

Tell us a story

What a recent Covid project tells us about the pandemic experiences of children and the vital role of storytelling. By **Professor Chris Pascal** and **Professor Tony Bertram**



When young children were encouraged to explore their experiences of the pandemic through storytelling, they were able to express themselves and process their feelings while giving practitioners a deeper insight into their needs.

Our aims with The Froebel Young Voices of Covid project were to realise children's right to express their narratives about Covid-19 while exploring the power of Froebelian storytelling strategies to support reflection on, and resilience about, their experiences.

The project was carried out in four nursery settings – two in Scotland and one each in England and New Zealand – where practitioners are trained in a Froebelian approach to storytelling and in action research methodologies. Practitioners were encouraged to document the different pedagogic strategies they used to support children's storytelling about Covid-19.

Sustained shared conversations

Throughout the study period, practitioners engaged in deep, sustained and reflective conversations with the children about their daily life, interests and preoccupations. Some of these conversations were led by the children's interests and passions, while others were instigated by the practitioner and others happened as part of the nursery's daily life.

Conversations varied from one-on-one to group interactions, and fleeting exchanges to extended and extensive. Some were stimulated by an activity. All those recorded were dialogic, child-led and focused.

News broadcast

Many of the children, like the practitioners, had been exposed to lots of Covid-19-related news. They wanted to share what they had heard. Many children displayed an awareness of the Prime/First Minister's briefings on the TV and radio. They recognised these figures and had a view on them.

Books that reflected real life were part of the prompts to encourage storytelling

One nursery had an outdoor wooden TV screen where children were recorded giving their daily update of pandemic news. A practitioner commented, 'We introduced the "TV" as a possible Covid-19 vehicle for children to share what they watched or wanted to talk about. Some children became really engaged and responded to initial prompts to tell us the news.'

In another, pictures of the leading figures were printed and laminated as part of a series of pandemic-related photos for the children to use in their news stories.

Role play

Role play narratives were seen as a key means by which children could play out their understandings, experiences and feelings. Some of these were stimulated by books, and others were spontaneously created by the children themselves.

Staff framed some stories by providing resources, props and equipment. In some the children wanted the practitioner to be involved, but in others it was made

clear this was a peer or sometimes a solitary activity.

The child's choice was respected, as illustrated by this practitioner's reflective narrative: 'I noticed you quietly and on your own at the desk tapping and concentrating on the keyboard. I watched as you picked up the keyboard and mouse and walked off purposefully, I followed you and asked what was happening. "Need to put this in the house to do work," you told me. You set up in the home corner. You are now working at home on the laptop – in the background. You are playing with another friend, S. You are mum while S is dad. Other children sometimes take roles in this play which continues over several days mostly in the home corner.'

Picture prompts

One way to encourage narratives about the pandemic was through a series of picture prompts. These were laminated and had sticky backs to adhere to a storyboard:

'I took a small group to look at some photographs... The Prime Minister, a supermarket, Covid notices, a hospital, a closed park. The children commented, "That's the prime minister, he is in charge". "The park is closed because you can't go in there because of the virus, you might get it and it will make you ill and you will have to go to hospital."

Puppets/persona dolls

The use of puppets and persona dolls was seen as a valuable means through which children could be encouraged to listen to and then tell their own pandemic stories. These were seen as particularly helpful in allowing children to explore their feelings and emotions about their Covid-19 experiences.

Singing and music-making

In all the study sites, singing and music-making were utilised as a key means of expression and therapy, bonding the children together. The creation of new Covid-19 songs, or adaption of existing songs to relate to this time, was also popular with children, who appeared to find great humour and relief in songs that chased the virus away.

Craft work and modelling

Giving children resources to make and model was seen as an important means by which children could create something that they wanted to

explore through 2D and 3D media. The sustained conversations during the process of creation and modelling were regarded as special and invaluable for listening to the child's inner thoughts about what they were representing.

Drawing and painting

Children had the opportunity to draw a lot – on paper, walls, chalk boards, the floor, in sand and almost wherever and whenever they wished. There were plenty of materials and tools provided.

These drawings, and the process of creating them, provided a wonderful means by which the child could explore, explain and express what they were thinking about and what they understood about the virus. It was often the process of drawing, rather than the product, which was where the story lay.

Books

Having a wide range of books reflecting home and real-life environments was seen as essential to stimulate children's storytelling, as this narrative exemplifies:

'Reading the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, which I initiated by saying we couldn't go to other people's houses (like Goldilocks did), led to V and E telling their own version of the story and mark-making, either "writing" or drawing their story. We have also used baby bear at group time and talked about why he is sad (no porridge, broken chair, someone in bed), which developed into him being sad about not being allowed to see friends and family.'

CHILDREN'S VOICES

Sharing the learning from our experiences and thinking about how we might enhance our pedagogic



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In particular:

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practice is crucial to ensuring that the current and future mental health and well-being of this generation of young children are not adversely affected.

We have learned a lot about how to use storytelling strategies within a Froebel pedagogic approach to ensure children feel themselves as active, feeling and thinking human beings making connections with their own lives. In short, collectively we are taking great care to value, listen to and nurture young children during this devastating time.

The project has generated a wealth of new knowledge about the pandemic experiences of young children and their families. Children have told us they urgently want to:

- regain their daily life and routines
- be with their friends
- have extended time to play
- be outdoors
- have authentic and detailed information about the pandemic.

We have also seen the power of Froebelian pedagogy which foregrounds storytelling in play as a key element in contemporary practice. This pedagogy has enabled deeper and more connected relationships to be built and daily routines to be adapted to support children to manage the radical changes to their daily life. Children have become our teachers in this shared story.

This project offers a challenge to all of us to respond actively and authentically to what the children are saying, and also to their silences – and, echoing Froebel, this will be a test of our judgement and feelings too. ■

Professor Chris Pascal and Professor Tony Bertram are directors of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood

The Froebel Young Voices on Covid project

A wealth of evidence about children's Covid-19 experiences and desires for restoring their daily life has been gathered with the aim of informing current and post-pandemic practice and policy. Practitioner learning about the power and contemporary relevance of Froebelian pedagogy is also highlighted.

Challenges addressed during the project include:

- What has it been like to be a practitioner supporting young children through the last 12 months of the global pandemic?
- What new demands has Covid-19 presented to early years practitioners?
- How well has a Froebelian-inspired pedagogy focusing on children's storytelling supported children's social and emotional well-being during the crisis?
- And what makes for an effective pedagogy during, and after, a pandemic?

→ Read the full project report at: <https://bit.ly/3e1Qccl>