



How to set up a Storysacks project



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Storysacks

Storysacks were developed in Swindon by Neil Griffiths in 1995. The initiative has now spread to schools, pre-schools, volunteer groups and libraries nation-wide. The concept is simple: a Storysack is a large cloth bag containing a good quality storybook with supporting materials to stimulate reading/language activities. They are designed to help adults and young people share books with children in a way that is: -

- Positive
- Theatrical
- Special
- Interactive and
- FUN

The reading skills developed by Storysacks are endless. Neil Griffiths has been able to count over 90 separate skills for just one book. Storysacks can promote skills in: -

- Sequencing
- Rhyming
- Prediction
- Rhythm
- Positional vocabulary
- Alliteration
- Compound words
- Words ending in.....
- Collective nouns
- Adjectives
- Verbs
- Dialogue etc.
- Questioning
- Story setting

A Storysacks Project can also help to develop many other skills including team work, creative and social skills.

This booklet has been designed to help any organisation wanting to embark upon the task of creating a library of Storysacks. It covers the issues that need to be thought about at the start of the project.

Many projects have already been set up in schools with parents making the sacks. Other projects have been set up where businesses and clubs make them for local schools, playgroups and other organisations. To simplify this booklet we have throughout referred to the makers as "volunteers" and the recipients as "schools" or "children".

Although we focus on schools, we acknowledge that there are other groups who would use Storysacks (e.g. SureStarts, churches and youth groups). Obviously each school/organisation will have its own strengths and its own challenges in setting up a Storysacks project.

Planning a School Based Storysacks Project

Storysacks have been shown to enrich language development and are popular with parents, children and teachers. However, producing a library of usable sacks and developing systems for their distribution and return is an enormous task that could put a great strain on the resources of most schools. The obvious way of easing the burden is to use volunteers. If the project is to be successful then careful planning, right from the start, is essential. The obvious place to start is with the school staff.

The School Staff

Before starting a Storysacks project all staff should be told about the project, how the children will benefit and the implications of having volunteers in school. They will need to understand that some members of staff may need to be released for blocks of time to buy books, hold meetings etc.

A room for meetings will need to be allocated and staff will have to agree to any consequent disruption. A secure cupboard to store materials will need to be found.

Thought should be given to the way that Storysacks are to be stored. Some schools have found that it is safest to keep them in a cupboard or on a shelf. This would need to be agreed right from the start to allow time for existing users to find alternative accommodation and for any alterations to be made.

The use, by volunteers, of school equipment such as computers, photocopiers and laminators should be thought through well before the project begins. It can be annoying to volunteers if they are unable to use equipment at a time they were told it would be available. Likewise it can be annoying to busy teachers if they feel that they do not have free access to school equipment.

If volunteers are to use school equipment then someone must take responsibility for training them. No one wants valuable equipment out of action for the sake of a ten minute training session! Some schools prefer to allow time for a member of staff to do tasks such as laminating. The use of consumable resources such as card, glue sticks etc should be planned. Volunteers need equipment. They are already giving their time; they should not be made to feel that they cannot use school resources. It would be best for all concerned if Storysacks equipment were kept in a separate cupboard. Teachers should agree not to borrow from volunteers and volunteers should know exactly what they can use without worrying that they might be taking something that the class will require later in the week.

If issues affecting staff/volunteer relationships are resolved right from the start then the partnership should run smoothly and have benefits for all parties.

Getting Volunteers Involved

We advise schools to send out letters and display posters inviting volunteers to an introductory Storysacks meeting. (Always give an end time as well as when the meeting begins!) A number of organisations have linked the introductory meeting to a social event. It is very important to take time to organise this event as all schools have a large amount of untapped talent amongst the parents. You can begin with a small number of volunteers and, through word of mouth, that number will grow.

The contribution volunteers make to Storysacks projects will vary. At your early meetings stress that commitments can be very flexible. Many volunteers enjoy working on Storysacks because they are a good channel for creative work.

It is not unusual for voluntary groups, independent from schools to want to make Storysacks, either as a community service or as a team building activity. Independent groups invariably make exceptionally good Storysacks, but we advise early contact with the receiving crèche, nursery or school to negotiate on suitable books, contents and Health and Safety issues.

Some enjoy the challenge of the project and the opportunity to work with others. New friendships will be made. Storysacks give an opportunity for people of all ages to volunteer to work together on a project that they can see will be of use to young children and their families.

Many volunteers become really enthusiastic about Storysacks and involve friends and relations in the project. For some volunteers it may be just the beginning of a whole range of projects in which they may become involved.

Organisations that have started on a Storysacks project have all reported that the first making/planning session should take place very soon after the introductory meeting. Both dates should be fixed before involving volunteers.

Funding

A library of Storysacks can be an expensive resource. A fairly basic storysack can cost £15 to make, but costs can be significantly reduced by making certain objects and buying items from car boot sales and charity shops. Many schools have looked for sponsors or held fundraising events to raise money to buy craft materials and books. The non-fiction book may be one of the most expensive parts of the Storysack.

If you intend to contact local businesses, remember that they probably receive many requests for money from a range of worthy causes. They may not be able to give money but can sometimes give time, goods, useful resources etc. This can often be very good PR for businesses so it is important to acknowledge any sponsorship given. They may even wish to make up Storysacks if given guidance and support. Some businesses have found making Storysacks a valuable team building exercise.

Volunteers may be able to provide useful contacts and addresses. Parents, teachers and friends of the school could also be approached, even if they are not directly involved in the making of the Storysacks.

Some projects have been able to obtain match funding agreements with organisations where they share the costs equally. You may need to organise fundraising events such as sponsored walks, jumble sales, discos, sales of promotional items, book fairs etc.

It is important to consider that some money will be required each year to replace items which have been lost, broken or simply worn out.

Making the Storysacks

A Storysack could contain the following: -

- A storybook
- A non-fiction book which is, in some way, connected with the story
- A taped version of the story
- Artefacts (Puppets or toys which are connected with the story)
- A language game which is related to the story

Before a single sack is started volunteers need to be very clear about the age group for whom the Storysacks are intended.

Resources Required by a Storysacks Group

- Storybooks
 - Non-fiction books
 - Card/coloured paper
 - Glue sticks
 - Felt pens
 - Crayons
 - Paints
 - Pencils
 - Tracing paper
 - Material
 - Scissors
 - Wool
 - Knitting needles
 - Sewing needles and thread
 - Photocopier
 - Computer
 - Laminator
 - Sewing machine
 - Cassette recorder with blank tapes
 - Planning sheet
- Planning sheets are recommended to keep volunteers focused on what is needed. Without them volunteers can get carried away and the sacks end up containing too many activities. This can be counterproductive as parents may only have a limited amount of time to share books at home. If the sacks are too full parents may decide not to bother with them.

Volunteers are often very good at finding/making objects for Storysacks. Where the volunteers are experiencing difficulty in finding a particular object then other people may be able to help. This then gives opportunities for teachers and parents, not directly involved in the project, to make a contribution. Requests for artefacts should be specific, e.g. a red lorry, a small brown teddy etc. Toys should carry the CE symbol and cuddly toys should not have loose eyes or buttons etc. Aim to have as many washable items as possible.

Some stories lend themselves to scenery or a play mat that can be used both to enhance the storytelling and also to help children to retell the story. These can be made from material or laminated card but care needs to be taken that they can be folded otherwise they could become damaged very easily.

Games should be simple and give opportunities for language development. They can either be related to the content of the storybook, (e.g. a story about trains could have a train game) or else connected with any special features of the book (e.g. a story written in rhyme could have a game of matching rhyming words).

Volunteers are often very good at devising their own games. Where they find this difficult, a well-known game could be adopted (e.g. snap, jigsaw, spot the difference etc). Games can be stored in boxes or small drawstring fabric bags. Try not to have too many small pieces, as they could easily become lost. *Very small pieces are likely to be a hazard to young children.*

Audio Tapes

Although ideally Storysacks are enriched by the inclusion of a tape, for many groups this has been the most difficult aspect of the project. A tape is not essential and many excellent sacks have been made without one. If you are able to tackle tape making then it is best to use short play tapes. One source of these is YPO. (Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation, 41 Industrial Estate, Wakefield, WF2 0XE)

Young children respond best to familiar voices. Teachers, older children, the school caretaker and parent helpers can all be involved. It is best if you can have a good mix of male and female voices.

Try to fill the whole tape so that if the previous user has not rewound it then there is something to listen to at whatever point the tape is inserted into the cassette player. Both sides of the tapes should be filled. It is important to keep a copy, which is never loaned. Make sure that the tapes that are loaned have had the tabs taken out of the back so that they cannot accidentally be taped over.

Children and young people will need to be told when to turn over the page. Some volunteers have made tapes with a "ping" sound at the appropriate point in the text but many children find this confusing, particularly if there are other sound effects on the tape. It may be better to just say "Turn over the page". If you are using sound effects to make the story more exciting this could become a useful project for schools either as part of the technology curriculum or as a voluntary activity.

It is a good idea to use the tape as a means of telling the children about the book. The cover, author and illustrator should be discussed along with any significant features (e.g. rhyming couplets, alliteration etc). Many volunteers have found it easier to record the tape if they have already written a script. This avoids long pauses and omissions.

Storybooks

It is important to choose the storybooks before starting on the sacks. Some organisations have assumed that books are available and have started work only to find that the title is no longer in print. It can be soul destroying when hours of work are wasted. Do not assume that because you have an ISBN number and the book is on order that you will be able to obtain a copy.

It is probably best if you select a number of books, from which volunteers can choose, so that they have a book that not only interests them but is also suitable for using as the basis of a Storysack.

Make sure that the books you choose: -

- Can be read aloud
- Have a good story
- Have good illustrations
- Reflect the varied interests of your children
- Will extend their knowledge and language

Objects and Games

Before volunteers start planning which objects they require to bring the story to life, safety issues must be discussed. Sharp items and objects with small pieces should not be included. Plastic bags should not be used to store games.

Other Items in the Sacks

Recommended Items

- A flashcard with the title of the book is useful provided that it is written in lower case letters. Words written in capital letters are difficult for young children to learn so, even if the book cover shows the title in capital letters, the flashcard should be in lower case.
- A list of contents will help to ensure that items are returned.
- A card with talking points around the theme of the book. This could include: -
 - 5 questions to ask that will test the child's understanding of the story
 - a prediction question
 - a rhyme activity
 - meanings of difficult words
- A simple booklet for parents, showing ways of sharing books with children, is also useful.

Optional Items

- A play mat with toys is useful for stories where characters move from one place to another. These can be placed on the mat as the story proceeds.
- Dual language books
- Dressing up clothes
- Recipes etc.

The Sacks

The sacks need to be attractive. They do the same job as book covers. Some volunteers have used pillowcases and decorated them with fabric paints or letters that are sewn on. Letters that are glued on can become loose so it is advisable to take the time to sew them. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that the sacks will need to be washed periodically. Old curtains or new fabrics can also be used.

Thought needs to be given to size as small children may have problems carrying large sacks. Obviously, there may be occasions when a large sack will be needed to hold a large piece of scenery, but these should be the exception rather than the rule. It is probably best if the actual sacks are made last as they will then be able to accommodate all of the contents. (Remember to make allowance for the fact that new fabric may shrink during its first wash.)

The makers and sponsors of each sack should be acknowledged. This can be done by way of labels attached to the sacks.

A statement, saying that Storysacks should not be used unsupervised with children under the age of 3 years, should also be included. To avoid any risk of strangulation, care must be taken over the length and type of cord.

Using the Storysacks Library

Once the Storysacks are ready you will be anxious to start lending them. Before they are borrowed it is important to have a meeting to show parents and carers just how to use them. Parents need to understand the benefits of sharing books with small children. It is also helpful if they appreciate the time that has been spent in producing the Storysacks and the need to take care of the items so that other families can enjoy them too.

Safety issues relating to small objects must be discussed with parents. You will need to use your discretion and knowledge of particular families as to whether or not Storysacks are lent to families with children under the age of 3. Some schools have only lent Storysacks to families that have borrowed library books on 5 separate occasions and returned them on time.

Distributing the Storysacks can be a time consuming job so a volunteer who can take charge of this would be very useful. A stand in, who knows the system, would also be invaluable. Systems need to be devised for checking the sacks on their return. It is important that this is seen to be done, so parents realise that it is important to collect up all bits and pieces. Checking them when they are borrowed gives the borrower an opportunity to confirm that everything is in the sack. Some organisations have found that displaying a photo of the contents of each sack speeds up both the borrowing and the checking of Storysacks. So too does limiting the number of items in each sack.

Storysacks should be borrowed for a number of days as families often have commitments on certain evenings that would make it impossible for them to share books that are only borrowed for one night.

One issue that needs to be considered right from the start is a procedure for borrowing and returning Storysacks in bad weather. Parents and children need to know the rules to avoid damage and disappointment.

Possibilities for Further Development: -

- Number sacks
- Writing sacks
- History sacks
- Geography sacks
- Sacks dealing with emotional issues (divorce, death etc)

Storysacks are an excellent resource. They are great fun and a very practical aid to children's reading. We wish you well with your project.

Good Luck!

A selection of children's book titles suitable for groups beginning work on Storysacks:

A BUSY DAY AT THE BUILDING SITE	MAYA, TIGER CUB
A QUIET NIGHT IN	MEG AND MOG
AFTER THE STORM	MILO
ANDREW'S BATH	MR BEAR TO THE RESCUE
BABY GIRAFFE	MR WOLF'S WEEK
BAD TEMPERED LADYBIRD	MRS HONEY'S HAT
BADGER BOY	NOAH'S ARK
BADGER'S RACE	NOISY FARM
BIG HUNGRY BEAR & LITTLE MOUSE	OLD LADY WHO SWALLOWED A FLY
BUMPER TO BUMPER	OLD MACDONALD
BUZZ BUZZ WENT THE BUMBLE BEE	ONE BEAR AT BEDTIME
CATS, DOGS AND CROCODILES	OWL BABIES
COME ON DAISY	OWL WHO WAS AFRAID OF THE DARK
DEAR ZOO	PIG IN THE POND
DILLY	POLAR BEAR, POLAR BEAR, WHAT DO YOU HEAR?
DINOSAUR ROAR	RAINBOW BEAR
DINOSAURS AND ALL THAT RUBBISH	RAINBOW FISH
DOG ON A BROOMSTICK	RAINBOW FISH AND THE BIG BLUE WHALE
DOG THAT DUG	RAINBOW FISH TO THE RESCUE
DOGGER	RED RIDING HOOD
ELMER	RESCUE PARTY
EMMA'S LAMB	RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE
FARMER DUCK	RUNAWAY TRAIN
FARMYARD HULLABALOO	SNOWMAN
FIND ME A TIGER	SPOT'S BIRTHDAY PARTY
FIVE MINUTES PEACE	STAND BACK SAID THE ELEPHANT
FLOPPY	THREE BILLY GOATS GRUFF
FOX'S NEW COAT	THREE LITTLE PIGS
FROG IS FROG	THREE WOLVES & BIG BAD PIG
GOLDBLOCKS & THREE BEARS	TIGER CHILD
GUESS HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU	TIGER WHO CAME TO TEA
HARRY POTTER	TINY RABBIT GOES TO A PARTY
JUST LIKE JASPER	TRAIN RIDE
KIPPER	TROUBLE IN THE ARK
LION AT SCHOOL	TROUBLE WITH ELEPHANTS
LION WHO WANTED TO LOVE	UGLY DUCKLING
LITTLE CAT & GREEDY OLD WOMAN	WALKING THROUGH THE JUNGLE
LITTLE DONKEY	WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, DAVY
LITTLE POLAR BEAR	WHAT TIME IS IT MR WOLF
LITTLE TANG	WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE
MAISY	WHERE'S MY TEDDY

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Planning Sheet for a Storysack

Book Title:

Task

Person

Sack

Main Characters

Soft Toy

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Artefacts

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Non-fiction book: _____

Audio Tape: _____

Game based on story: _____

Any other tasks: _____



a strategy to improve literacy in Derbyshire
and Derby City

County Hall
Matlock
Derbyshire
DE4 3AG

Tel: 01629 536403

Fax: 01629 585402

e-mail: info@rowa.org.uk

Website: www.rowa.org.uk

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