

Accessible libraries: Storytime

How can you make your storytimes more inclusive of all participants?

Kids love storytime! It's an important part of library programming, and a fun way to support children's early literacy development. With some small tweaks, you can make your storytimes welcoming and engaging for children with disabilities.



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- General tips for a welcoming storytime
- Room setup and layout
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Centre for Equitable
Library Access

General tips for a welcoming storytime

- Everyone is welcome! Remember that it could be the children or adults attending your programs that have disabilities.
- Let the grownups know that it's okay to leave and come back if their child needs a break.
- Not all kids are going to be able to sit still for a story. Just because they are moving around doesn't mean they aren't listening.
- Cancel the "Shhhh" rule!
 - Not every child will be able to sit completely quietly for the story.
 - There's a difference between disruptive noise, such as a child who is screaming, versus minor noises, such as a child who is quietly humming to themselves.
- Use a microphone, even if you are good at projecting your voice. This ensures that people who are hard of hearing or sitting further back will be able to hear.
 - This is especially important for large groups.
- Describe the "agenda" for the program. Some participants will feel calmer if they know what will happen next.
 - Say things like, "We're going to listen to a story and then we'll sing a couple of songs..."
 - Read the Sensory Storytime section below for more tips on including agendas in your program.



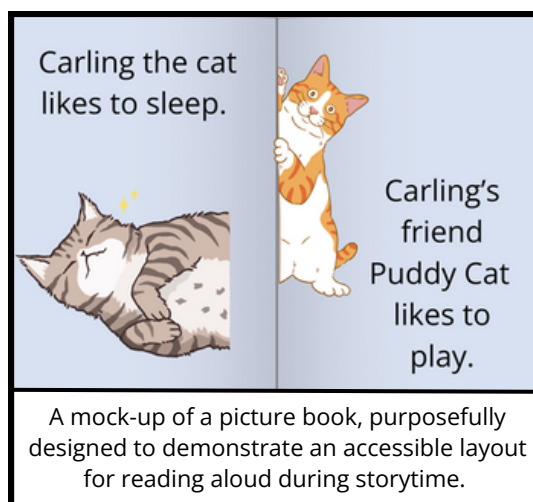
Room setup and layout

- Have chairs available for children and adults.
Not everyone can comfortably stand or sit on the floor.
- Make sure there is space for people with mobility devices and service animals to navigate the room.
- Create space for children who need to move around while still listening to the story.
 - A designated area, such as off to one side or right behind the seated children, allows kids to move around without distracting the other children or blocking their view.

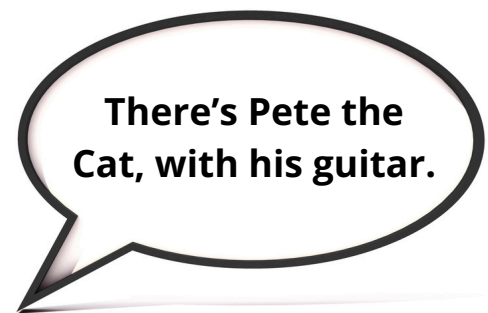


Books

- Choosing a book:
 - Select books with bold illustrations and bright colours. Avoid books with a lot of small details and cluttered or overlapping images.
 - If you want the children to be able to identify any of the text, such as sound effects or action words, choose books with large, bold text in a clear font. Avoid books where the text might be obscured by illustrations or patterned backgrounds.



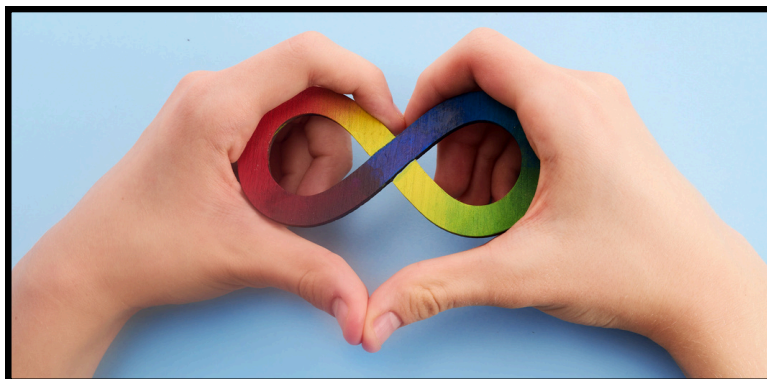
- Can everyone see the pictures?
 - For larger groups, consider projecting the pages on a screen. You can use a book that is available as an ebook.
 - For smaller groups, slowly move the book from one side of the group to the other so that everyone has a chance to see the pictures.
- Help those who have difficulty or cannot see the pictures.
 - Describe what is happening in the illustrations if it is not explained by the text.
 - This doesn't need to be every detail, just a general sense of what is happening on the page.
 - For example: "There's Pete the Cat, with his guitar, getting ready to sing about his white shoes."
- Incorporate American Sign Language (ASL) into your program.
 - Show videos of books that use both verbal narration and ASL. These are available through library services such as Kanopy, as well as on YouTube.
 - Invite a Deaf presenter to your program to read the story.
 - Do not refer to sign language as "baby signs." This practice is considered cultural appropriation by many Deaf people because it treats sign language as a novelty to teach hearing children that is then forgotten about once the child learns to speak.



Sensory storytime

Sensory storytimes are designed for children who feel safer and more comfortable in an environment with fewer people, quieter sounds, and lower lighting. These spaces are created for kids who have sensory sensitivities. Kids who are neurodivergent, such as autistic children, have learning or developmental disabilities, or other disabilities may feel more at ease in these spaces. Many of these tips are also things you can implement in all your storytime programs, not just the ones specifically targeted at children with disabilities.

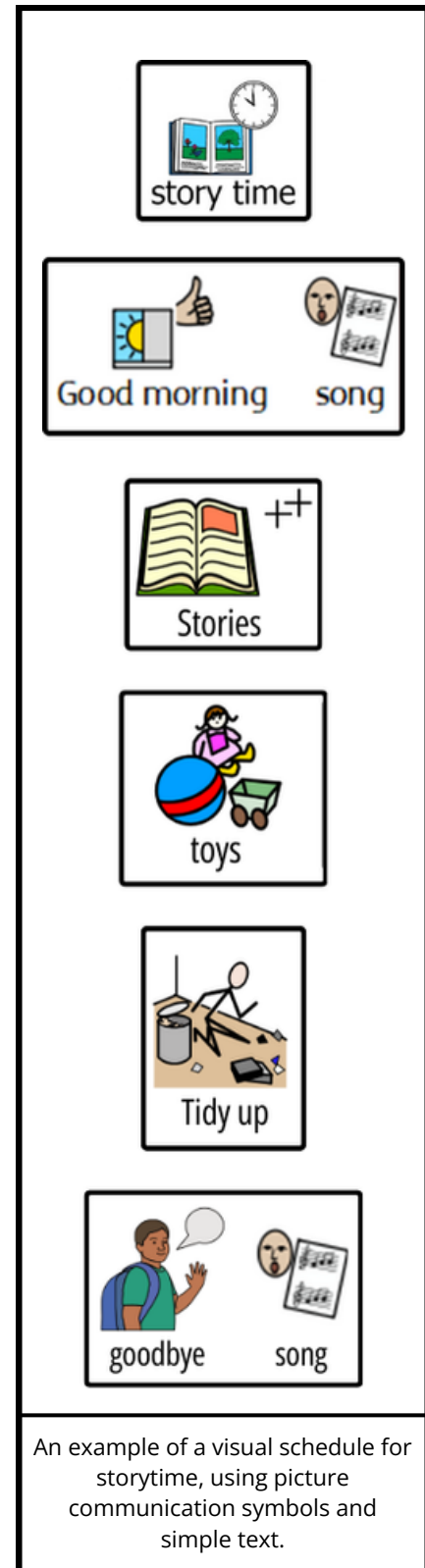
- Keep the group small. Large groups can be loud and overwhelming.
 - Around ten participants is a recommended number.
- It's best if registration is required.
 - Drop-in programs mean that there is a chance that too many kids will arrive, and some will be turned away. This is disappointing for all children but is particularly difficult for neurodivergent kids who often have difficulty coping with sudden changes in plans.
 - Getting a child with disabilities ready to leave the house and travelling to the library can be a lot of work. Requiring registration reassures parents and caregivers that their child will be guaranteed a place in the program.
 - Be sure to ask during the registration process if the child requires any specific accessibility accommodations.



- Choose a location that has soft lighting.
 - Harsh fluorescent lighting can be difficult for some people with sensory issues.
 - Offer sunglasses to participants. They don't need to be expensive or high quality. They are intended to reduce the impact of harsh lighting, not offer UV protection.
- Choose a location that is relatively quiet. Avoid loud, abrupt noises and cavernous spaces that echo.
 - Loud noises can be upsetting and even physically painful to some people. Try to keep the volume level in the room relatively quiet.
 - Offer headphones to participants. They are for muffling ambient noise, not producing audio themselves, so they do not need to be functioning. If your computer stations have over-the-ear headphones that no longer work, you can cut off the cords and repurpose them for storytimes.
- Choose relatively short stories.
 - You can abridge a longer story if needed.
 - Remember that some participants will have to work hard to focus on listening to the story so shorter stories give them more frequent breaks.
 - Stick to only one or two books and break it up with a song or rhyme in between. Again, this gives participants a break from focusing.



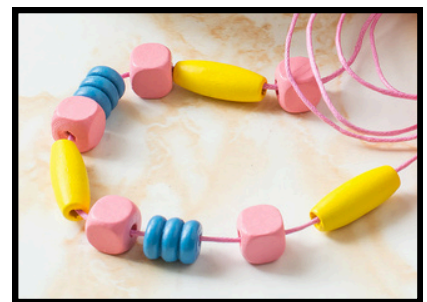
- Always include a visual schedule.
 - Outline the different parts of the program. Knowing what to expect can significantly reduce anxiety and will also help those participants who have difficulty with change and transitions.
 - Use photographs or picture symbols as well as short, simple text. Many neurodivergent children process visual information more easily than written or verbal information.
- Talk about the schedule during the program.
 - For example, say something like “First we are going to read a story and then we’ll sing a couple of songs.” After the story, say something like “Now that we have read a story about outer space, we are going to sing a song about travelling to the moon. It’s called Zoom, Zoom, Zoom!”
 - If you’re doing a craft or activity, give participants a warning before it ends. For example, say something like “Five more minutes for the craft and then we are going to listen to a story. Start thinking about finishing up”. This allows them time to process the upcoming change rather than being surprised.



- Repetition and predictability
 - These are both good things. It isn't lazy planning to repeat elements of the storytime for multiple weeks. In fact, it's reassuring to many kids. Predictability is comforting to a lot of neurodivergent people.
 - Follow the same basic structure and order of events each time. Use the same welcome and goodbye song or routine.
 - You can use the same songs and rhymes multiple times. This allows the children to participate more fully in the programs because they already know the words or actions.
 - Hold these programs regularly so that they become part of a child's regular routine. If the program is only offered once every few months, each time is a new event that the child must adapt to all over again.
- Offer a variety of seating options.
 - Provide chairs for both adults and kids. Not everyone can comfortably sit on the floor or stand for longer periods of time.
 - Designated seating spots, such as carpet squares, can be useful for some kids. It can help them feel like they have their own space.
 - Seating also gives important visual cues. It can be helpful to children who have difficulty understanding the boundaries of other people's personal space. It also helps children who feel unsure about what to do when entering new spaces. Seeing seating set out tells them they can come in and sit down.
 - Remember that some kids will also need to move around too. Create space for both options.



- Make the program interactive.
 - Many neurodivergent people have an easier time learning and focusing if they can move around at the same time.
 - Incorporate shakers, scarves, fingerplays, bubbles, and more to engage the participants' senses.
 - Choose books with interactive elements.
- Stimming
 - Lots of neurodivergent people use stimming, or self-stimulatory behaviour, as a physical way to process big emotions or simply to help them focus. They may stim when they are excited, anxious, or need to keep their hands busy while they listen.
 - Stimming can include physical actions, such as hand flapping, fidgeting, or rocking back and forth. It can also take the form of vocal sounds, such as humming or repeating words or phrases.
 - Stimming is generally a positive behaviour and should not be discouraged or corrected.
- Have fidgets available.
 - Fidgets are small objects that participants can hold onto and play with while participating in the programs.
 - They can include fidget spinners, "Pop Its," stress balls, sequin fabric, and more.
 - There are lots of low-cost options that you can purchase at dollar stores.
 - You can also make your own fidgets. For example:
 - A string of beads.
 - A pipe cleaner works well for twisting and tangling.
 - A swatch of fabric or faux fur can be used for stroking.



- Emotional reactions and taking breaks.
 - Meltdowns happen. Some neurodivergent people can become overwhelmed, tired, or stressed and may experience a meltdown. This is a term used by many members of the autistic community and is largely not considered derogatory. Meltdowns are not tantrums or misbehaviour. Work with the parent or caregiver to support the child and help them calm down.
 - Make sure that parents and caregivers know they can leave and return to the program if their child needs to step out of the room for a break.
 - If a child is exhibiting behaviours that are harmful to themselves or others, work with the parent or caregiver to ensure that everyone stays safe.

Have fun!

Sensory storytimes can be an important learning opportunity for the participants but they should also be a fun, social activity. It's ok to be silly, tell jokes, and laugh with the kids. Follow their lead and have a good time!

