

## **What Time Is It? It's Toddler Time!**

### **Laura Drath**

Fish and Wildlife Interpreter II  
California Department of Fish & Wildlife  
1701 Nimbus Road  
Rancho Cordova, CA 95670  
(916) 358-2884 phone  
(916) 358-2912 fax  
[Laura.Drath@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:Laura.Drath@wildlife.ca.gov)

### **Abstract**

If the children are our future...let's hook them early! Brief interpretive programs for very young children (and their families) are easy to create and deliver, bring in lots of new visitors, and build loyal constituencies for your site. Learn the basics of designing and delivering thematic programming for children under 5, discover how to help families extend the learning when they leave your site—and get tips to keep them coming back again and again.

### **Keywords**

early childhood development, toddlers, preschoolers, storytime

### **Introduction**

While many sites offer day camps, workshops, and other programming for school-age children, their younger brothers and sisters, the toddlers and preschoolers, are often overlooked. Site staff developing programming may feel these very little ones are too young to teach, or may not feel confident in working with small children. In fact, the under-5 set represent a tremendous opportunity to grow your site's visitation, to develop a loyal constituency, and to prepare the ground for future learning in fertile young minds. Developing a brief storytime program is a simple undertaking that can produce big benefits for everyone involved.

### **Developing a Program for Young Children**

The key concept to understand in terms of early childhood development is that, as Maria Montessori said, "Play is the work of the child." Children learn through play, through song, through stories, and through sensory experience—all things you can easily provide through a simple, inexpensive storytime program at your site.

The educational theorist Jean Piaget described the concept of schemas, which are cognitive frameworks that help people organize and interpret information. When a child encounters new information, they use it to change or expand their schemas, or to create new ones. For example, a small child may have a schema about a horse. She may understand a horse to be a big animal, with four legs and fur. When she sees a cow for the first time, she may believe it's a horse. When she learns it's actually a cow, she'll revise her schema for horse and create a new category for cows. Young children can be thought of as small scientists, continually busy in developing theories about how the world works, then testing those theories, revising them, testing them again...in such fashion children amass a truly astonishing amount of knowledge about the world around them in the first few years of life.

Your job in presenting a program for this age group is to give them just a little more information to add to their schemas. By providing the basics about the butterfly life cycle, or animal tracks, or life in a Gold Rush town, or whatever your topic may be, you are giving them new research material for their ongoing studies. By presenting that material through songs, stories, puppets, and craft activities, you are making it accessible, memorable, and enjoyable for them.

### **Structuring Your Storytime**

Storytimes have a great many positive outcomes for young children, including increased attention span, confidence, awareness of the outside world, listening ability, imagination, and more. In addition, “a review of the literature shows that there is evidence to support that meaningful literacy activities, such as reading, singing and playing with children, can impact a child’s brain development and subsequently help provide them with the pre-reading skills they need to start school.” (MacLean 2008)

Storytime programs are wonderfully flexible and can be structured in whatever fashion best suits the needs of your audience and the constraints of your site. Some of the recommended elements include:

- 2-4 simple, thematic, beautifully illustrated books
- 2-4 thematic songs. Call-and-response, fingerplays and action songs, and thematic, repetitive lyrics set to familiar tunes are best as they encourage audience participation.
- A simple craft or hands-on activity to engage the senses and reinforce the theme
- Engagement with your site—take them on a (very) brief walk or hike, introduce them to a resident animal, let them try turning the spinning wheel, or (as we do here at the Nimbus Fish Hatchery) take them out to feed the fish!

Creating a handout for each session of your storytime serves multiple purposes. You can include the lyrics to the songs to further encourage audience participation (and avoid singing solo). In addition, you can provide ideas for follow-up activities as well as background information to help the adults feel empowered to extend their child’s learning at home. You can also further plug your site and any upcoming events and programs you have scheduled.

## **Promoting Your Program**

A storytime program practically promotes itself. It is free, no registration or commitment is required, and it provides a simple, educational, and fun family outing. Families with very small children, especially stay-at-home parents, are eternally on the look-out for opportunities like the one you are providing. Once you get the word out, whether via the local children's librarian, mass emails, family-oriented publications, or Facebook and Twitter, word-of-mouth will quickly become your best advertising tool.

## **Benefits to Your Site, Your Staff, and Yourself**

Working with very young children can seem daunting to the uninitiated. But if you are willing to get out of your comfort zone a little, you will find the rewards make that initial discomfort entirely worthwhile. Working with very young children is energizing, ever-changing, and just plain fun! Giving your staff supported opportunities to develop and deliver this kind of programming can increase their confidence and interpretive skills as well, and enhances the depth, breadth, and value of the interpretive offerings at your site. Toddler and preschooler programming provides a rich opportunity to deliver your messages to an often overlooked and underestimated audience while challenging you to think outside your traditional programmatic approaches.

## **Conclusion**

I'd like to thank Ira and Lizzie Bletz, whose presentation on programming for the very young at the NAI Region 9 spring workshop two years ago inspired me to launch Toddler Time at Nimbus Hatchery. The program has taken off and soared since then, and we have been able to engage a new, ever-growing demographic of now-loyal visitors. I encourage other sites to give some attention to the pre-kinder crowd—after all, they are our future, and it's Toddler Time!

## **References**

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