

Why I Tell to Middle School Children by Tersi Agra Bendiburg

Remember the Terrible Twos? Middle school children are a lot like two year olds. I don't say this as a put-down. These children have one foot in childhood and the other in adolescence, and most do a remarkable job negotiating these two worlds. To understand them, we must know the steps to their amazing dance. Like two year olds, there is so much they want to do, and can do. Then there are things they want to do, but are not physically or emotionally ready. Those of us who work with these children, find ourselves emotionally pushing or pulling them, as we try to encourage or restrain these students in their daily lives.

In the fall of 1990, while working at Griffin Middle School, I got to interact with 6th, 7th, and 8th graders everyday. I worked in the school kitchen. Yes, I was once a lunch lady. I kept the kids laughing and guessing every day, as they came through my line. I had to wear a hairnet, but I dressed it up; Jingle bells for Christmas, hearts for Valentine's Day, Shamrocks for St. Patrick's Day. Besides entertaining them, I also cautioned them to stay clear of green hot dogs and warmed, leftover pizza.

Each grade had its own Commons, an area where students gather to have activities and eat lunch. One day, as I was pushing the bread oven to the 6th grade Commons, two very tall and buff boys stood in my way and would not let me pass. I judged them to be 8th graders, and they were. "Excuse me," I said. But they would not move. So, placing my hands on my hips I said, "Boys, why aren't you in class?" They laughed, so I continued. "I want you in class now. Is that clear? I'm a momma, so don't mess with me." They answered, "Yes, Ma'am," and walked across the hallway to their classroom.

The following semester my manger moved me to the 8th grade Commons. One day, as I was serving lunch to students, I noticed several boys whispering and pointing at me. After a second glance, I recognized one of the boys who was smiling and saying to his friends, "You see that little lady there? Don't ever mess with her, she's a momma." The boys and I stayed friends until the end of the school year.

The summer after my first year at Griffin Middle School, my sister encouraged me to take Doug Lipman's storytelling workshop. Like most of us who tell stories, I had been a lover of and listener to stories. But me, tell stories? With my accent? "I'll never be understood," I kept saying to myself.

Yet, I went ahead and attended the workshop, where I was coached and helped by this learned, intuitive and gentle man. By the time the weekend was over, not only did I know that I could tell stories, but Doug discussed with me the idea of leaving the lunchroom and telling stories for a living.

During the next school year I weaned myself from my lunchroom job. Each day, after finishing in the lunchroom, I showered in the girl's locker room, changed clothes, and went to other schools to present storytelling programs. My first paid storytelling job was at my own Griffin Middle School. Jo Zarzeka, the media specialist, hired me to tell stories at a festival there. In 1993, staff members from Young Audiences of Atlanta came to the school to evaluate my storytelling program. That spring I was accepted to their roster as well as to the Fulton County School Arts Program. That was over twelve years ago, and I have never looked back.

In 1993, Ben, our oldest son, entered middle school. Now I had a "specimen" to observe up close. Those years working at Griffin Middle School as well as the years spent observing Ben and later Jordan, taught me a lot about working with middle school children. I learned not to treat middle school students as little children, but neither to be afraid to have fun with them. I learned to have a well-planned but still fun and educational program. I learned to start the program by telling them a short, personal story, not to expect instant enthusiasm, and to finish my program with a quiet story. I made sure that the teachers received a study guide before my visit, so as not to waste performance time introducing myself.

Time limitations are important. Most middle schools kept to a tight schedule. Enough time needs to be set aside for the students to ask questions and make comments. If the program has progressed at a good pace and held their attention, they are usually eager to do this.

I also learned that small groups work better with this age group. This may mean being at a school for several days, in order to tell to all the classes in that grade level. One of the advantages of this is seeing the students who I told stories to earlier in the week. Sometimes the students call out, "Hi Cuba," when I walk by, or sing a refrain from a story I told them. Also, if the students like the program, they will let their peers know. When students come to the performance asking for a particular story, I consider this the highest praise possible.

Years ago, I did a program of personal and family stories for 8th grade students who were studying immigration. As I was leaving the school building, a red headed young man called out to me. "Did I leave something behind?" I asked. "No, Ma'am," he answered, "I just want to tell you something. You know the story that you told about your two cultures, and how you go back and forth between them?" "Yes," I answered. "Well," he said, "It really spoke to me. My parents are divorced and remarried. I have two sets of everything: of parents, of rules. I even have two bedrooms. Sometimes, it is hard to go back and forth between these two worlds. Thank you, Mrs. Bendiburg. Your story taught me that I can embrace my two lives and be richer for it." "Thank you," I said, with a lump in my throat, "for listening and for being so smart as to apply the story to your personal life."

Driving home that day, I cried about the power of story...about the goodness found in most of these students. About how over and over they have honored me by really listening and by being present. Their response to story, in spite of their being in the middle of such turbulent and joyful years, always humbles me.

My wish is that if you have been inspired by my words, you will give this age group a chance. If you do and find that you have an affinity with these children, maybe, like me, you will pinch yourself for the opportunity to tell to these "hormone driven" youngsters, and you will say, too, "How lucky can a storyteller be?"

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