

Story Study: Swimmy

Teachers Guide: Read the following paragraphs yourself prior to facilitating the discussion questions with children. This will enable you to ask the questions confidently and use them as tools to help children figure out what is going on in the story as well as what lessons they can learn from it. By asking questions and having children come up with answers, their learning experience will be more fun and more effective than if you were to simply give them all of the answers. If they are struggling to find strong answers, use the following paragraphs to help steer children in a more focused direction.

Story Summary

Swimmy is about adapting to new situations and learning to work together. Through this story, children will learn about dealing with loss, loneliness, and fear as well as the importance of critical thinking and teamwork as they follow little Swimmy on his undersea adventures!

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Read the Story

Before reading the book, ask your child/children to look at the cover pictures, read the synopsis on the back of the book and ask your child/children to think about what Swimmy is like. Ask them what they think the story might be about. Here are some helpful tips to guide you before, during, and after reading the story:

- Give them enough time to state what they think and feel.
- Read the slowly, asking children to pay attention to the pattern of the story and the rhyming words.
- Spend time with each page and explain what is going on.
- Ask questions about what is going on in each picture.
- Once you have finished reading, ask children what it was about and who Swimmy met along the way.
- Ask some questions from the list below (choose questions that seem relevant for your child/group of children).
- Make sure that **everybody** gets a chance to ask and answer questions. Don't let the older, more confident, and/or louder children take over everything.

Discussion Questions and Topics

Comprehension Questions to ask children – These questions are designed to see how well children understood the story:

- How does Swimmy get over the death of his family? What motivated him to get back out and explore?
- Why does Swimmy think it's important for the new red fish to get out and see the world?
- Why did the big fish eat Swimmy's family? (he was "very hungry")
- How does Swimmy solve the problem of big fish trying to eat him?

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Discussion Questions to ask children – These questions are designed to help children think critically about the story and formulate their own individual ideas and opinions:

- What is the value of teamwork? Why is it important to work as a team?
- How do you think Swimmy feels about the big fish? Do you think he would be angry? Sad? Etc.?
- What do you think Swimmy and the other small fish eat when they get hungry?
- What are some of the interesting things Swimmy meets in the ocean along the way? Have you ever seen anything like this in your life?
- Why is it scary to be alone? Why does being alone sometimes make us sad? Does Swimmy need other fish to be happy? Why? (He is happy on his own, but also happier with the school).
- Why do you think Swimmy eventually went back out into the ocean after his family died?
 - **We think:** He felt he had to. He had nothing else left behind, so he went out to find a new life. It also probably helped him process all of the pain of losing his family.
- If you were Swimmy, and your family got eaten, what would you do? How would you feel?
- Together with his friends, Swimmy works to be bigger than the big, scary tuna, but does that mean they are definitely safe? Are Tuna the biggest fish in the ocean? What about sharks? Are there other types of big predators in the ocean? What about dolphins? What do dolphins eat?
 - Even if there are bigger fish, do you think Swimmy and his friends should take the risk?
- How does being clever make things better for Swimmy? What are the benefits of being smart, and being able to think quickly?
- Why is it important to think critically about the world around you? Compare Swimmy to the other fish who only ever think about fear of bigger fish.
 - **We think:** Thinking critically helps you act in the best way for any situation. Living in fear, on the other hand, teaches you to act a certain way, no matter the situation. Swimmy, who was not afraid, was able to come up with an idea, which the other fish never could have, because fear does not give you new ideas like thinking does.
- How did knowing about all the other things in the ocean motivate Swimmy to come up with a solution for the other fish? Why did that make him not want to sit behind a rock, like all the red fish?

Activity 1: Make your Own Swimmy Stamps

- **Resources:**
 - Corrugated cardboard (Like what cardboard boxes are made out of that can be torn into two layers)
 - Pencils
 - Scissors
 - Paper (poster size)
 - Paint (red and black)

Activity: Before the session, make a sample stamp to show your child/children before they begin. Read below for instructions. In making your sample, try to anticipate any issues or troubles your child/children may have.

Before beginning this activity with your child/children, turn to the very last page of *Swimmy*, and study the school of fish in the picture. Look at both the large shape they all form together, and at the smaller shape of individual fish. Ask your child/children: *how do you think the artist (Leo Lionni) created this picture?* The answer is: **stamps**.

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When asked how he created the art for the book, Lionni said, “Swimmy and the little red fish were rubber stamps.” Look closely at each of the red fish—they are all the same shape, but none are the exact same. Some are darker, some have gaps or spots. Explain to your child/children that this is the result of repeated stamping, where each is supposed to be the same shape, but the ink comes out slightly different each time. This results in a beautiful picture that is unique and interesting. Now, **your child/children will get the chance to make their own Swimmy stamps.**

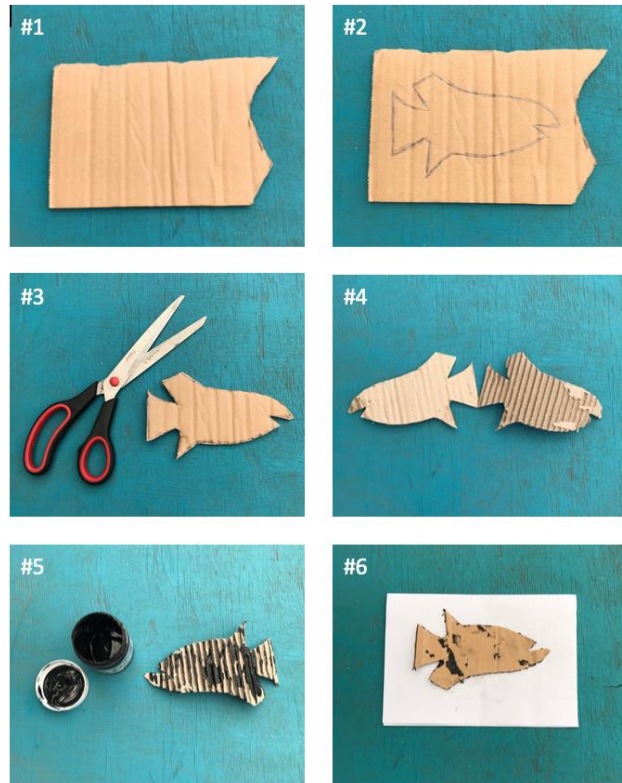
➤ Making your Swimmy stamps.

- Give your child/children pieces of cardboard (**See diagram #1**). Explain that everyone will now create their own version of Leo Lionni’s stamp. **If you have a sample, hold it up for show.** Have your child/children look closely at the shape of the fish in the book. What parts does it have? (A tail, some fins, a mouth, etc.) Your child/children can then use a pencil to draw their own fish onto a piece of cardboard (**#2**). Then, your child/children will cut this fish shape out with scissors (**#3**).

- **NOTE:** Each child’s fish will be a bit different from all the rest. This is OK.

However, do your best to make sure no child makes their fish too big (because it will take up too much space) or too small (which will be difficult to use over and over and difficult to cut).

- When all of the fish are cut out, demonstrate to your child/children how to **slowly and carefully pull the two layers of cardboard apart (#4)**. This will leave two stamps of the same shape – one mostly flat and the other with the wavy lines of the corrugated material. If your child/children accidentally rip or ruin the shape of their fish, allow them a new piece to quickly start again.
- Before stamping, ask your child/children what they think of their two stamps. *Will they produce the same shape, or different? Will they produce the same texture, or different? How do you think a fish made with one side of your stamp will look compared to the other?*
- Now your child/children will get to use their stamps and experiment with different textures. They will do this by lightly coating their stamps with paint (**#5**), then pressing it onto a piece of paper (**#6**).
 - **NOTE:** Depending on the age group, you can either distribute paper and paint to all children (which is more suitable for older children) or have your child/children apply paint to their stamps one by one, so you can control the amount of paint used (which is better for younger children). Either way, give your child/children time to **practice and explore using the different stamps**. Have them try the corrugated stamp and the flatter stamp next to each other, and compare the two. Maybe let them try both sides of both stamps, and see which they like best (although this can make things messy).



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What happens when you use more paint vs. less? **Encourage your child/children to discuss the activity as they do it.**

➤ Create your own Swimmy school.

- Once your child/children are comfortable using their stamps (and before the stamps get soggy from too much use!), have everyone in the group work together to create your own Swimmy school.
 - **NOTE:** This requires a large piece of paper that is strong enough to hold lots of paint. If only smaller paper is available, your child/children can each create their own mini-school or stamp their fish onto newspaper).
- Draw the rough, fish-shaped outline for the school on your piece of paper, then let each child come up one by one to put their favourite version/texture of their stamp to help fill it in. Your child/children should all use the same colour paint (red, if you want to copy the book). Stamps can overlap if space is too small, and each child can do more than one stamp if the paper is big. Make sure to leave space for Swimmy.
- When all of the red fishes are stamped, use your stamp and some black paint to make your Swimmy, right where the eye should be (**see picture**).
- When your school is complete, wrap up the session with a discussion. Re-read the words from this page of the book: **“He taught them to swim close together, each in his own place, and when they had learned to swim like one giant fish, he said, ‘I’ll be the eye.’”**



➤ Ask your child/children:

- How did they learn from the fish in the book through this activity?
- How do you and your friends “swim close together?” What do you do together that makes you stronger, like Swimmy and the fish all swimming in their shape?
- By working together, the fish could scare away the bigger fish. What can your group of children accomplish by working together?
- Think about the fish stamps. Each comes from the same shape, but has its own unique look. How does this relate to you as a group of children (or yourselves as a family if your child is alone)? Are you all the same? Or different? What good does having unique qualities do? How does it help (or hinder) working together?

Activity 2: Try Texture Painting!

➤ Resources:

- Paper
- Paint
- Miscellaneous material (provide in advance, or allow your child/children to find in environment)

Activity:

- Allow your child/children to study the artwork throughout Swimmy. Look not only at the sea animals, but the plants, rocks, water, and the rest that fills out the underwater world. Ask your child/children to describe the different things they see, using whatever words they can. Ask them to describe the textures, the patterns, colours, etc. Then ask: *How did the artist create all these pictures?*

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- **NOTE:** Lionni used cloth doilies for these plants, covering the material with paint, then pressing it onto paper to produce that intricate pattern.
- Look specifically at the page with “a forest of seaweed growing from sugar candy rocks.” How would you describe this seaweed? How do you think this seaweed forest was made? With a standard paint brush, or something else?
- Explain to your child/children that Leo Lionni painted with all sort of materials to create the different patterns and textures in the book, not just standard paint brushes. He used glass, paper, stamps, cloth, doilies, etc. All of these come together to form a beautiful underwater world for Swimmy. Now your child/children will get to experiment with this type of painting themselves.
- Distribute a few pieces of paper to each child.
 - **Optional Extra for older children:** Have your child/children fold a piece of paper in half, then in half again, then once again. When unfolded, the paper should now be divided into 8 sections. Explain to your child/children that they will fill each section with a different paint texture, using different materials of their choice.
- To start, give a demonstration, and have every child follow your example to paint their first square. For this, you will use paper as a paintbrush. Distribute more paper and then have the children tear up the sheet so that each child has a section of paper. Then, using your own paper as an example, crumple it into a ball. Then, un-crumple it. Hold it up to your child/children. How has the paper changed? (it should have more texture now).
- Repeat the crumpling process two more times, then unfold the paper. Now, it should be well textured. Then, using paint, pick a section of your original paper, and use the crumpled paper as a paint brush. You can either press it in (like a stamp), or you can keep it in a ball and brush the imperfect edges along the paper.
 - **NOTE:** For this, and most other materials, be sure not to use too much paint. This will result in a puddle, where the pattern of the printing material is not shown.
- Now, your child/children will explore their surroundings to come up with other things to use as stamps or brush textures. It is possible for you, the facilitator, to provide a variety of materials for them to try. However, in order to promote creativity and exploration among your child/children, **encourage them to seek their own materials from their immediate surroundings**. This can be leaves, sticks, string, plastic packets, candy wrappers, chips bags, etc. Try not to limit your child/children (beyond reason)—let them explore as they wish to.
- Help your child/children with the painting after they’ve collected material. If a particular texture does not come out well, encourage them to try another, perhaps with less or more paint (depending on the issue).
- When your child/children are finished painting, encourage them to look at each other’s sheets. Ask them to find patterns they like, and guess what material was used.
- After the activity, talk with your child about:
 - Different materials they found, where they found them
 - Any difficulties in painting/printmaking with those materials
 - The different results: which they like, which they think they can improve on, etc.

Activity 3: Create Your Own Pet Anemone

- **Resources:**
 - Tissue Roll
 - Paint & brush
 - Marker

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- A pair of scissors

Activity: Before leading this activity with your child/children, make a sample using the instructions below.

After you have created your sample sea anemone and are ready to implement the activity with your child/children, explain to them that, in this lesson, they will be making a craft based on one of the creatures they learned about in the Fish Facts activity -- a **sea anemone**. They will get to create, colour, and name their own anemone to take home. **Hold up your sample for them to see.**

- Distribute toilet rolls and paint supplies. Explain that each will get to paint their toilet roll in whatever colour and pattern they like, because sea anemones come in all sorts of colours. Encourage them to get creative! Try dots, lines, patterns, colour mixing, etc.
- If your child/children would like to personalize their anemone more, encourage them to **add eyes** (see picture below). These can be painted on, or your child/children can cut small circles out of some scrap paper and stick them onto the paint.
- Once all children have finished painting their anemone, leave the toilet paper rolls out in a secure place to dry. It is important to dry them before the next step, because wet paint may ruin the scissors.
- When the toilet paper rolls are dry, distribute scissors to children. Have them take their painted anemones and pick one end of the TP roll to be the top (if they did create eyes, make sure the top is the opposite end of where the eyes sit). Take this end, and use the scissors to cut a line into it, a little less than halfway down the tube. Then, repeat this all the way around the roll. This will form the anemone's tentacles. **NOTE:** Make sure your scissor cuts are **straight and do not overlap**, or else you will cut away some of the cardboard, and your anemone will lose a tentacle!
- Now, children can use their hands to bend and spread the various tentacles, like the picture. This will give their anemones a wavy look, as if it is under the sea!
- When all of the anemones are finished, children can make their anemone their pet, and give them a **name** and a **personality**. Then, the anemones can talk to one another, asking questions like: *What part of the sea are you from? What creatures do you see there in your part of the sea? Have you ever seen a little black fish? What about a big red fish with a black eye?*



Activity 5: Fun Fish in a Jar

- **Resources:**
 - Paper plate
 - Bright colors paint (yellow, orange, green and blue)
 - Paint brush
 - 2 pieces of paper
 - Pencil
 - A pair of scissors

Activity: Ask children to think of what an aquarium looks like. What do we use it for and what stays in it? What should be in it and why? Then, show children the picture of a fish in a jar and ask them to make it. Give children the materials and go with them through all the steps until they finish it. Fish in the jar sample



Figure 1 Fish in a Jar sample

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Activity 5: Produce a Swimmy Drama

**** NOTE: This activity is best for a session where multiple children are present.**

➤ **Resources:**

- Cardboard (large pieces)
- Paint
- A pair of scissors
- Colouring materials
- Piece of paper

Activity:

This activity is designed to help children better understand the story of *Swimmy*, as well as improve their self-esteem by acting on stage. After reading the book and learning about the different creatures in it, explain to children that they will now put on a performance of *Swimmy*. They will either perform it for family members, nearby neighbours or an audience of stuffed animals.

➤ **Decide on props and characters.**

- Go back through the book as a group, and decide what props and characters you will need for your drama. You should have AT LEAST the following:
 - Swimmy
 - Big fish (Tuna)
 - Red fish (several little ones, or one person acting as all of them)
 - Creatures Swimmy finds
- **NOTE:** For this section, you can choose a few characters for Swimmy to swim by. You do not need to do all of them, unless you want more children to be involved. Either way, when reviewing your script, only include the animals whose props you have created. **If your child is alone, the other animals can be props instead.**
- Your children can also think of scenery or backgrounds that may help the play be understood. This can be sea plants, other fish swimming by, or some sort of ocean backdrop.

➤ **Make your props and characters.**

- Using large pieces of cardboard, paint, and colouring supplies, create each of your characters and props. Make sure the pieces are large enough so that 1) the audience can see it and 2) shy children can stand behind their character/props until they gain confidence to show their faces.

➤ **Translate the play. This is an optional step for children whose first language is not English.**

- To make the play more accessible to your audience, one option is to **translate the play from English into your child's native language**. This will not be simple, as not every language expresses ideas in the same way, and some words (like, say, "swimmy") are made up (or there is no word for it), and therefore can't be translated. Only do this step if you think your children are capable of doing it. If not, feel free to perform your drama in the original English.
- Come up with the translation as a group, using an open discussion. Ask your children how they think they would translate certain lines, and see if there are any other options in your language. Sometimes, it is **not the exact words that can be translated**, but rather the **idea the words convey**. Try to open the discussion wider, talking about both the difficulties of translating, but also the reasons why you are doing it (to convey ideas to audience, etc.)

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- This is a good step if older children are presenting the play to an audience of younger children. Not only will the audience be able to understand it better, but they will be inspired by their older peers to act and speak and tell stories in a dramatic way, using their own language.
- **Pick a narrator.**
 - The narrator will be the one reading the words of the story along with the actors' acting. This can be you, the parent, or any child who can speak clearly and confidently in the language you choose to perform in.
 - **NOTE:** The narrator should read the book exactly as it is printed, unless translated already, or if certain pages are being cut out (see **NOTE** to character list above).
- **Practice Your Drama.**
 - Before performing, run through the play for practice. Practice each page of the book, with the narrator reading the words aloud, and the actors performing the actions that match. **Pay attention to the timing—the narrator may need to wait between pages for the actors to finish.** Allow different children to try different roles as you go.
 - As a group, decide on the best combination of actors to present the play, or create multiple “casts” of children who perform the drama for one another. Decide the best actions and timing to get the narrator's story across. For instance, **what is the best way to re-create the big fish formed by Swimmy & his friends? Make one big cardboard piece held by one child, or have smaller ones with lots of children standing close together?** Make sure you agree as a group what the best way to convey the story will be. Then, get ready to perform!
- **Perform your play!**
 - Now it's time to combine props, characters, narrator, and timing into one big performance. Gather your audience, set your stage, and break a leg!

Thanda is a non profit organisation based in rural Mtwalume, KwaZulu Natal South Africa. Our curriculum is made up of activities that we have developed over 12 years. The ideas and inspiration for our activities come from is a wonderful combination of educators, books, websites, YouTubers, and other places and people on the internet. We are very grateful for all of them. Where we use ideas or activities directly from a source, we always endeavour to give credit to the creator. We do not endeavour to profit from these story studies, we only wish to add value to the lives of people we may have the opportunity of crossing paths with.
