

ANNUAL PUBLIC EVENTS THAT JUST GROW AND GROW

Bedtime Story Hour:

Here is a simple activity. Invite parents and children into an early evening Bedtime Story Hour. In its simplest form, this is simply a time during which children come into the school or the library in their PJ's and listen to you read a story to them. However, lots more might happen. Encourage children and parents to each bring along something to read for themselves and something that might be read out loud like a picture book plus a blanket and maybe pillows.

As the group arrives, encourage silent reading with the parents modeling good behavior by reading as well. Have extra books in case people forget to bring along reading material. When everyone has gathered, you might read a story or two and lead the group in an audience participation tale.

However, if there are more than one person running the event, you might split the group. Let the children go with one adult, while the parents remain with the other. The children might listen to a story. If you are bold, you might teach the children the parts to an audience participation story.

While the children are a work or listening, you might conduct a brief workshop with the parents: possible topics: techniques for reading picture books at home, selecting good books to read, and reading and writing activities to develop a more literate home. If you are bold, you might teach the children the parts to an audience participation story.

After a bit, call the group together and let the children tell their group story. If the parents have learned a story, they might perform a group story for the children.

You might end the evening with the each parent reading a picture book story to their children. Yes, it will mean that everyone is talking but no one seems to mind.

Things to do at Home: Advice to Parents

If you want your children to read, you have to read. It is that simple. Furthermore, find ways to communicate through the written word – not just chores lists but good news as well.

- Limit television for the whole family.
- Make regular visits to the library.
- Be excited about your child reading.
- Send mail to your child and have an in home Post Office
- If your child is excited by something, take him or her to the library and do some reading.
- Ask your child what he or she learned today. If they say nothing then have an almanac or book of facts and both of you go and find some strange fact to share.

Stone Soup

This is a fabulous community activity. The feature is real stone soup. Encourage everyone to bring along “fixins” for a soup. If this is being run as part of a much larger event, people can bring along any ingredients. If the event is short, encourage them to only bring vegetables. Have a knife and a chopping board handy. If you do use meat, chop it finely.

Have a pot of water boiling. When folks have arrived call everyone together and explain that you don’t have much for dinner, just this thing watery soup. This is the cue for the “Mysterious Stranger” to step forward with the well boiled boulder. (Yes, if you want this to work, you have to convince everyone that the rock is well boiled.) Have the “stranger” claim he can make a great soup with just a stone. He puts the stone in the soup and then begins to walk from person to person asking for ingredients and offering to share his stone soup. One by one the families will hand up their ingredients and the soups will begin.

As with the above event, have people bring along books to read, maybe a picnic lunch and then, after a bit, have them gather for the soup. Make sure to bring along bowls. The stranger might serve up the soup and thank everyone.

You might want to end the event with the telling of Stone Soup. If you want to make it an audience participation tale, remember all the actions it took to prepare vegetables, and stir the broth, the pouring, the chopping... I’m sure you get the picture. To reinforce the messages of community and sharing, you might ask people to bring along non-perishable items that can be collected and donated to a local food bank or pantry.

The Teddy Bear Picnic

This is a truly magical event. It centers on a reading of the Three Bears. Invite families to bring along “fixins” for a family picnic. Encourage children to bring along their stuffed animals and a good read aloud book. As a high point of the event gather everyone for a reading of The Three Bears. However, during the event set aside some time for other family activities including children and parent getting tips on reading aloud to their stuffed animals. You might do an audience participation version of the Three Bears. The most charming possibility for this event: The Teddy Bear Clinic. Ask a couple of local adults who are good with needles and thread to bring along a sewing basket, a jar of buttons and maybe a little stuffing and set up a table at the side of the event. Have them available during the event to repair any overly loved stuffed creature. If they are silly folk, you might ask the local hospital if you could borrow a lab coat of two for the doctors who will be sewing during the event.

The Great Road Race

Want to encourage fitness? How about an annual Road Race. This one takes a little ambition. Ideally, it should be hosted by the Hare and the Tortoise. This is an event for all ages. One part of the race can be for distance and for speed. However, one whole part of the event, conducted by the Tortoise, should feature grace, style, and patience. The slower the better. You need a start and a finish line (crepe paper), maybe a start flag, a whistle and a “Great Race” banner. Start small and you may have a regional event in no time. You might want to tie in with the local Y and have people come along to talk about health and fitness.

A verb demonstration: There are certain words that are used too much in stories and “walk” is certainly one of them. This activity is strange but great fun. Have volunteers find a replacement word for “walk.” You might want to have a dictionary and a thesaurus on hand if anyone wants to be a late entrant. Have participants write their new verb on a piece of paper along with the definition. Have them attach a piece of string to the two corners making a sign that can be worn around their neck. At some point during the event announce the rules: that people are to guess what verb the participants are playing out. The guessers can then look at the card, the word and the definition.

Possible Walking Words

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| Stroll | Meander | Rush |
| Pace | Perambulate | Dash |
| Run | Limp | Crawl |
| Saunter | Jog | Stomp |
| Slip | Glide | March |

It is a silly event but it teaches a lot about language.

A Themed Parade

Everyone loves a parade. This can begin small and become an annual event growing as large as you wish. In fact, many communities currently wrestle with whether to stage Halloween events. You might offer a wonderful compromise: A costume parade featuring famous characters from literature – a reader’s parade. I have found that a parade works best if you have a focus. For example, you might choose fairy tale characters. The first step if you are planning a parade is to contact your police department and let them know what you are considering. They need to know.

In the parade’s simplest form, get the word out for children to arrive in costume at a particular place and time, then get out in the street and march along. The police will make room for you and, of course, they’ll want to stop traffic. What fun is a parade without a little traffic jam?

You should have a banner for the beginning of the parade that has your name and the name of the group and the name of your parade. Again, bed sheets are a good starting place and long lengths of closet poles.

Participants: In the beginning you should rely on a small group of people who are sure to get into costume and march. However, open it up to the public. Invite people to get into costume and join you. Put up flyers. Invite the press. Invite politicians. Your parade will begin to grow.

Free Stuff at the End: Encourage people to swing in at the end and march along with you. You will be a big hit if you have free stuff at the end. You can approach local vendors, especially ice cream vendors and let people know there will be ice cream at the end. They go wild.

That is all you need for your first year. If it works growing your parade is rather simple.

Funding: You won't need much. Consider going to the largest employer in town as your starting place. Tell them that if they make a new banner for you, they can put their name on it.

The Press: Invite everyone along. Challenge local media people to make a costume. Ask people to announce the parade is coming instead of reporting on the parade. Ask the local weather guy to plug it. "Looks like great weather for the Fairy Tale Parade tomorrow. Do you have your costume yet?"

The Staging Area:

If the parade grows you will need a staging area, a side street with no traffic where people can gather and get into line.

Parade Divisions:

If your parade is a hit, next year you can expect more participants. Get the word out that you are now looking for specific characters. For instance, you might do three specific fairy tales: The Three Pigs, Cinderella, and Jack and the Beanstalk. On the morning of the parade, as the children arrive in a costume, if they fit one of the special divisions, send them to a particular point in the staging area. All the other characters march at the end. You now have four divisions in your parade.

Floats:

Don't be intimidated by this. Parades need music, sound and soul. Now bringing in a marching band might be bit tough but small musical groups and single musicians are easy to find. If they can walk, great! If you have a bass player, you'll need something that rolls. It may be motorized, it may not. Be creative. Lots of folks know people with antique cars, especially convertibles. That's a starting place. A tuba player in the back of a shiny convertible. Now that's wild.

Flat bed trucks also work well. Ask local businesses. Don't cover over the doors of the truck. They want their logos seen. Place simple paper table skirts around the bed of the truck. They won't blow off if you're driving very slowly. What goes on the truck?

Anything that makes noise: a local barber shop quartet, maybe. Make sure they are sitting in case the truck stops quickly. Small combos. A local percussion guy. An opera singer? A steel drum player. A local drumming circle.

Banners:

Bed sheets are your starting place but those can be quickly replaced by more interesting material. Never get too fancy. The key to the parade is that it looks completely home made. See if local artists are interested in helping

Special Pieces:

If you have a group of artists in your town, you might approach them to create large puppets or large cut outs to carry. Save these, they can be used year after year.

Special divisions:

This is where things can get truly strange. The easiest is a bicycle division but let your imaginations go. Maybe you can talk a group of local dads into doing close order drill baby carriage maneuvers. Maybe you have people marching with wheel barrels with children riding inside reading. Anything that rolls. You can always add as you go.

Communications:

With cell phone (especially if you are working on a weekend - free minutes) you have the entire communications system.

Why do this?

The Wizard's of Reading

In 1982 I was running a children's theatre on the campus of Mount Holyoke College. We ended the season with a huge outdoor production of the Wizard of OZ. I learned then of all the OZ books and an idea for an annual event began to develop. We would stage one the OZ stories each year along with other special events. So was born the OZ Parade and Festival for Children. We cleared it with the police and got local vendors to supply free ice cream. We announced that anyone could march, just dress as an OZ character and come on over.

We suddenly had several built in divisions: Lions, Witches, Tin Men, Scarecrows , Dorothys, and Gindas. We also told anyone who did not have a costume or could not afford one to bring along a broom and they would march at the head of the parade with the Gatekeeper sweeping the route" OZ DPW. Hundreds came.

During the winter we approached a bunch of local libraries and asked them if they would join with us in the Wizard's of Reading. The libraries wouldn't have to change anything about their summer reading program except to announce that if a reader completes the library reading program he or she would get to march in a special division of the OZ Parade as a Wizard of Reading with Glinda and get a signed certificate from her. The response was unbelievable. Participation in summer reading went wild and hundreds of

readers showed up. At its height, the parade featured hundreds of people in costume and thousands of folks watching. There at the very center, walking with Glinda, were the Wizards of Reading. It was huge.

I am not suggesting that you go wild. Start small and watch for excited folks around the edges, maybe retirees who might be interested in fostering your fledgling adventure. Turn it over and get out of the way.