

## **The Strategy: Coffee Can Theater**

By Wolf Trap Master Teaching Artist Melissa Richardson

Coffee can theater is a strategy for sharing stories in which the teller uses small props to stand in for characters and elements of setting. Children can then retell and sequence the story in a hands-on way. Coffee can theater can also be used to create original class stories.

### **You can use coffee can theater to:**

- Establish the setting of the story
- Introduce characters
- Tell and sequence a full story
- Tell stories that would otherwise be challenging for the children to understand. The added visual element can allow children to understand more complex plots.
- Reinforce math concepts (“How many cows were there? How many pigs? How many animals in all? Which animal came first? Which animal came second?”)
- Sort characters or setting elements by attribute
- Explore spatial and positional words related to the story (“The lake is far from the barn. The cows are inside the barn. The duck is near the lake. The duck walked over rocks and between the trees to get to the barn.”)
- Teach story elements (“Which of these toys is a character? Which of these toys is part of the setting?”)
- Compare and contrast a coffee can theater story with the same or similar story from a book.
- Teach flexibility (“There’s a goose in the book, and we don’t have any goose toys. Are there any other animals we can put in our story instead?”)
- Work on imagination by using neutral or abstract props for the story (“We will pretend that these blocks are the castle. We will pretend that this ball is a giant rock.”)
- Let children problem solve and make decisions by gathering or making props for a story
- Adapt a well-known story using different characters or setting elements. (“The Three Little Fish and the Big Bad Shark,” “The Three Little Zebras and the Big Bad Lion.”)
- Create a simple classroom story inspired by props of a certain theme, like signs of spring, things that are soft, or the letter C.

**Whether you share a story from a book, with coffee can theater, with flannel board, or with any other strategy, students should be active participants right from the start.**

### **During a coffee can theater story, children can:**

- Chant along with a line that repeats in the story (“I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!”)
- Chant along with a repeated line that the teacher has created for that purpose
- Create sound effects using their bodies and voices
- Create sound effects using instruments
- Create gestures for characters and elements of setting in the story
- Visualize elements of the story (“So Squirrel ran out into a meadow and saw all sorts of flowers. Everyone imagine lots of flowers. I see tall, round, purple flowers and tiny, spiky, orange flowers. What kind of flowers do you see?”)

- Reflect on the characters' emotions. ("Show me on your faces how Bunny is feeling with his big block tower. Now show me how Bunny feels when the tower falls down.")
- Predict what will happen next in the story.
- Create dialogue for the characters. ("What did Baby Bear say when he saw that his favorite chair was broken?")

#### **Coffee can theater tips for success:**

- If the story you are telling comes from a book, you can read the book *and* share the story in a coffee can theater style, in either order. Sharing a story in multiple ways is a great way to teach about same and different.
- When sharing a coffee can theater story, do not hold or read from the book. Your hands need to be free to manipulate the props. You can post a simple sequence chart behind the children to help you recall the major details of the story.
- Use a small table or stool so the props are at eye level for the children. Set up this table a few feet away from the children. Make sure the children understand the boundaries of the audience area and that they should not touch the props while the teacher is presenting the story.
- Provide an opportunity for children to touch some of the props, either before or after the storytelling.
- Put the story props out as a center area afterward so children can retell the story on their own.

#### **Creating coffee can theater stories quickly and easily:**

There's no need to feel overwhelmed by gathering materials for your coffee can theater. You can be ready to tell virtually any story imaginable in about five minutes using simple objects found around the classroom.

#### **Create a simple kit to pull from when you are planning a coffee can theater. This may include:**

- Small animal and person toys
- Simple objects that can stand in for many things – fabric, blocks, paper cups, craft sticks
- Basic crafts supplies – paper, markers, craft sticks, paper cups, tape, pipe cleaners
- Optional: small, interesting objects, like beads, netting from fruit packaging, or colorful fabric scraps

#### **If you don't have a particular character, get creative!**

- Select a different animal with similar attributes. Children can help with this.
- Find a picture online, cut it out, and tape it to a craft stick to make a puppet.
- Create people or animals out of pipe cleaners.
- Draw a picture of the character and tape it to a small paper cup. Then it will stand on its own!

#### **Use objects representationally, or combine simple objects to create what you need.**

- Blocks or small boxes: houses, bridges, furniture, vehicles
- Fabric: sails, water, grass, clothing
- Craft sticks: boat paddles, wands, walking sticks, railroad tracks, tree trunks
- Beads or marbles: food, toys, any small object
- Paper cups: houses, bushes, any element of setting if you tape pictures to them
- Pipe cleaners: can be bent and twisted to create many different objects