

**Storycrafting with children**  
**A key to listening and to sharing**

**Researcher Liisa Karlsson (PhD.)**

Researcher Liisa Karlsson (Ph.D.)  
Taivaskalliontie 2 G, 00600 Helsinki, Finland  
Mobile +358 40 835 8951  
e-mail: [liisa.karlsson@welho.com](mailto:liisa.karlsson@welho.com)

In this article I will first describe briefly the basics of the storycrafting method which has developed in Finland. Then I will concentrate on how and in what ways we can listen and share with children. I will give an account of various listening strategies. I will also give a voice to children and introduce what the children have said.

## Storycrafting method

Human being is *homo narrans*, born as a teller. The storycrafting method is based on the idea that everybody has thoughts, information, and tales which no-one else has. Every person's thoughts are valuable, worth listening to, interesting, and relevant to storycrafting. In the storycrafting method a child or a group of children tell a story of their own choosing. The adult writes it down word by word, exactly as it has been told. The adult doesn't ask questions, or demand further explanations, or suggest improvements. The adult doesn't evaluate the child or his or her abilities. The narrator's own tale is fine and interesting just as it is, in the way he or she presents it. When the story is finished, the adult reads it so that the child or children are allowed to change the text if they want to. Storycrafting is a reciprocal method for sharing and listening to the thoughts of other people.

### *An example from Tell a Story –videotape*

On the videotape entitled *Tell a Story* (Riihelä 2001) there are two children and a nursery school teacher. The adult has said to the children:

“Tell a story that you want. I will write it down just as you will tell it. When the story is ready I will read it aloud. And then if you want you can correct or make any changes.”

In Finnish: "Kerro satu. Kirjaan sen juuri niin kuin sen minulle kerrot. Lopuksi luen tarinasi ja voit muuttaa tai korjata sitä mikäli haluat."

*On the video segment we can observe:*

- how easy it is for children to start their own story - straight a way in front of a recording camera,
- how easy it is for them to make a story together – without being trained in how to create stories and how to behave socially,
- how quickly and collectively they plan the structure of the story in the telling action regardless of the big unknown cameraman behind the camera.

The video also shows how collective the storycrafting situation is among all the participants: The adult's true interest in listening activates the child. At the same time the kid's story stimulates the other tellers and the adult to really listen to what the child will tell through the story. It is about a collective-reciprocal-sharing process.

One story from Aleksis (4 years old) and Caritas (4 years old) seven story-series (from the video *Tell a Story*, Riihelä 2001):

About THE LITTLE ELEPHANT

Carita: The little elephant was walking.

Aleksi: 'Tip, tap, tip, tap' (both kids show with their hands how the elephant walked).

Carita: And then daddy came. Then a man knocked on the door.  
 Aleksi and Carita: 'Knock, knock'. (The kids show with their hands how he knocked.)  
 Carita: But nobody answered. Suddenly the phone rang.  
 Aleksi: 'Prrr.'  
 Carita: 'Prrrr.'  
 Aleksi: 'Click.' 'Hello, hi, yeah.'  
 Carita: Then it put the phone down (Aleksi: 'blig') and suddenly the phone rang again.  
 Aleksi: Then it fell... look, this split like this.  
 Carita: It was bleeding.  
 Aleksi: Yes, and then it died.  
 Carita: Then suddenly on the ground: 'Simba!'  
 Aleksi: 'Simba! Why did you come into my lap? I'm dead.'

On the videotape the children are telling their own shared stories about the elephant's adventure. But why should we actually listen to children's fairy tales? How can we really listen to children, to their thought and ideas?

### **Into the children's world with children**

Next I will concentrate on how to get into the children's world, what it requires from adults and also how we can listen to children.

To enter the children's world it requires the adults need to create the right conditions. The research showed that we need to:

1. give space and time to the children,
2. listen seriously and regularly to the children,
3. reflect together with other adults on what you have seen and
4. get involved in a shared and reciprocal togetherness with the children.

#### ***1) Space and time for children's own and collective action***

If we want to enter the children's world we need to give space and time for children's own and collective action - for their play, telling, moving, drawing, constructing, conversation, consideration etc. Through the storycrafting method children's own culture has become visible; Children's own culture hasn't been taken into account in society, among professionals or parents. During the research we found that storycrafting was an easy-to-use method which made space for children's own culture. Children's abilities broke cover and came up in the child institutions, families, media, and also among the children themselves.

#### ***2) To listen regularly and seriously to children***

If we want to enter children's worlds we should also listen regularly and seriously to children. We need to hold back and concentrate; really listen to what the children are telling us and what they want to say.

I will present a story of Finnish children which tells how the kid's described adults' talk about

children. A group of five-year-old children have narrated the next story about a day in a family day care. It is interesting to concentrate on how the children bring out the talk of adults about children; how they describe what things are central for adults, what they are interested in, from whom the adults ask about children's day in day-care and from whom they inquire of children's points of views.

*The Story: "The children are coming and going from the family day care"*  
(Karlsson, 2000, page 171)

Casts:

The child-minder

Asta (mother)

Ulla (mother)

Sari (mother)

The children are bustling around

Asta: Hi, I bring Toni to the day care.

Child-minder: Yeah. At what time will you come to the day care tomorrow?

Sari: I'll bring him when it's eating time. Today I'll pick him up at six.

Child-minder: How did you come so early today to the day care?

Asta: In this exceptional case I'll start my work so early.

Child-minder: It's ok for you to go. We'll be fine..

Ulla: Here comes the boy, Mika.

Child-minder: Good that you arrived on time, because the porridge will be burned soon. Put Mika on the chair. It's ok for you to go to work if you are in a hurry.

Ulla: I'm not in hurry anywhere.

Child-minder: What was I about to say...

Ulla: I'll go now. Bye, bye!

Sari: Hello.

Child-minder: At what time will the child come to the day care tomorrow?

Sari: Before the porridge.

Child-minder: It is better if he will not eat it. He can eat after the others here. This kid has such long hair!

Sari: Yeah, it has grown. I am in a hurry to go to work.

Child-minder: Bye, bye.

In the afternoon

Child-minder: Your child did well, but he bolted down the food!

Ulla: Indeed.

Child-minder: We can talk a bit. You will come again tomorrow. Take your child there.

Ulla: I'll come tomorrow again at the right time. Bye.

Sari: Hello.

Child-minder: You are coming to pick up your child. She has been very good. She has eaten

well. There will be no stomach aches.  
 Sari: Oh yes, oh yes. I should take him to the barber.  
 Child-minder: Come again tomorrow. Toni will still stay here.  
 Sari: I'll go now and close the door. Bye, bye.  
 Child-minder: Bye, bye.

Child-minder: Ye-es, the child has done very well . No stomach aches. At what time will you come tomorrow?  
 Asta: At the meal-time, I think. Because then the child will get a proper meal . I can pick him up at six. I had to discuss with a friend at work. I think you have noticed that I always come a quarter of an hour late.  
 Child-minder: Where are you working?  
 Asta: In the conservatory.  
 Child-minder: And there you always do one's hair. So, bye, bye.  
 Asta: Bye, and thank you.

## **Various listening strategies**

The concept of listening is not unambiguous. We can listen to others in different ways. I'll present four different ways of listening.

### ***I No-listening-strategy***

We could choose a no-listening-strategy: in that case the adult doesn't listen to children at all. The five years old children described that situation in the above-mentioned story from the family day care.

### ***II Listen as a corroborative form of action***

The adults could also listen in a corroborative way, as a self-enhancing procedure. In this strategy the adult and their aim or purpose is focused on what the adult wants support for her or his own ideas, beliefs and ways of thinking.

For example: children are playing in the kindergarten. Two boys, Mark and Tony, are running around. They are noisy too. The adult is thinking: "Mark again! He is always the troublemaker!" The adult doesn't listen to what the boys are really doing as to whether it is an ongoing play or is there a serious conflict. The adult has confirmed or corroborates a previous perception of Mark as a troublemaker.

Another example: the mother asks her daughter: 'What have you eaten at school?' The mother is not interested in what the child thinks about the food, or how important was the lunchtime for the girl today, or how does she feel about the matter, etc. The mother only wants to know how much food she herself will have to make at the next meal-time.

In this way of listening the adult interprets the child's actions and words for her or his own benefit.

The child is only an informant and an object. It concerns only the adult's individualistic perspective.

### *III Listening in order to have an effect on someone*

Adults often listen in order to have an effect on someone. An example of this listening strategy is a situation which happened before the start of the project of storycrafting. The group of one teacher and two five-year-old boys are looking at an envelope. It has been sent from another area from other children. In the envelope are other children's stories. Look at the example and determine:

- How many questions did the adult ask and how many questions did the children ask?
- How long were the adult's statements or sequences and how long were the children's statements or sequences?

*The fragment from a situation in kindergarten: The flower stamp and address  
(Karlsson. L. 2003, page 236 appendix 10)*

The teacher:	(shows the postal transported envelope to the children.) We will read together. So, that here is now...? (She shows the stamp with flowers.)
Jukka (child):	Flowers.
Pekka (child):	Flowers.
The teacher:	And what is this called? Do you now, what is glued here?
Jukka (child):	Marguerite-flower!
The teacher:	What is here... yes, the flower is marguerite. Do you know, what is glued here? (She shows the stamp on the envelope.)
Jukka (child):	Well?
Pekka (child):	Stamps.
The teacher:	Yeah, it is a stamp <b>S</b> .
The teacher:	Here it says: my name and the name of our kindergarten.
Jukka (child):	Mmm.
Pekka (child):	Yeah.
Jukka (child):	Oho, but there are...
The teacher:	(interrupts) Guess what it says on it next?
Jukka (child):	I don't know.
The teacher:	Is it the street where we are?
The children:	Ye-es.
Jukka (child):	But...!
The teacher:	(interrupts) And here then, what...
Jukka (child):	(interrupts) But, what are these?
The teacher:	I will tell you soon. 02180 Tampere, it is the post code. We are here in Tampere, you see.

In this example above we notice that the interaction is discontinuous and in short segments. Only the teacher's initiative was taken seriously and she often interrupted the children. The teacher asked and the children answered and then the teacher judged the child's answer. The child answered almost every time with only one word. The adult didn't go on with the children's questions. The main point was that the teacher wanted to teach and the children's points of views

were not important. That working method is a common way of action especially in traditional teaching, education or training situations. In those cases the adults have a fixed conception of how to educate children and what is necessary for children to learn. The adults define and evaluate children by what they are going to be and not by what they currently are just now. But the child's childhood is in the present. So the adult has the initiative and the child is an object for the actions of adults, for teaching and training.

In Finnish and international researches we find the same results: the teacher takes the majority of the initiatives. She or he talks approximately 70% to 90% of the time. All the children together have thereby only 10% to 30% of the time to speak. We are then in an absurd situation: those who should capture the world, learn, and grow have very little time to tell about their ideas, interests, opinions, know-how's, and to reflect with others. (See e.g. Tizard & Hughes 1984, Keravuori 1988, Leiwo & al. 1987, Riihelä 1996, Lavinto 1998, Myllylä 1998).

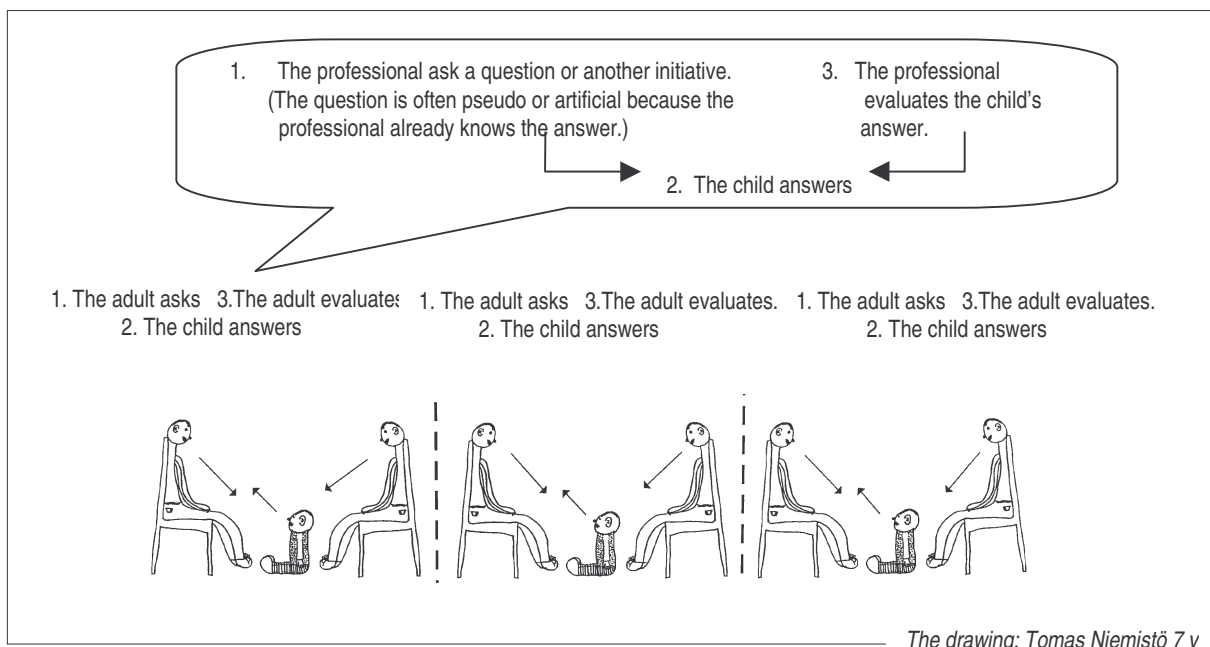


Figure 1. The teacher asks and the child answers. The adult define and evaluate the child. The interaction is discontinuous and in short segments.

#### IV Listening in a collective, reciprocal and shared dialogue

We can also choose a qualitatively different way of listening. It is based on a shared and active point of view: Listening in a collective, reciprocal and shared dialogue.

As an example of this way of action, there is a situation in the same child group as earlier, but this episode happened one and a half years later. The children had been storycrafting several times. You can again examine and determine:

- How many questions did the adult ask and how many questions were asked by the kids?
- How long were the adult's statements or sequences and how long were the children's sequences?
- How much did they speak and how long were the children's and adult's sequences?

*The fragment in kindergarten: What shall I tell?*  
(Karlsson. L. 2003, page 237 appendix 10)

*Jukka (child): And our pictures? But now, but by the way I will make... Should I make up a sport story?*

The teacher: You can choose it yourselves.

*Jukka (child): OK. I do it.*

*Pekka (child): I make... Should I make a joke?*

The teacher: Ye-es. For example. It is a good idea. I'll look first at yours... It is Jukka's eighth story.

*Jukka (child): And Pekka has made?*

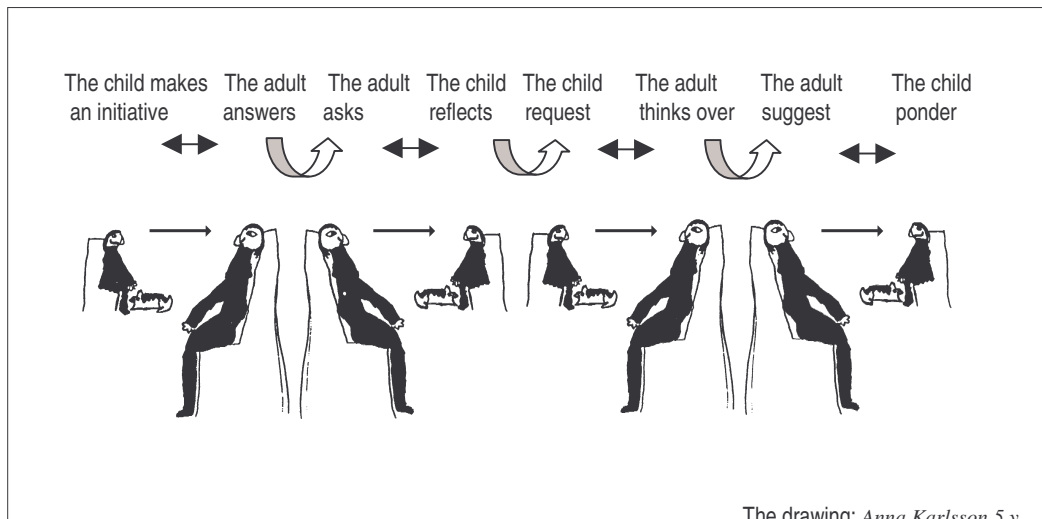
The teacher: Wait a moment. I read it... The number of the story-letter is 11.

*Jukka (child): How many stories has Pekka?*

The teacher: Wait a bit and I'll look. I can see it from the other page. It is Pekka's third story.

We can see that the dialogue between the children and adult has changed after one and half years. The dialogues are now a factual, shared conversations. The testing or inspecting atmosphere has gone. Instead, it is a continuing dialogue between the adult and the children: the aim of the conversation is on-going. The child's as well as the teacher's initiatives are valuable and respected. The initiatives and responses build up on the previous statement. The children and their ideas and interests were taken seriously.

We can call that type of conversation as flowing, interactive and democratic. The situation can look like this:



The drawing: Anna Karlsson 5 y

*Figure 2. The continuing dialogue between the adult and the child. The kid's as well as the teacher's initiatives are valuable and respected. The conversation is flowing, interactive and democratic.*



### ***3) Reflection among the adults on what we have seen***

To give time and space for children and to exercise active listening is not enough. Entering the children's world also requires reflection among adults on what they have seen. In the research projects we found how useful it is to reflect on what every adult has heard and seen. They read aloud the children's stories and talked about what has happened: what the children are for instance telling, talking, acting and playing, what they are interested in, their ways of thinking. They discussed what has happened in the situation and how has it gone. Everybody's own observations and notes from the playing and action situations are debated. Finally the teachers and care takers asked: what have we learnt from the kids? How can we take into account what we have heard and seen? And how can we plan activities with children and put them into practice? It was an important way to open the adult's eyes and ears more, to lift up big antennas to tune into the children's world.

### ***4) Courage for shared and collective togetherness***

If we really want to understand and know children and learn about the children's cultures from their perspectives, we need to dive inside children's culture and world. Children are active, skilled social actors. A child doesn't think quite like an adult. Their worlds and mode of action, their ways of thinking and reflecting are much more complex than we often think. If we want children to tell us about themselves, we need to take them seriously and treat them equally. We should hold back and learn to listen in a collective, reciprocal and shared dialogue. And at last we also need also courage ourselves to get involved in a shared and reciprocal action with children, to throw ourselves into a collective dialogue with children

## **Children's own stories**

### ***Toni Parmanen, 5 years old:***

I have so many secrets that I don't tell them to anybody. They are so complicated that I can't remember them myself either. They are – in English. I can't say them, yet.

### ***The children made their own stories in the The Museum of Contemporary Art, Kiasma in Helsinki, Finland:***

#### ***A story from Ville, 4 years old:***

The person with four hands throws a rock. They throw it on top of a little person, but the person gets out from under the rock quickly. The end.

#### ***A story from Vertti, 3 years old:***

This is about, where people can't go, but diggers go.

***A story from Valpuri, 6 years old:***

**AUTUMN COLOURS**

The sun was shining. It's hot.

It's autumn. The leaves are different colors.

The colors are bright.

Brightness can be different colors.

***A story from Doris, 2 years 6 months:***

The bird dream

A bird knocked at the window. Nothing. The dream ended. It was a crow.

***A story from Juuso. 10 years old:***

The fish that was different

That fish has come from some other country and it's quite different. Those others have come to look at it. They're coming to see what it's like, if it's good or evil. Then they notice that yes it is really good. So they make it one of their friends.

***A story from Katja, 11 years old and Krista, 12 years old:***

The two-eyed boy

The two-eyed boy sat on top of the hill with an ox, eating tuna fish. Then the wind blew the tuna fish into the sea. The boy's name was Olli. Then he went home to sleep. In the night he had a nightmare about a war in the Near-East. Suddenly his dream moved to Egypt. On top of a pyramid sat a man with no clothes on. He was reading Donald Duck. Then Olli woke up again and noticed that it was morning. In the morning Olli went to fetch the post. On the way he noticed a skull. Suddenly he noticed three men following him. They were ugly. When Olli got home, the three ugly men were sitting round the table playing chess and drinking wine. Olli wondered how they had got in but he didn't really care. Then Olli went into the living room to watch television. Then he noticed it was King Kong on the television. He changed channels and saw Matilda. The old witch was eating a hare. Suddenly an owl appeared on the television. Then Olli turned the television off and went to his room to write a letter to his dear friend Krista. In it he told how he had fished in the summer for perch and flounder. Then Olli went to the sauna, when he had finished writing the letter. After that Olli drank a cup of cocoa. Then he went to bed to read his Goofy paperback and fell asleep.

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***Liisa Karlsson 2000: Giving children the floor. Transition in the tradition of professional practice (Doctoral dissertation, PhD)***

The research considered the position of children by clarifying how they are able to participate actively and on their own initiative in the activities of an institution. The research analyses the

professionalism and the child as a cultural construct. The study is phenomena-based and multi-disciplinary. It represents cultural research in that traditional models of thought and action are questioned. The research and development action are linked (see research as design model).

One of the problems of institutions, such as day care centres and schools, has proven to be the lack of potential for children to participate and influence matters. It emerged in the research that children's participation could be furthered through a change in the professional's child concept. This change furthers a dynamic and relative knowledge concept, the combination of personal and public knowledge, the view of an active and capable child as a creator of knowledge and the conception of the organisation of work as reflective and collaborative. The conclusion of the study showed the importance of the elements of efficient learning environments and of expertise of those who work with children.

The empirical data of the research was collected as part of a national and international project between the years 1995-1999. In the collaborative intervention the objective was to increase the children's prospects for active participation by use of the new Storycrafting method. The traditional position was changed: both the professional and the child no longer occupied the traditional positions. The professionals concentrated on listening to the children's own narratives and on building the children's own story networks. Personnel met regularly to reflect upon their experiences and their work development.

The professionals' writings were analysed using a qualitative content-based method. The professionals' views and operational culture underwent a change during the intervention. For example, the concept of education and learning and the viewpoint which objectified the child changed to an emphasis on the active subject with reciprocal viewpoints.

The research showed that there was an increase in the children's genuine participation and prospects for influencing the activity and its planning.