the soft feather with its little bird voice over and above the bells he had previously been so attached to. This little bird then became the central character to the story such

that mum and J had created an original and imaginative story together.

This progress was as a result of the trust established not only between mum and J, but also of the trust established between mum and Naomi, which allowed Naomi to physically support J, whilst mum encouraged J to further explore choosing and communication.

### **Feedback from Parents/Carers**

All parents began sessions feeling a little awkward and slightly unsure of what was being asked of them. However, by the end of each session parents and carers all commented on how much they had enjoyed the sessions, enjoying;

- An opportunity to spend some quality time together without life's distractions
- The range of responses they were able to observe in their children
- Sharing experiences of parenting a child with profound and multiple learning difficulties with other parents/carers
- Learning new skills in interacting and sharing play together.

### **Feedback from observations of the children**

From observations of the children it was clear that;

- they were ready to engage
- they were clear and consistent in their responses
- given time and encouragement they could always reflect their understanding
- they were always ready to make choices

**Because,**



**Some  
prefer  
the  
noise**



**Some  
like  
materials**

**But most of all,**



**I  
Like  
to  
share  
with  
You!!**

