

Wide-eyed and Curious: Working with Young Children in Groups

by Shutta Crum

I've been a storyteller, teacher, and children's librarian for more than twenty years. Five years of that time included doing more than thirty traveling storytimes a month— indoors, outdoors, and under all sorts of conditions. I've learned a lot about working with children in large groups. Some things I've learned the hard way— like, never do book programs next to a moon jump!

With a little planning, and a few tricks, you can avoid some of the common problems of group presentations to young children as *you* do school visits or author programs.

The key to success is Preparation:

1. ALWAYS OVER-PREPARE! Don't plan every move, every response, every line you plan to utter. **Do** plan to fill more time than you have allotted: more things to show, more stories to tell, more illustrations to demo, for a wide-range of ages. This way you have built in some flexibility for yourself prior to seeing the actual audience. If two parents with 18 month-olds show up, you'll be prepared with age-appropriate materials and parent information. If you get an audience of 100 mostly older folks, you've got it covered.
2. GET ALL THE INFO YOU NEED UP-FRONT. Don't make any assumptions about your presentation setting. Just because you're doing a school visit does not mean you'll automatically be doing it in the school's media center. Maybe they've scheduled you to do a few minutes with each lunch shift in the lunchroom. (Gads!) While you're getting directions and making all those financial arrangements, ask: Is it a quiet space? Are you presenting with others? Next to, before, or after someone famous like Jane Yolen, or "Arthur?" Do you have someone assigned to assist you? Chairs, or an open floor space?
3. PLAN TO PLAY TO YOUR YOUNGEST AUDIENCE MEMBERS. (Generally, 3 through 6 year-olds.) When working with groups of mixed-age children, prepare primarily for the youngest. While the multiple layers of meaning in the text and artwork of a picture book can captivate teens and adults, it is holding the attention of the young listeners that will facilitate an enjoyable group experience for everyone. Short asides to older listeners are fine, but be sure to come back regularly and primarily to the young ones.
4. PRACTICE. Rehearse your song/story/book reading/activity by handling any visuals you will be using. Practice *outloud* using your props in front of a mirror while timing yourself. Actors and actresses practice this way. You should, too. That means if you're going to read from your children's book, hold it the way you plan to hold it for the audience to see the pictures while reading aloud with emotion and using a variety of character voices.

When telling a story, don't memorize it word for word unless you're reciting poetry. That's a sure-fire way to trip up! Do as all good storytellers do: make it your story. Study the plot, practice repetitive phrases you need to get just right, note main character traits, and, perhaps, memorize the first and last line. Put these elements together in your own way and tell it in your own style.

5. PLAN VISUAL INTEREST. The majority of your program should be planned with some on-going visual interest to keep the eyes of little ones front and center. This can be your book, illustrations, puppets, string stories, magic tricks, felt-board stories, origami, cutting/folding/drawing while talking or telling a story, or illustrating on a whiteboard while discussing a point or demonstrating a technique. Don't forget the most important visual element— you.

If you simply sit still on a stool and talk, you'll quickly lose eye contact and the interest of the youngest listeners. In addition to using your hands and face, move around. Walk from side to side as you tell/discuss. Wave your hands in the air to make a point. Eyes will follow you. Your goal is to keep them wide-eyed and curious about what you're going to do next.

6. PLAN FOR WHAT YOU KNOW IS GOING TO HAPPEN. Know your responses to common questions and situations that arise in group settings. For some things you will need to "think on your feet." For other situations you can have a plan of action/a response.

This is what we in the library field do: COMMENT: "I already know this story."
RESPONSE: "This is *my* special way of telling it."

COMMENT: (Apropos of nothing you're discussing) "I'm four years old." Or, "I have a dog." RESPONSE: "That's great! Everyone who is 4, raise your hand. Now put them down. Everyone who is 5 raise your hand. Everyone who is 6 or older raise your hand. Everyone who has a dog (cat, bird, fish, other), raise your hand," etc. You must remember to tell them to lower their hands! This stops each of the 67 children present from trying to individually speak with you in the middle of the program. It is much less disruptive to spend a few minutes getting this out of the way when it inevitably arises.

COMMENT: "I can't see." RESPONSE: "Sit on your bottoms, and I'll hold everything up high."

Think about how you will answer the questions that always come up: "How old are you?" and "Where do you get your ideas?"

7. PREPARE FOR THE WORST WITH LIVE ANIMALS. If you bring a live animal, prepare for various situations. Some children are afraid of dogs, cats, and snakes, even sweet little Fifi who loves kids. Some people are allergic. And *always* have a diaper on non-housebroken animals, especially farm animals!

8. **PLAN A 7th INNING STRETCH.** This is especially important for groups with lots of young children. Somewhere past the halfway mark, do a song, a chant, a fingerplay, an activity, or have the group get up and touch/examine something. What you can do successfully will depend on the size of the space and the size of the group. You don't want a huge group to get up and move about; it could be difficult to get them back down again.

9. **PREPARE A SHORT OUTLINE OF HOW YOUR PROGRAM IS TO PROGRESS.** This does not mean that you will be strictly adhering to an agenda for the program. It means that you have a short written list of what order things should come in, what your 7th inning stretch will be, and the things you want to cover and to hand out. Tape it up somewhere or have it handy so you can quickly check that you haven't forgotten something in the excitement of the moment.

10. **PACK YOUR BAG AND CHECK IT TWICE.** No matter that you have requested in advance that certain items be present, *always* bring along the minimum that you need for a successful program. You can keep those items stashed in your car if you get there and discover everything is exactly as you requested. (Hah!)

This means you may need to bring a stool, an easel, a feltboard, a whiteboard, a large pad of paper and markers, a stapler, an eraser, your guest book, Kleenex, and masking tape. Of course, you'll need your books and all your special presentation items. So try to get supplies that can be easily carried.

At the Program:

Now for the presentation itself, but don't worry, you're going to do great because you've really prepared. You're there and you've arrived at least 20 minutes early to set up, and find the location of the nearest bathroom. Yes? (And you've remembered to bring water for yourself.)

1. **EARLY ARRIVALS.** Do chat with early arrivals. Kids love to get your ear privately and to help set-up.

2. **HANDOUTS.** Place somewhere near the entrance area Kleenex, handouts, and your guest book so that attendees can leave email and snail-mail addresses, and latecomers can access your materials easily. If you're at a school, give handouts to teachers and don't put the guest book out.

3. **FAULT LINE.** Mark a front "fault line" with your masking tape. This is especially important in open spaces where the kids will sit on their bottoms in front of you; it also serves to protect that fragile 17th century violin that ties in with your story that you just had to bring. Tape off an area about 4 to 6 feet wide. This is your stage. The audience sits on the other side of the tape. If you have brought fragile/dangerous items or live animals you may need to enlist a parent or older child who will be the "line judge."

4. SEATING ARRANGEMENTS. In large open spaces the best rule is: kids on their bottoms in the front and center, and big people on the sides. Lap-sitters must stay on a parent's lap. And, if there are any chairs/stools, those go to the grandparents or people with special needs. Strollers must stay outside the program area or in the back. Announce it, and monitor as folks arrive, or have an assistant do it. This can be done with a smile and most people are happy to oblige. But don't wait until everyone is already all settled down to make them rise and reseat themselves. That can bring grumbling.

5. VOLUNTEERS FROM THE AUDIENCE. If you're doing activities that require volunteers from the audience, have enough activities so that all children who wish to may join in. Or, have an adult help. Too often a young one can burst into tears because he/she did not get chosen to help.

6. PRIZES. If you want to have a drawing for a prize, have the slips pre-printed with the type of information you need. (Name, phone, address, age, etc.) Have plenty of pencils with erasers –important to kids– available, and a box to put slips in. Never, *never*, draw the winner in front of the crowd! This is a sure-fire way to have a non-winner burst into tears. Instead, announce that you will do the drawing at a later date and you will telephone/contact the winner personally.

7. INTERRUPTIONS. We spoke earlier of being prepared for the age/pet comment that always sparks more comments, and how to prepare for that. There are other interruptions you can learn how to handle. For example, the child who raises his hand and keeps it there throughout your comments. This can be distracting to the whole group. You can stop this interruption by making eye contact as soon as you can and then very briefly "break the 3rd wall," as they say in theater parlance, to address your audience member directly while making a downward movement with your hand. "You can put your hand down now. I won't forget to call on you as soon as my story is done. Hold on to your question, OK?" Then go right back to what you were saying. But don't forget to ask the young questioner his question as soon as it's appropriate. This kind of very brief interchange is normally not distracting to your audience and is much more comforting than watching a hand wave around for ten minutes. The same thing holds true for toddlers who get away from parents and wander to the front, cry, or cause some other disturbance. Stop briefly, ask, "Mom? Dad? Can you help with the little one here? You may want to keep her on your lap." And then continue on with your presentation.

8. ABOUT LINES. If you have young children line up for anything, consider letting the very youngest get in the front. It is terribly hard for a 2 year-old to wait 30 minutes for your signature, a balloon animal, or to pet Fifi. Most parents will work with you on this. If it is unavoidable, have Board books, coloring sheets, puppets that little ones can play with while Mom or Dad is holding the spot in line. Also, keep any decisions the little ones have to make when they get to the head of the line to a minimum. Otherwise it can take four times as long to get through the line as kids think about their decisions. Have all materials ready and ask only one/two basic questions. Do you want an orange balloon or a purple one?

9. A CAVEAT. Have fun, but don't expect it to go perfectly. Every program has its own energy. Be open to the moment; the opportunity to hear new ideas, the chance to touch the lives of children, and something wonderfully serendipitous could happen.

Post Program:

What? You thought you were all done, that you could just pack up and go home? No, the most important part of your presentation is just beginning.

1. THANK YOU NOTES. Send "Thank You" notes to the coordinators of the program, including bookstore clerks, teachers, and librarians who helped you make it a success. And don't forget the media if the local paper did a big PR splash for you. These folks are important to you, and it reinforces your name and your program for any referrals they might make. Besides, it's just good manners.

2. KEEP A LOG. Take the time to make and keep a log with dates and notes on each program. What worked. What didn't work. Approximate age groups attending. Activities you did. (Staple in the little outline you wrote earlier.) What you handed out. Add any comments while the presentation is fresh in your mind, which will help you plan and prepare for the next program.

3. DO AN EVALUATION. If you've just started doing these kinds of programs, it doesn't hurt to mail an evaluation to the program host, or to teachers, to get some feedback before you do it again.

4. DRAW YOUR PRIZEWINNER'S NAME. Do your drawing and contact the winner to arrange for delivery of the prize.

5. ENTER NAMES IN YOUR DATABASE. Enter the names of those signing your guest book and those in the drawing into a fan database you are keeping for your mailing list. You are doing this regularly aren't you?

6. WASH AND REPACK. Wash puppets/stuffed animals the little ones played with and repack everything for the next program. Check to see which handouts you will need to make more copies of for next time.

7. RELAX! You did it. In some child's eyes, you're a "star."

This article was first published in the August/September 2001 issue of the "SCBWI-MI News"