



# Parent and Teacher Power Hour

## 8 Ways to Engage Children without a Computer

### \* The Infinite Magic of Stories \*

by Caroline Brewer, Author and Literacy Activist

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**Welcome – Caroline Brewer,** Author, Education Consultant, and Literacy Activist

**Opening –** *When the Spirit Says Sing* by Karen Wilson Ama'Echefu, Singer, Storyteller, Cultural Historian

**Kara Finds Sunshine on a Rainy Day** – When I wrote my first children's book, *Kara Finds Sunshine on a Rainy Day*, what I had in mind was telling a story of hope and healing, about historical figures such as Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Helen Keller, Andre Trocme, Kim Phuc and others, who, during difficult times, came to the rescue of others and also rescued themselves. And I did tell that story. But years later, I realized that *Kara Finds Sunshine* was more than a story of hope and healing. It was a story about how my mother raised me. She raised me with stories. Stories of her childhood. Sayings that she grew up with. (*God don't like ugly and He ain't too crazy about pretty either! Teeth and tongue fall out, and people do too.*) When my mother told me stories, it helped me learn to slow down and think things through, and to be creative with how I responded to events in my life. I think that's the ultimate power of stories – to help us slow down and think more critically. And it's why we want to explore stories as a way to engage children and support their intellectual, social, and emotional growth and development.

**A Life-Changing Story - The Bad Day** is a short story written by a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader who refused to attempt or complete any work in school for months. I became her teacher late in the school year and discovered that she had produced very little work. She would sit quietly in class each day and create art by drawing in her notebook or making flowers out of paper. She wouldn't read aloud in a group or even to me, one-on-one. She would say she didn't know the answers to Math equations and would not contribute to discussions on science either.

After a few weeks, I recognized that because all of the children loved art that feeding their hunger to be creative first thing in the morning might help them relax and open up to the other subjects. So I offered this 3<sup>rd</sup> grader and all students the chance to paint or draw every morning for 30 minutes before moving into the curriculum. From that day forward, this 3<sup>rd</sup> grader and every other student became more enthusiastic about learning. This 3<sup>rd</sup> grader took a science assignment to write a sentence about land masses, bodies of water, and weather and turned it into a very clever story about a boy's bad day. She also had been somewhat volatile. She would angrily threaten classmates when her feelings were hurt. By the time the year ended, I realized that she and the other students were no longer fighting with each other, verbally or physically, and all had made tremendous gains academically. And they all loved writing their own stories – this third grader loved it the most!

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**The Birthing Room** – *The Birthing Room* is a story Karen Wilson Ama'Echefu, a professional and master storyteller, told about the first time she entered the master bedroom of her new Northwest Bronx apartment. Peering out onto her windowsill, she laid eyes on a mama bird in the nest with her eggs. After a while, the eggs started cracking and the baby chicks had made their way into the world. And then, Karen said, "I saw the mother do her thing and feed her babies. She would chew the food, half-digest it, and then upchuck into the baby's mouths and they thought it was the best thing since sliced worms!" In Karen's mind, they seemed to be saying, "Oh, me! Me! Me next!" It wasn't the prettiest sight, but, Karen said "it was very loving and very cool. It was the most amazing gift."

**The Bird Condo** - Karen's new home was a block away from Van Cortland Park, 200 square miles of green, and, in her opinion, the closest thing to the country in New York City. She observed from another window several families of sparrows in their nests built into kudzu growing up the side of the house. She likened this multi-family dwelling to a bird condo. The sparrows would be full of all kinds of chatter in the morning, when it was time to go off into the sparrow day. Karen imagined they were saying things like, "*Don't forget to pick up some of those twigs on the way home! And where did you say you were going today? And, 'Can you go past Maizie's nest, she told me shew as going to send some of those special leaves.'*" And "*Get that bug off your wing. You can't go flying off like that. What would people think?*" And then they would fly away to have their day in the world. Then later in the afternoon, about the time we humans get home from school and work, the birds would come back to the nest again, and chatter like families, saying, "*How was your day? How many bugs did you find? What did you do about that stream of air? It almost knocked me off my wings!*" For about a half hour, Karen said it seemed everybody had news to share. Then, all was quiet the rest of the night.

So, *The Birthing Room* and *The Bird Condo* helped us to see that stories are everywhere. If we just pay attention to what's happening around us, we'll find them.

**What's a story?** – A Story essentially is a happening, an event, a telling or retelling, an account or statement of facts. A story can also be the telling of lies, sometimes for fun. Ultimately, a story is about something that happened, and then something else happened, and then something else. Usually, there's a point to the story. A lesson. Sometimes, though, the story continues and becomes a series.

**What kinds of stories are there to be told?** – Real stories – Found in books, newspapers, magazines, television and radio, movies (documentaries), and journals, notebooks, scraps of paper and cards, poems. Made-up stories – Found in novels, folktales, fairy tales, fables, poems, nursery rhymes and songs are stories. We often forget that. And there's the oral tradition of stories we find in African, Native American, Asian, Middle-Eastern, and Spanish-speaking cultures. *The 8 Ways to Engage Children without a Computer* has links to hundreds of folktales, fairy tales, and fables. And the handout has eight nursery rhymes as well.



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**Why do we need stories? What good are stories?** – Stories help us remember. Stories help us record what's important in our lives. They educate us and entertain us. One of our guests on the program noted that he grew up with fables and that they always provided morals, and that's a great role for stories. Another guest said that stories help us to express ourselves and see things in a new way. She gave us an example of how she explained the use of a record player to her children who had no idea how it worked because they had grown up with modern devices, such as computers, tablets, and smartphones. Stories also are good for challenging us to use our minds and imaginations. Stories provide a great way to play with words and ideas, and simply to have fun.

**What do we need to begin a story?** – I shared that all we need to begin a story are words. Words that you speak, or words that you write, or words in your mind that come out on paper as a drawing or illustration. You also could make a story with music. No words. Just notes. Facts, such as these found in the *Pop-Up Book of Long and Tall Animals: The giraffe is the tallest animal in the world (19 feet tall). If the average child stood next to a giraffe, it would be at the giraffe's knees. The ostrich is the tallest bird in the world (8 feet tall), and can run 43 miles an hour. A story about a race with an ostrich could be a fun story.*

One or two words, such as **Love, Hate, Fear, Music, A Lock, A Chair**, are enough to begin a story.

I looked at a chair in my dining room and this story came to me.

**THIS CHAIR** - *See this chair. This brown wooden chair at the head of my dining room table. It looks like a regular old dining room chair, with its high back of squares and rectangles, and leather seat cushion. But this chair will never be just a brown wooden chair to me. This chair is the keeper of stories. It's the keeper of the stories of my mother's visits with me. When I look at that chair, it starts telling me stories about my mother's wit and wisdom. It starts telling me stories about what makes her smile and what makes her laugh. It tells me stories about the love she can't help expressing for her family. The chair tells me stories about my mother's struggles, too –about her struggles year after year to get to the chair and ease her body down into it. I see her sitting there and opening her medicine case and picking up her cup of water and the pills she feels she needs to ease her aches and pains, which have grown over time. So, you see, this chair is not just a chair to me. It's the keeper of precious stories.*

**INTERVIEWS:** Finally, interviewing family members, friends, or even strangers could provide enough information to begin the telling of a story. We'll go deeper into how to conduct interviews and create stories in future talks.

I wish you all a great time with stories!

Beginning this coming Sunday, April 25, we will go around the world to gather and share stories from a variety of cultures and discuss how these stories came to be and why it's important to keep sharing them.

