

## Listening to Our Children Kim Atkinson

“Once upon a time there was an evil stepmother. And there were 4 princesses who lived deep deep in the forest in a castle. The princesses went to their cupboard and found some treasure. But a pirate was watching and he stole the treasure”

This is the beginning of a story told to me by a group of 4 year olds. They tell it effortlessly, quickly and without pause. They are confident in the roles, the evil stepmother is always evil and it is with much hilarity that she is dumped into the garbage later in the telling. The princesses are good, they go shopping, drive vans, and dance with princes. The pirate was added later by a boy who was certain that a pirate needed to be included. Apparently where there is treasure there must be a pirate.

Listening to the stories and imaginative play of children is a gift. The trick is to actually listen. So often I find myself talking, asking questions, commenting on what I see, or repeating what I hear.” So you are washing the clothes, what will you do with them now? “That looks like good soup you are making, can I have some?” I do this with good intentions, asking open ended questions to further the play, stimulating language and thought. But now I think I might just be barging in.

Lately I have been trying different approach, just sitting close by and saying nothing. I have to admit that saying nothing doesn't come naturally to me in any situation, but I am finding the effort of keeping quiet to be well worth it. The conversations I hear are rich with narrative, imagination and tell me something about the children participating. I hear about great jungles with superheroes that can't fly but can walk on water, and then suddenly they can fly. I hear about making oatmeal for the dogs, and it smells like cinnamon, and really it's not real, just pretend. And I hear about snakes on pancakes, and worms too. I hear about monsters, and jaguars, bad guys and witches. Somehow these scary things all end up exploding, getting eaten or otherwise coming to a fatal end.

Listening to children, really listening, opens up their world to us, allows us a glimpse into how they may think, how they are interpreting what they see around them. We can get clues as to how they make sense of media, of what families and friends do. And we can be filled with wonder to see just how much children know, how they solve problems with great logic. And we can see that each child understands the logic of the other child, it is we who can't quickly follow why there are snakes on the pancakes.

We might just see a bit of how children view themselves. The pirate boy was certain he was a pirate, definitely not a prince. And the princesses? They are princesses every day. The evil stepmother was evil, ferociously evil, for 3 days, then suddenly became a princess. But someone new took on the role, and was deliciously evil.

Listening to children allows us to provide more opportunities for making oatmeal for dogs, to investigate what kind of treasure is in the cupboard, and to figure out what to do

with that monster. We can look closely at play that is repeated over and over and think about why, and we can watch children acting different roles, trying on identities.

So, get out a pad of paper and a pen, sit yourself in the corner, and write down what you hear. Or ask your child if they have a story to tell you. And this is the tough part...don't say anything, just listen. You will be drawn into a world of fantasy, where magical things happen, where laughter is abundant, problems are solved and bad guys come to a satisfying end. Read it back to your child, and they will be delighted. Read it later to yourself and reflect, you will be delighted too. And you just might learn something.