

EYFS · PRE-K / RECEPTION / K

Helicopter Stories

Storytelling and story-acting

What it is

Helicopter Stories is an approach developed by American teacher Vivian Gussin Paley in the 1970s and adapted for UK schools by Trisha Lee. The premise is breathtakingly simple: 1. A child tells a story to an adult who scribes it word-for-word 2. Later that day, the class gathers in a circle 3. The story is read out and acted out by the children, in the order they're chosen It's been studied extensively. The evidence base for its impact on children's language, narrative skills, and self-regulation is one of the strongest in early-years research.

How to scribe a story

Sit at child's level Quiet corner of the classroom. Notebook ready. Child decides when they're ready.	Write down EVERY word Even when it doesn't make sense to you. Even when grammar is wonky. Their words, exactly. This is sacred.
Don't correct or improve If they say 'the dragon flied away,' you write 'the dragon flied away.' The story is theirs.	Don't lead Don't ask 'and then what happened?' or 'who else was there?' Wait. They'll continue or they won't.
Stop when they stop If a child says 'the end,' that's the end. Even if it's two sentences. Some 4-year-olds tell 30-word stories. Some tell 200. Both are fine.	

How to act it out



Make a 'stage' on the floor Tape a square or circle on the carpet. About 1m square. Children sit around it but not in it.	Author chooses character The author of the story sits in their place around the stage. They choose which character they want to BE.
Other parts come from the circle Going clockwise around the circle, children take turns to be other characters. Even if they don't speak — they go to the stage.	Read slowly Adult reads the story. Children act simply — walking, jumping, falling, hugging. No props, no costumes.
Everyone applauds At the end, everyone claps. The author bows. Next story.	

Why it works (the research)

Studies of Helicopter Stories — including a major UK evaluation by the Education Endowment Foundation — have consistently shown impacts on: • **ORAL LANGUAGE** — children using more complex sentences, more vocabulary • **LISTENING** — children attending to peers' language with extraordinary focus • **SELF-REGULATION** — taking turns, waiting, watching others have a go • **COMPREHENSION** — building narrative understanding • **INCLUSION** — quieter children, EAL children, children with SEND all participate The approach is unusually inclusive because **EVERYTHING** is at a child's pace. There's no right way to tell a story. There's no length requirement. The child who tells 20 words is celebrated equally to the child who tells 200.

How to start

WEEK 1: Tell children about it as a class. Announce that the storytelling table will be open every day. Don't push. WEEK 2: Some children will come. Scribe stories. Don't worry that they're 'just' 5 words long. WEEK 3: Hold the first story-acting circle. Even one story is enough. Establish the routine. ONGOING: Daily storytelling, weekly (or daily) acting sessions. Build the rhythm. By half-term, children will be queuing up. LINK: Trisha Lee's organisation (helicopterstories.co.uk) has free resources and training. Worth investing in if your setting wants to embed this fully.

