

Spirited Play

The approach to telling stories used here stems from the work of Jerome Berryman in Denver, Colorado. Berryman's approach, which he termed '*godly play*', is very much set in a Christian nurturing context, with assumptions being made about the child's existing 'relationship with God'.

The approach used here, while borrowing on Berryman's work, makes no such assumption. Rather, the approach goes back to the principles Berryman himself made use of, those of Maria Montessori. That is, children's development starts from their absorbent minds – they learn best at their own pace, without 'effort', and principally through play. Teachers simply respond to the child's request to 'help me do it by myself.'

The stories we use here, therefore, are taken from a variety of religious and non-religious traditions, and the storyteller is advised to pace the telling in such a way as to allow all the children who are listening time to reflect on the story's meanings *in their own way*. Stories are told in as simple a way as possible, and the materials used are similarly lacking in elaboration. This is to enable children's imaginations to act upon the essences of the story and to make connections between the stories and their own experience.

Teachers are encouraged to learn each story off by heart and to avoid too much eye-contact, again allowing children their own space to reflect upon the story.

Reflection is particularly encouraged during the 'I wonder...' section of the presentation. Here, there is not so much emphasis on the teacher making connections with the child's own experience as simply allowing such connections to occur naturally. Some children will 'wonder aloud', others in silence. As part of their 'personal response' children then engage in some creative activity that allows them to construct their own insights.

The stories are designed to be returned to time and again, thus encouraging deepening levels of response and insight with each retelling.

Each session will typically last between 45 and 60 minutes and will conclude with a 'feast', that is, a gathering together again as a whole group and a sharing of, for example, juice, biscuits and fruit.

Finally, as each child leaves the room, they receive a word or two of praise or encouragement from the storyteller and the doorperson.

A fuller description of '*godly play*', by Dr Rebecca Nye can be found at www.godlyplay.org.uk/whatisgodlyplay.html.

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THE TEACHING STRATEGY

1. AT THE THRESHOLD

The children are welcomed by the doorman and invited to sit in a circle with the storyteller.



2. BUILDING THE CIRCLE

The storyteller settles the group in preparation for the story. (Berryman, following the Montessori tradition, uses the term 'lesson'.)



3. PRESENTING THE LESSON

The storyteller focuses on the special materials used to present the story. These are usually three dimensional figures crafted in natural materials.



4. WONDERING

The children are invited to wonder about the story and explore their connectedness to it. Some wonder aloud others in silence.



5. RESPONSE

The children decide on their own response to the story, which may be through art work, learning to retell the story with the original materials, through games, maps puzzles or books.



6. THE FEAST

The work is put away, everyone returns to the circle and a feast of e.g., juice, biscuits and fruit, is enjoyed.



7. SAYING GOODBYE

The session ends and each child is spoken to, by the storyteller and the doorman, before they leave.

With thanks to Claire Clinton – RE Adviser for Newham