

TRANSCRIPT: Call and response

Keith Park

This morning's group come together for a 25-minute session of stories and poems. These are all done interactively and it's call-and-response based. It means that the person leading the group calls out a line and everyone else just repeats it. It's one of the oldest storytelling techniques in the world and is used all over the world in many, many different cultures. There are, of course, children who don't speak and there are a hundred and one ways of joining in by signing, rocking, stamping, clapping, dancing.

The point behind it is that the rhythm of call and response sets up a communicative atmosphere. Most of the poems and songs are based upon a four beat rhythm which, according to the research, is very close to the rhythm of the instinctive interactions between mother and newborn, where mother will pick up the baby and speak something that's highly rhythmic in intonation, possibly meaningless, possible not. She will then pause and wait for the baby to reply. Of course, the baby says nothing but after a moment then the mother will continue as though there had been a reply, so you get what's sometimes called a 'proto-dialogue' and I've extrapolated that principle and applied it to storytelling and drama. So that one person calls out a line, everyone else responds in any sort of way whatever, and the rhythm that generates is very close to the instinctive rhythm that we all have within us.

The activities can be seen from a number of different perspectives but I tend to view it as language and communication activity, and the communication skills that are being developed are awareness, anticipation, turn-taking, gaze alternation and all those skills culminate in the point, but it's a declarative point, it's not a point meaning 'I want' or 'give me, it's 'look at that'.

The approach to including children in the activities is to encourage them to participate on their own terms. There are two or three children who find the hall a very difficult environment because of its size. It's very echoey and there can be a lot of movement. It's one of the reasons why I use a lot of drumming. I keep a pulse beat going, one beat a second, to let people know that we are still on task and it builds both security concerning the activity and, I hope, anticipation as to what's going to happen next.