

# A Conversation with Vivian Gussin Paley

**Vivian Gussin Paley** taught preschool and kindergarten for 37 years, primarily at the University of Chicago's acclaimed Laboratory Schools. She is the author of 13 books about young children. Vivian has won numerous awards and honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship "genius grant." She will deliver the opening keynote address at NAEYC's 2011 Annual Conference and Expo, November 2–5, in Orlando, Florida.



**Meghan Dombrink-Green** is an assistant editor with NAEYC.

**Meghan Dombrink-Green:** *My first question is about the storytelling and story acting you used in your classroom. What happens when a child can see his or her story acted out in the classroom? What does the story bring out in the child or in the classroom?*

**Vivian Gussin Paley:** I've used storytelling and story acting for over 30 years. I think maybe a good way to answer this first question is to con-

nect the storytelling and story acting to play.

Let's consider a familiar scene in the doll corner. 3-year-old Timmy is on all fours, barking, crawling, waiting to be noticed and petted. Now, for that role, barking is sufficient, and there will be actions in response. The baby will cry, the mommy will rub the puppy's neck, porridge will be cooked and served. Maybe the puppy will be scolded because he's making too much noise. All kinds of things will develop and intermingle, things over which Timmy has very little control, depending upon, of course, his level of development.

But Timmy may want to go further with his puppy role. He may want to shape events, put them more under his control—something he has already learned he can do when he dictates a story to the teacher, especially when it's acted out. So, let's imagine that he dictates, "The puppy ran away and the boy finds him." It's satisfying as far as it goes, but it lacks the immediacy of play. This is where the staged version comes in. In the staged version

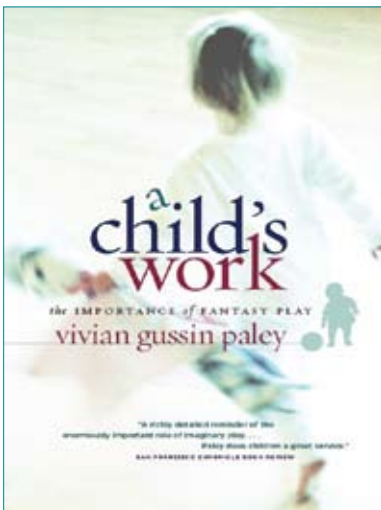
of the storytelling process, the puppy feels the anxiety of being lost, just as he would in play, and enjoys the pleasure of being found, versus the self-contained format of a written-down story with a beginning and an end.

Timmy and the teacher together create a spontaneous piece of curriculum for each other. The teacher asks questions about the intentions of the storyteller and the actors. Does the boy say something when he's looking for the dog? How about when he finds the dog? It is an open-ended dialogue, and only the author and the actors know the answers. This makes it extremely interesting and creative for the children and teacher. In most other situations, the teacher knows the answers to the questions.

So how can the teacher get started? Well, as I just described, any piece of action observed in play can be used to promote the first story that is dictated. "Timmy, that puppy you pretended to be in the doll corner has an interesting story for us to act out. If you tell me what happens to the puppy, I'll write it down, and later we'll act it out." Now after one such experience, Timmy and everyone in the class understands what the activity is. The teacher posts a sign-up list for storytelling volunteers. The idea of theater has been connected to play. And so, the ideas come across easily. It's the children's own theater. It's for and of themselves. And the children recognize this.

**MDG:** *What is the role of the teacher when the children are engaged in dramatic play?*

**VGP:** To me, teachers play a very creative role. As in the theater, they make all kinds of legitimate connections having to do with character and plot.



Teachers observe from outside the drama and comment in the manner of a Greek chorus, sometimes repeating something a child or character has said. Their role is to try to make connections that help reveal the players' intentions, especially when it seems as if the players may have lost touch with what those connections are. After all, the players are much younger than the teacher. They're just learning to make these connections. The teacher has had many years experience in this and is there to give the children a head start.

What kind of connections? What kind of questions might be asked from the outside? "Is the baby worried because the superhero has come in?" The teacher may detect some anxiety there. "I wonder why the puppy's barking so much? Does she need to be petted?" Obviously, the puppy may have been barking too much for the teacher. "How can we make room in the spaceship for another ninja, because James is also a ninja now?"



He's not sure how to join you, and he's trying not to knock anything over."

Sometimes a problem that's obvious to the children can be handled in another way. The teacher can say, "You know, here's something that needs a longer discussion. Let's put it on our list of discussions we need to have." Or getting back to the storytelling: "This is an interesting problem,

interesting story. Maybe someone would like to help me write it down so we can act it out? Put your name on the story list, and perhaps you can think of something in the story." With experience a teacher learns how to use this basic format, to tease out ideas and help the drama go better. Because that's the common goal. Not to see how smart someone is, not to see how quickly someone can respond, but the play's the thing. The children understand and want to help improve the play once they realize that it is all a matter of how their story is constructed.

**MDG:** *Why is it important to observe children at play when trying to understand how children communicate and what they need?*

**VGP:** Above all, I think, the continued observation of children at play demonstrates the importance of make-believe as the thinking tool children use. The reality is that most social, linguistic,

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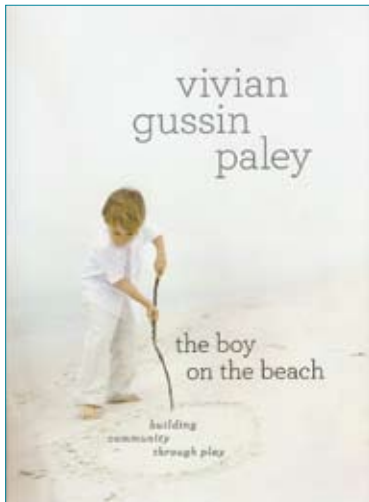


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logical interactions are usually better explained and understood in terms of these imaginary themes. Vygotsky pointed it out brilliantly. Famously he told this story: Two little sisters are walking together, and suddenly one says, “Pretend we are sisters, and pretend we’re taking a walk.” They are sisters, they are taking a walk. But what the older child has intuitively realized is that to view a larger perspective of the narrative, to be able to expand the story, they need to pretend they are the characters acting the roles.

Teachers also begin to use storytelling as a teaching and learning device. Once I understood this, many situations in preschool and kindergarten classrooms became clear. “Pretend we’re lining up like penguins tiptoeing on ice.” “Pretend we’re like giraffes with long, straight necks.” “Like baby ducks following their mother. Pretend.” Let’s say before a math activity, “Pretend we’re so tiny we don’t even know how to count on our fingers yet. And then we learn how.”

In my most recent book [*The Boy on the Beach*], I write about a classroom in which children have a very messy reenactment of Hurricane Katrina. As she sees the huge mess, the teacher says, “Pretend we’re cleaning up after the hurricane. Pretend we’re the National Guard, and we’re putting everything away where it was. I’m putting on my big rubber boots. You

put them on too.” Suddenly there is a focused community. The children have been treated as actors, not outlaws. Children’s play helps them focus on common problems in the format they know best: story.

And on different days, there are different ways of focusing and endless conversation, including between the teacher and her associates. With my assistants and student teachers, after every school day, our first question might be “How did we achieve intimacy today? What role did the teacher play?” And each one offered his or her own notion.

**MDG:** *In The Boy on the Beach you talked about good play and bad play. How do you distinguish between the two?*

**VGP:** I think in the common parlance, teachers and parents all know what we mean by *good play* and *bad play*. Good play has few sharp corners and everyone seems to play and work well together. Bad play is the opposite. A disagreement. Fights. And a big mess.

Well into my teaching career, I learned that good and bad play are usually a matter of having a script that works or one that needs to be rewritten. Once you begin to depend on storytelling and story acting, you start looking at your classroom as theater. The children are constantly imagining characters and plots and, when they have a chance, with each other, acting out little stories. You can look at the children and yourself as actors. “Well, this hasn’t worked. We’d better think of a better way to pretend this story.” What seems to be a chaotic scene, one we might call *bad play*, is simply a scene that lacks closure for one or more characters.

The teacher’s role is to help the children make up a new scene. The children become used to the teacher—or even other children—saying, “This isn’t working. We need to tell the story of what we’re doing with each other. What characters are we playing? And what needs to be played in a different

way so that the play does not have to stop.”

Let’s say the teacher feels that the action in the doll corner is becoming chaotic, over-excited, and she wants to help. She becomes accustomed to saying, “Who are you pretending to be?”

The child says, “I’m a bad dinosaur.”

The teacher replies, “Ah, okay. I thought as much. What can a bad dinosaur do in this story that is allowed in our classroom?”

Given the story the children are acting out, they need a bad dinosaur. But there are certain rules in a classroom. This of course is very helpful in expanding vocabulary, imagery, social awareness, and the valuable idea that we can choose different outcomes for most of our actions. It is a worthy approach whereby we study and achieve literary and social control.

**MDG:** *You came up with the term “creative kindness.” How do you see children acting that out, and can you talk a bit about that term?*

**VGP:** Since *The Boy on the Beach* came out, where I use this term, many people have asked me, “What’s the difference between ordinary kindness and creative kindness?” And each time I give a different answer, since for me the subject is evolving.

The teacher or the child who suggests a role for the child who’s been left out is practicing what I think of as creative kindness. The effort to respect, include, and admire a child takes into account the particular nature of a child’s desires and self-image. Let’s say the teacher says, “Peter really loves being the big monster, doesn’t he? I wonder if anyone has a place in their story for a big monster. And maybe Peter would like to know how you want the big monster to act so he doesn’t frighten the baby.” You can see all the creativity that goes into this kind of thinking.

It’s much easier to practice creative kindness in a classroom that allows for play and storytelling and story acting because you can insert new



scenes and new roles in stories. When the classroom is primarily organized around subject lessons, it is harder to accomplish. For young children, it is easier to explain the creative side of kindness where there are roles to be explored and a story to be told.

When the kindergarten teacher figured out an honorable way for the children to clean up the hurricane mess, she was being creative and kind. She provided the story with a good ending. And maybe that's what it's all about: to help someone who's stuck figure out a better ending to his idea.

**MDG:** *How do you explain the importance of play to parents or adults who are skeptical that play is what children need?*

**VGP:** I have found that most parents do value play, and they do understand its importance in their children's lives. Nothing presents a greater worry to parents than when their children come home and say, "No one likes me, they won't play with me." I've rarely heard a parent of a young child worry about phonics or writing. But families grow very sad when their children are visibly excluded from play and the teachers do not seem to know how to counteract the event.

In my experience, parents are the first to recognize that their children become more articulate and interest-

ing when they make believe. They love to repeat their children's words: "Did you hear what Johnny said?" They call up the relatives. They bore everyone with all these wonderful things that the children did. "He's only 3 and look at what he said about the man in the moon."

It is the teacher's role to keep telling anecdotes about how clever, inventive, innovative, nice, and sweet children are in play. I would never go into a parent-teacher conference without a page of at least five brief stories highlighting the creative play and conversation of the child. I'd share these before discussing anything else. Now that parent knew I liked his or her child. If you take down their stories, you like them. If they know you're taking down their stories, they like you. And we start with liking each other, and we see how happy children are when they play. I would invite them in to watch storytelling and story acting; it so resembles the play experience and gives it more meaning.

**MDG:** *Is there one particular child or story or situation that stands out in your mind right now?*

**VGP:** You know, there are so many Mollies and Fredericks and Jasons, all unique individuals with wonderful stories to remember. Let me tell you instead about a teacher who remains on my mind and has had a great influence on my rethinking certain aspects of teaching.

Mrs. Tully grew up on a farm in Louisiana, cared for by grandparents who were sharecroppers and fantastic storytellers. I walked into her preschool classroom and had the privilege of listening to a true storyteller who, before she did anything else, made a story out of everything, just as her grandfather had. Here is an example of her magic.

Samson and Aaron, two 4-year-olds, are having a knock-down, pull-apart fight in the blocks. Mrs. Tully separates them and immediately begins a story. She'll get to the part about

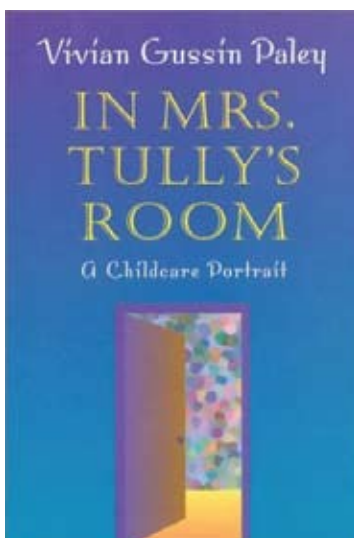
fighting later. She always uses the characters from her grandfather's storytelling, so the children know them. She says, "Oh dear. Miranda the Cow would be very sorry if she saw Samson and Aaron. She would be afraid that her milk would turn sour. Whenever there's fighting in the barn, her milk turns sour. And then Grandma and Grandpa can't have sweet milk for their coffee. And the little cats, they might decide to copy the fighting and push the baby lambs. And how would that be?"

There wasn't a thing that went on that she didn't have a story for. Everyone could take a deep breath, move back from the crisis, and put it into a story context. Then she would say, in her lovely Southern accent, "Now, Samson and Aaron, what were you all fighting about? It reminds me of when my two older brothers used to fight over a stick." Then she would have the boys pretend to be her brothers, arguing about the stick and coming up with solutions.

I came there for one visit, and stayed for almost five months. I came back again and again and finally wrote a book about it [*In Mrs. Tully's Room*], because this approach to child care was so incredible to me and something we all could do, once we get the hang of it.

**MDG:** *Do you have any last words of advice for our readers?*

**VGP:** I hope this doesn't sound too glib: *Think dramatically.* Get in the habit of thinking of yourself and the children as partners in an acting company. Once we learn to imagine ourselves as characters in a story, a particular set of events expands in all directions. We find ourselves being kinder and more respectful to one another because our options have grown in intimacy, humor, and literary flavor.



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