



Storytelling Games and Improvisational Play

Improvisation and playing storytelling games can stimulate the imagination, enhance creativity, and bring out new ideas. Before any games are played let the participants know they are in a safe environment. Adults and kids need to know that there are no wrong answers. It is okay to play, and having fun sparks creativity. Kevin Cordi has said, “Play is a meaningful way to create and learn.” Kids are usually more willing to imagine and begin the “play” process. However, when adult storytellers become engaged in play, it can bring laughter and fun galore. Playing storytelling games with a group can build unity, a sense of community and cooperation. Games work well with all ages.

Warm-Ups

What Is It . . . Really?

Take any ordinary object. Have everybody brainstorm what it could be used for. Anything goes! Ex. Pencil—used as a fishing pole, as a tongue compressor, etc.

Main Skill Sets: Imagination, Adaptability

Story Attitude Adjustments

Each person gets an index card and writes a different 3-4 word sentence or phrase on it like “Pass the butter!” or “You did what?” Then people trade cards until the leader says to stop. Everyone divides into partners. One partner says an emotion like “anger” or “exhilaration”. The other partner reads whatever phrase they have in their hand. Then the partners switch. You can trade cards and partners.

Main Skill Sets: Voice Tone, Word Choice

Carry On

Form a circle. One person decides on an imaginary object to pass to the person next to them. This “object” is passed around the circle. Examples could be a stinky sock, a fragile lamp, and a bowling ball. Let the people take turns deciding on the next “object”.

Main Skill Sets: Body Language, Facial Expressions

Pass the Mask

Have everyone sit in a circle. This will be a pantomime activity. No one is to talk during the activity. Explain that there is an invisible magic box in front of you containing many different masks. The box can change size, shape or how it opens, but inside the box are many masks showing different kinds of emotions. Pass the “box” around the circle. Pretend to open the box, take out a mask, and put it on. Show everyone in the circle what the mask looks like by demonstrating an emotion or feeling. An emotion can only be used once. Remove the mask slowly and place it back in the box. Close the box and pass it to the next person. After everyone has done a mask, then you could have the “box” contain imaginary costumes. While in “costume”, a simple activity could be acted out like combing hair, drinking a glass of water, etc.

Main Skill Set: Facial Expressions

The Walk

Take everyone on an imaginary journey. Have various environments that the people could “walk” through like tall grass (swish, swish), rivers (splash, splash), or anything else you or they can think of. Perhaps the song “Going on a Lion Hunt” will help.

Main Skill Set: Importance of Sounds, Body Language

Picture Story

Take a poster or picture of some kind. Everyone takes turns making up the story behind the picture.

Main Skill Sets: Imagination, Perspectives

Games

Fortunately, Unfortunately

The story proceeds around the circle, a sentence at a time, each beginning with either "Fortunately ..."; or alternating between "Fortunately ..." and "Unfortunately ...". The objective is to keep the story going to a satisfactory conclusion.

Main Skill Sets: Listening, Making Quick Choices, Creating a Coherent Story

Story Circle

The group gathers in a circle and one person starts a story and then stops and the next person continues the story until the last person brings it to a close with an ending.

Main Skill Sets: Listening, Creating a Coherent Story

Object Story Circle

Many random objects are passed out to participants. Someone volunteers to start a story incorporating the object they have then each person adds to the story using the objects they have been given.

Main Skill Sets: Listening, Creating a Coherent Story

I'm Going on a Long Journey

The leader repeats this phrase and each time asks the audience for more detail until a story has emerged. For example: Where am I going to? The audience, "Nome, Alaska." Teller, "I was dreading my long journey to Nome, Alaska because..." The teller asks another question, gets the answer, adds it to the story with more detail and keeps going.

Main Skill Sets: Listening, Making Quick Choices

ABC Storytelling

Form a circle and start a story with a phrase, sound effect, or sentence with the letter "A". For example, "About a year ago a dog was found roaming the streets." The next person in the circle adds a line to the story that starts with the letter "B". The story continues around the circle until you get to the letter "Z".

Main Skill Sets: Listening, Creating a Coherent Story, Word Choice

Freeze!

Two people stand in front of the rest of the group. Someone calls out a place such as "kitchen" or "jungle". The two people act out a problem in that scene. After some interactions, someone from the audience shouts, "Freeze!" When called, the two people freeze in their positions. The caller takes the place of one of the people—in the same position they held. Then the caller changes the scene so it could then be "circus" or "cemetery". Another scene is acted out until another person audience shouts, "Freeze!"

Main Skill Sets: Body Language, Facial Expressions, Character Development, Picturing the Scene, Confidence

Mad Libs Storytelling

While everyone is in a circle, the leader of the game holds a beanbag and starts a story such as "Once upon a time there was a _____". The leader then tosses the beanbag to anyone in the circle to fill in the blank. The listener(s) have to add whatever is needed: noun, verb, adjective, dialogue, etc. Then the person tosses the beanbag back to the leader. The leader adds another sentence with a fill-in-the-blank. The beanbag is thrown to a different person. The story can be as short or as long as desired. Advanced version: To guide into a more coherent story, remember the six Story-Boarding categories: Settings & Main Character(s); Trouble; More Trouble; Attempts or What to Do?; Solution; and Lessons Learned by the Character(s).

Main Skill Sets for Narrator: Adaptability, Creating a Coherent Story

Main Skill Sets for Participants: Listening, Making Quick Choices

A Big Yarn

Form a circle. Take a ball of yarn and have it wrapped around each person one time. Everyone will be connected. The person with the end of the yarn begins the story. They take the yarn and rewrap the yarn until it is passed to the next person. Then the next person picks up the story from where the other ended. Continue until yarn is wrapped up.

Main Skill Sets: *Creating a Coherent Story, Word Choice*

Tall Tale

You need a paper fan and a glove. Have everyone sit in a circle. Tell everyone to pass the mitten and the fan around the circle, skipping every other person (i.e. one person has the fan while the other has the mitten).

Direct the people to make up a short “tall tale” or exaggerated end to the sentence:

- If they receive the mitten, complete the sentence, “It was so cold that. . .” Give examples.
- If they receive the fan, complete the sentence, “It was so hot that. . .” Give examples.
- People can make the examples as wild and crazy as they want but should not repeat anyone else’s tall tale.

Main Skill Sets: *Voice Tone, Word Choice*

The Typewriter (or The Computer)

Someone pretends to type on a typewriter. The person “typing” starts the story. For each character or object the typewriter mentions, a person from the audience jumps out and plays the character or object. They listen to the writer’s story and act it out, BUT the writer must listen to the characters/objects when they add their own dialogue.

Main Skill Sets for Writer/Teller: *Imagination, Creating a Coherent Story, Adaptability, Word Choice*

Main Skill Sets for Actors: *Confidence, Body Language, Facial Expressions, Character Development*

First and Last

Gather children’s books from the library. Write down the first sentence of the story on a piece of paper and put it in a hat. Then write down the last sentence of the story on a different piece of paper and put it in another hat. Do this for as many books as you like. Then have one person draw one “first sentence” and one “last sentence” from each of the hats. Give no more than 10 seconds for the person to tell the impromptu story. Watch them attempt to connect the first and last sentence. Be prepared for many laughs!

Main Skill Sets: *Creating a Coherent Story, Adaptability*

Encounter with a Dinosaur (or an Animal)

Break the group into small circles of 4-6 people. Ask about something unusual, funny, sad, or interesting to them involving an animal. You could brainstorm these encounters. A person could switch a real animal experience and figure how it may be with a dinosaur. Have each person decide on an opening and closing line. The leader could share a short example of each of these lines. Then, in their small circle, have each person share with the others of what happened to them. While a person tells a story, there are to be no interruptions, but people can make comments or ask questions when the story has ended. After everyone has had a chance to tell their stories, ask one person from each group to retell one of the stories. Share these stories with everyone.

Main Skill Set: *Imagination, Adaptability, Confidence*

Crazy Mixed-Up Fairy Tales

You will need four sheets of colored copy or construction paper, cut into quarters. Each color represents a different topic. Break the group into small circles of 2-4 people. Give one square of each color to each group. Direct everyone to use the different color paper to write the following, though give examples of each:

- Name of a character from a favorite fairy tale (yellow paper)
- Name of a place—could be exotic or normal (blue paper)

- Name of a character from a different fairy tale (green paper)
- Problem (pink paper)—do not worry about this one for younger kids

Collect all of the paper squares, then separate them by color and mix them up. Have each group pick one card from each pile. Direct each group to do the following (10 min.):

- Create a story using each of the four elements.
- Decide how to tell it and practice it.
- Choose one person or the whole group to tell it.
- Have each group tell its story for everyone else.

Main Skill Sets: *Imagination, Creating a Coherent Story, Word Choice, Confidence*

Playing with Index Cards

Write random one or two-word items or phrases on each 20+ index card. Think of universal experiences of the people you will be with for this game. For example, the following words could be on index cards: stairs, thunderstorms, soda cans, cardboard boxes, spiders, ice cream, etc. Divide into partners. One of the partners grabs an index card. For about five minutes, let the two people discuss the one or two words on how these words relate to their personal lives. Then, as a group, listen to some of these story moment discoveries. If desired, these story moments could be expanded, outlined, and developed further as polished stories.

Main Skill Sets: *Imagination, Confidence, Listening, Perspectives*

“To Get” or “Mother May I . . .”

Have two people sit side-by-side in front of everyone else. Tell these two volunteers:

- They will be given a role and a situation.
- One of them must try to get the other to do something he/she doesn't want to do.
- The second person must not give in and state a reason for refusing.
- The person who is being asked must refuse no matter how ardent the plea.
- There is to be no hitting and no name-calling.
- Create dialogue. Do not say “why” or “because I said so.”
- When the people run out of things to say, reverse the roles or have two new people to the front.

Situations that could be used:

- A teenage girl tries “to get” her mom to take her to the mall.
- A boy tries “to get” his mom to let him stay home from school.
- A little girl tries “to get” her father to buy her a dog for her birthday.

Main Skill Sets: *Word Choice, Adaptability, Perspectives*

Story Sticks

Take at least 10 Popsicle sticks and write one word per side of the stick. You can use nouns (person, place, or thing) or verbs. After brainstorming, you will have 20 words total. You might have “tree” on one side of the stick and then “cattle” on the opposite side. You might have “running” on one side of the stick and then “swimming” on the opposite side. Draw a stick from the bag and tell a sentence or two involving one or both sides of the stick. Add to the story by drawing another stick by yourself, with a partner, or with a group.

Main Skill Sets: *Imagination, Adaptability, Word Choice, Creating a Coherent Story*

My House vs. Their House

People draw their house looking down inside it as if a giant ripped off the roof and looked down. Partners give each other a story tour of moments within the kitchen, bedroom, etc. This could have historical significance if the same activity is used to compare with a tribe's home, Spanish mission home, etc. Then tell the typical stories and moments.

Main Skill Sets: *Visualization, Perspectives*

Switched! (inspired by Colombian folktale “The Gardener’s Wife” a.k.a. “The Three Sisters”)

Note: printable courtesy of Story Crossroads, www.storycrossroads.com

This game can be played with two or more people. One person starts a story with a couple lines. Then another person calls at any time, “Switched!” When called, the teller pauses and switches out a noun or verb in the story. For example, “Once there was a boy who had a pet dog...” “Switched!” “...had a pet elephant and could never get it to fit in the house.” The next person continues the story. For a verb example, “Once there was a girl who skipped...” “Switched!” “...danced until her feet hurt.”

Main Skill Sets: *Adaptability, Word Choice, Creating a Coherent Story*

Anti-Poetry Stories (inspired by Chilean prose-like technique of anti-poetry)

Two Chilean poets, Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, received Nobel Prizes in Literature. Both delved in the prose-like technique of anti-poetry. Everyday items or ideas become large. Flowery language is discouraged while sayings of the day are celebrated. Use these concepts in creating a narrative anti-poem. Write slang words or names of everyday items on slips of paper. Choose 1-2 slips. For example, if you drew “toaster” and the saying “flamed—meaning to take something too seriously” then an anti-poem could be, “Oh, toaster! How you concentrate to such degree—high degree—that all is flamed about you. When bread came upon you, no cold shoulder did you bare. Rather, the anger ignited and burnt toast lay upon the plate.” Repeat and add to the story line.

Main Skill Sets: *Imagination, Adaptability, Word Choice, Creating a Coherent Story*

Caught You! (traditional Chinese game)

With a blindfold and a ball, take a group of people and form a circle. One person is chosen as referee. Another person is asked to sit blindfolded in the middle of the circle.

- Referee gives ball to Player in the circle. The ball is passed around.
- The Blindfolded Person chooses when to say "stop".
- Referee makes sure that everyone freezes.
- Person with the ball must sing or tell a story.
- The Blindfolded Person is replaced about every 5 minutes or whatever time was deemed by the group before the game began.

Main Skill Sets: *Adaptability, Listening*

Last Word-First Word (inspired by Asian storytelling technique and word play)

With two or more people, play with whatever is the last word in a sentence. For example, the first person could say a line like, “The roses bloom beneath the peach trees.” The second person must use the last word in the line to start the next phrase such as saying, “Trees quivered as the wind blew.” Another person (or going back to the first person), someone could say, “Blew from the East, the wind did.” And so on. Create a story.

Main Skill Sets: *Word Choice, Adaptability, Listening*

Lists, Lists, and More Lists (inspired by Asian storytelling technique and word play)

With two or more people, challenge as a pair or group on how many things you could list in a part of a story. You could decide on a story that all of you know or create a new one. Each person tells a few lines of the story and then passes onto the next person. An adult and/or referee can call at any time, “Lists, lists, and more lists!” When heard, the person in the middle of telling the story lists whatever connects to the story. For example, if someone said, “And she walked through a garden...” the list might include “with roses, tulips, brambles, peach trees, lilies, maple trees, vines, delightful benches, arches, and statues of jade”. The list needs to be 10 items. Continue story when list is complete.

Main Skill Sets: *Word Choice, Visualization, Adaptability, Listening*

Baba Yaga Game (inspired by Russian character)

One person is “Baba Yaga”, the matriarch witch of the Russian world. Another person pretends to knock on the chicken hut door of Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga opens the door and puts forth three “impossible” tasks. The other person must figure out creative ways to complete those tasks. For example, Baba Yaga could say, “Dust every

bit of rice.” The other person may respond with, “I call to a flock of birds and they agree to fly over the barrel of rice and dust them. I had always fed them bread after all!” If the person pauses too long (decide how long is too long) to figure out how to get past a Baba Yaga task, then Baba Yaga gets to pretend to eat them. Sound effects are encouraged.

Main Skill Sets: *Imagination, Body Language, Facial Expressions, Voice Tone*

Rainbow Serpent Game (inspired by Aboriginal values and well-known character)

This game works best with three or more people as the story grows as people hang onto each other’s hips to create the Rainbow Serpent, a creature who brings life to the land by bringing rain, rainbows, and abundance. The serpent lives in the deepest waterholes and shakes the earth to emerge. The first person pretends to slither and emerge from the ground and is the first part of the story. The second person, after hearing the first part of the story, hangs onto the first person’s hips. The two slither while the second person adds more to the story. A third person is either more of the story or the last part of the story depending on how many people are playing. The third person hangs onto the second person’s hips and so on.

Main Skill Sets: *Imagination, Listening, Creating a Coherent Story*

The Big Reveal (inspired by Italian folktale “The Traveler’s Secret”)

Before the game starts, slips of paper need to have one of these words per paper: Hero, Villain, Mentor, Good Side-Kick, Evil Side-Kick. Feel free to come up with your own categories. The cards are shuffled and each person receives a card. Everyone decides and announces what kind of character they will represent in the group story. For example, one person may want to be a magician who likes to make things fly. Another person may want to be a sailor who gets sea sick. Everyone tells the story, one at a time, introducing their characters, until all get a turn. Then, someone says, “Little did they know…” and turns over their card. If they were the magician and drew “Mentor”, then the rest of the story needs to have that character reflecting that fact. When the next person adds to the story, they also say, “Little did they know…” and turns over their card. If they were the sailor and drew “Villain”, then the rest of the story needs to have that character reflecting that fact. End the story when it feels satisfying.

Main Skill Sets: *Character Development, Visualization, Creating a Coherent Story, Adaptability*

I Don’t Know Game (inspired by Celtic character N’oun Doaré)

“N’oun Doaré” means “I don’t know” and that is what the boy responded with when asked for his name. This idea can be applied to telling a story. Sometimes the answer is not in front of us when creating a story on the spot. This game involves a storyteller and one or more people as questioners. As someone tells a story, any one of the questioners can interrupt the story and ask more about a moment in the story. For example, if the storyteller said, “The boy rode on the horse through some woods.” Someone might ask, “What was the name of the woods?” The storyteller has two choices. Either the storyteller might answer the question or turn the question by saying, “I don’t know. What do you think?” Continue the story.

Main Skill Sets: *Character and Scenery Development, Visualization, Perspectives*

Mystery Sign-Solver (inspired by Italian folktale “The Charcoal Woman’s Son”)

In the Italian folktale “The Charcoal Woman’s Son”, there was mystery with the meaning of the noblewoman’s sign “What God Made, I Destroyed”. For this game, one person creates a 5-7-word phrase, writes it on a piece of paper, and shows it to 2+ people. Give the people 3-5 minutes to make-up a short story behind it and each share with the group. An example could be a phrase, “Fresh fish can still stink.” All the others decide the meaning/story of this sign. One person’s story could be about a fish that was swept ashore. Another person may create a story of a store owner who refused to sell anything stinky, etc. The Sign-Maker awards 5 points to the favorite story. Rotate who is the Sign-Maker and go for a pre-determined number of rounds. Most points wins.

Main Skill Sets: *Imagination, Adaptability, Word Choice, Creating a Coherent Story*

Steam and Smoke (inspired by traditional and adaptive nature of Maori cooking)

A Maori Feast using Hangi or “Earth Oven” involves wet steam and smoke for the flavorful experience without frying or baking. The Maori also adapted from the Pakeha (fair-skinned people) way of cooking. In this game, everyone pretends to prepare a feast and dig a square pit, start a fire, lay down rocks, and then stack wood like pallets to crisscross on top of each other. When sitting around the Earth Oven, someone says, “We have steam and smoke.” Another says, “Then what should we cook?” If you have two people playing, then the first person responds, “Something _____ (descriptive word).” Otherwise, the individual responding would be the next person in the circle. The partner/next person must respond within 10 seconds of what could be eaten-imaginary or real-that shares that descriptive word. If too much time passes, then that person must run around the Earth Oven, sit down, and say, “I could not find anything _____.” Everyone pretends to be hungry. If someone said, “Something smooth.” Another would say, “Then let’s cook that smooth snake.” Eat whatever was decided. Take turns.

Main Skill Sets: *Word Choice, Visualization*

Minstrel, Story-Song American Idol of the Medieval Times

Challenge the whole group/class/grade/school to set a medieval story to their own music—authentic or modern music depending on your goals. Ask the top students to participate in an assembly and have the group/class/grade/school vote the Idol.

Main Skill Sets: *Confidence, Engaging the Audience, Merging Story with Other Arts*

Potlatch (inspired by Northwest area of North America traditional feasting and gift-giving)

Most tribes of the Northwest hold grand feasts and gift-giving to the invited guests called potlatches. This tradition maintains or increases a social standing. The longer that the potlatch host can feed and give gifts, the more respect is given. In this game, see how long you can keep a story going with stumbling or pausing too long complete with “food” and “gifts”. A person begins the story by with any scene or characters as desired. The other people can ask for “food” or a “gift”. The storyteller responds, “What do you wish?” and the person says what kind of food or gift is wanted. This is the only time the story can pause. Once the food or gift is identified, then the storyteller must continue the story within 10 seconds. A food item is something added to the story that suggests action. So if the listeners would like the plot to move along, then they demand food. A gift is a character or power that could help the main character(s) in the story. For example, if the storyteller said, “The boy looked out across the lake and fell asleep.” A listener could shout, “Food!” Then the storyteller might respond with, “But the boy felt a sting, jumped up and ran into the water.” If a listener said, “Gift!” Then the storyteller could say, “The boy had not seen who had stung him, but from the bushes, a rabbit hopped out and said, ‘I saw it. I can tell you who did it.’” The storyteller continues the story until pausing too long or runs out of ideas. Rotate tellers. Time each story to determine who had the longest potlatch.

Main Skill Sets: *Creating a Coherent Story, Word Choice, Visualization, Adaptability*

Storm-Summoning (inspired by Northwest story “The Boy of the Red Sky”)

To represent the coat worn by the adoptive mother, take a blanket for this game. One person tells a story, at least one other person waits to jump in to tell part of the story, and another person wears a blanket. The listener(s) jump in to continue the story when the person rustles the blanket. If two people are waiting to jump in and continue the story, then the first person who speaks gets to be the storyteller. However, if no one jumps in to tell the story within 5 seconds, then the storm brews and the person with the blanket can blow wind and tickle everyone with the storm. Rotate roles.

Main Skill Sets: *Confidence, Creating a Coherent Story*

Tell-Off, advanced story game
Shared by permission of Rixon Lane, creator

Audience: youth to adults

Level: advanced, all storytelling skill sets

Items Needed: timer, masking tape

Number of Players: 7-25

Roles: Judge, Jury (2-6 people), Prosecution (2-6 people), Defense (2-6 people), Other normal court roles like Bailiff as you see fit

Ave. Playing Time: 45 min. to hrs.

One-Liner: resembles storytelling court mixed with tag-team word wrestling

Instructions: Determine the boundaries such as a 5' by 3' rectangle out of masking tape on the floor. Have a timer that can countdown a minute. Someone plays the Judge, who gives penalties at any time during the game, even if telling is perfect. For example, if someone steps out of bounds, the offender could receive a "punishment" of pretending to be a duck while singing "Mary had a Little Lamb". The Judge always consults with the Jury for penalties. The Jury decides what six things must be mentioned in the stories to be told by the two tag-teams (Prosecution and Defense).

The first person on the Prosecution has one minute to tell a crazy story using all six items within the floor boundaries. If any item is missed or said wrong (like saying purple-spotted platypus vs. polka-dotted platypus), the Judge and Jury issue penalties.

Then, the first person on the Defense has one minute to tell a crazy story with the same six items but with a different plot. Afterward, the Jury comes up with six more items to be used by the second person of the Prosecution. This person continues the story that their partner already started. Likewise, the second person of the Defense continues their partner's story.

Repeat until all people from both tag-teams have time to tell. Finally, the Judge gives the verdict by sharing positive attributes of both teams so no one goes home "guilty".

The punishments are as important as the stories throughout the game. Any of the accused could argue their way out of punishment, thus improving persuasion skills. All rules are flexible.

History of this Game: Rixon Lane, a youth teller from South Carolina, created Tell-Off while participating in the National Youth Storytelling Showcase in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee of February 2006.

People Who Played the 1st Game: Rixon Lane, Chloe Clunis, Trent Howard, Tyler Smith, Eduardo Estrella, Maggie Lowe, and Rachel Hedman.