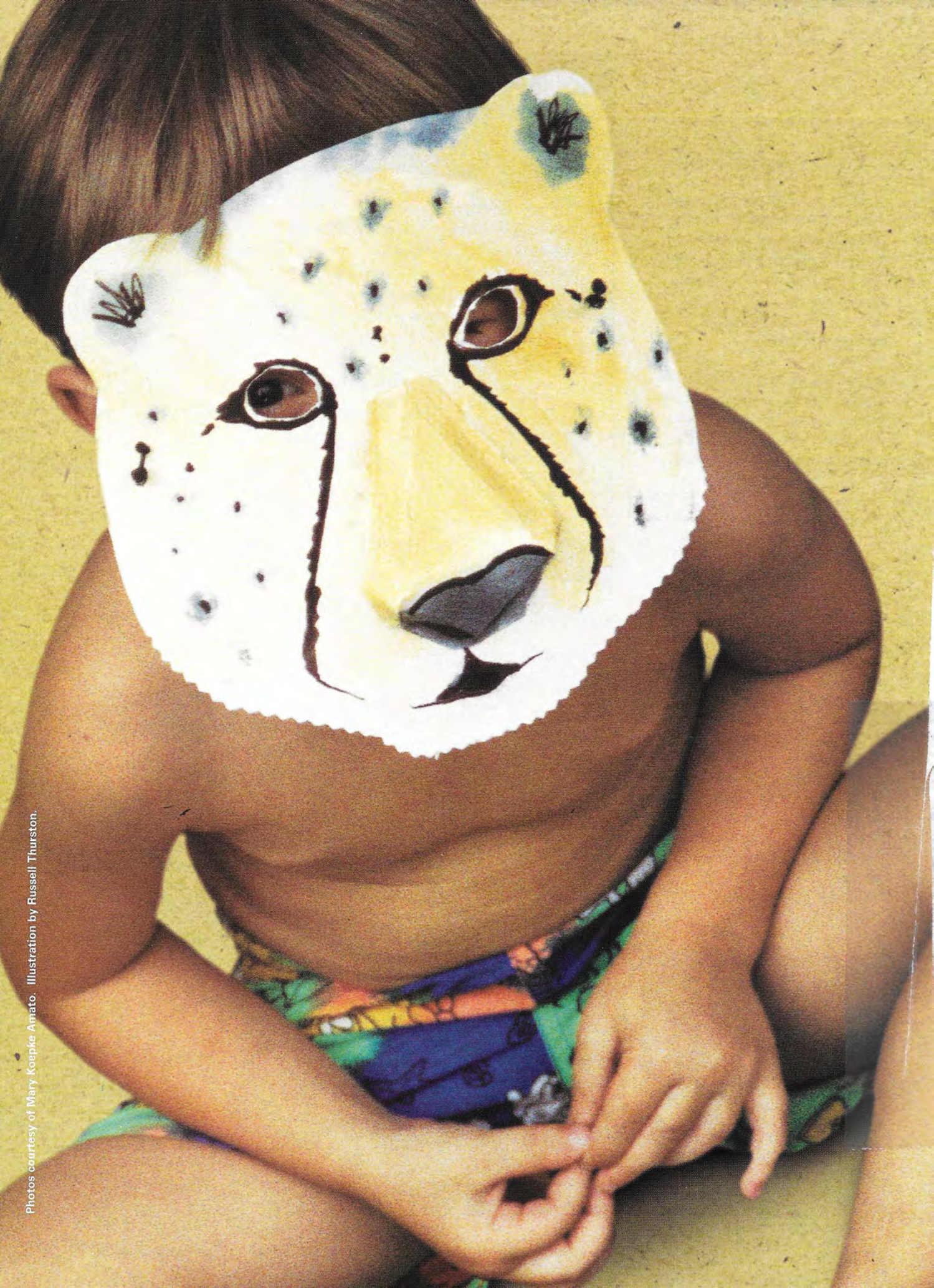




Photos courtesy of Mary Koepke Amato. Illustration by Russell Thurston.

Tinker

WEARING MASKS, CHILDREN CAN DO AND BE ANYTHING.

Tiger

AND SO, OF COURSE, CAN YOU.

Robot

MARY KOEPKE AMATO

fly





ne rainy afternoon, my son Max turned into a bird. Not an actual live bird, of course. We had made simple bird masks out of paper, and when he put on his mask something magical happened. His arms spread out; his feet beat a wild rhythm; and his voice warbled a bold new song. My very shy three-year-old guy puffed up with power. And when he removed the mask, his face radiated intense joy, as if he'd been given wings.

Since that enchanting day, masks have been as important to us as crayons or blocks. Hanging on hooks about our kitchen are more than 75 faces: pig, jackal, robot, wolf, and more. Primarily we use them to act out familiar folktales and stories of our own creation. My kids – and other kids over for play dates – call these improvisations “mask games.”

To children, our mask games are pure fun. As a teacher, I see all the educational benefits. While kids exercise their theatrical muscles, they get covert lessons in language and motor development, sequencing, recall, cooperation, decision-making, and creative thinking.

And there are psychological benefits, too. Each mask represents a different trait or emotion. By becoming different characters, kids get the chance to subconsciously explore various aspects of their own personalities.

Of course, you can act out stories without masks, but masks add a special magic. Inhibitions melt behind a mask. That is because the mask conceals your face from the audience. No one can see the real you, and that is empowering. Masks also immediately establish clear new identities. When your child wears an owl mask, she knows she's Owl, and she knows that everyone will recognize her as Owl. That's empowering, too. When my youngest son Simon pretends to be a wild animal without a mask, his cute face prevents us from taking him too seriously. But when he puts on the tiger mask, he looks the part. He knows it, and that knowledge gives him a lot of confidence.

Another great reason to use masks is because they are easy and cheap to make (see “Making Masks,” page 55). In 15 minutes flat, you can make a fabulous mask from a recycled file folder, transforming your child into anything

from an aardvark to the fiery sun. You could never pull that off using elaborate make-up or costumes.

To get the theatrical ball rolling, tell your kids that you're going to act out a folktale or fairy tale with masks. Choose a short, well-loved story, such as “The Three Billy Goats Gruff.” Then let your children pick which characters they want to be. Be adaptable. If you have five children and all five want to play the troll, let five trolls live under the bridge. You can play the parts of the three billy goats. If you have two children and one child wants to be the troll, while the other insists on playing a baby monkey, simply change the story to the “Three Monkeys Gruff.” You can play the older monkey brothers. These adaptations often make the story more memorable – and certainly much more personal.

AFTER YOU HAVE PICKED YOUR characters, make your masks and put them on. With young children (ages two to six), I have found it useful to narrate in addition to playing all the leftover parts. As narrator, I never tell the characters exactly what to say or do, but I do carefully set the stage: “Once upon a time there were three billy goats. . . .”

Since your kids know the story, they will know what to do from there. If anyone gets stuck, simply transform back into the narrator by lifting up your mask and giving a friendly clue: “Then the middle billy goat comes tripping across the bridge.” The narrator also helps to add that crucial sense of closure after the climax: “The goats ate grass and lived happily ever after. The end.”

Do not be surprised if your kids want to start at the beginning as soon as that last phrase pops out of your mouth. I don't know how many performances of *Cats* they've done on Broadway, but we must have produced *Peter and the Wolf* just as many times in our kitchen.

After staging about a zillion familiar tales, you will be ready to move to the next dimension: using masks to cre-





ate original stories. As you can imagine, it's hard to create an impromptu play by committee. To avoid arguments, I pick one child to be the main character. (The other kids won't mind if they know they'll get their turn later.)

Start by asking your main character: Who do you want to become? Your child may choose to be a superhero, a favorite animal, or a ballerina. Accept who or whatever he decides. Next ask your child: What does your character want? In all great stories, characters want something, and it's usually something pretty simple: Goats want grass, pigs want houses, and rabbits named Peter want to explore forbidden gardens. Kids are great at coming up with quick, simple, and dramatic ideas.

MOM: "Who are you going to be?"

MAX: "Lightning Man!"

MOM: "What does Lightning Man want to do?"

MAX: "Send rain down to the earth!"

Ask your dinosaur, batman, or ballerina what he or she wants to do and accept the answer. The goal may be benevolent (to save the planet) or beastly (to gobble up innocent prey). When your child is a hero, it is easy to see the therapeutic benefits of mask games. But remind yourself that pretending to be naughty is beneficial, too. Identifying with a "bad" character gives kids the opportunity to subconsciously express negative emotions, such as jealousy and aggression, in the safety of a make-believe setting.

Once your main character is set, the other players decide their roles. It is important to let kids decide for themselves who they want to become. Part of the fun of improvisation is seeing how different characters will relate to each other. I have only one rule: The main character gets to achieve his or her goal in the end.

The main character should not arrive at the goal too easily, however. To

make the story truly satisfying, you need conflict. Classic stories are made up of three basic parts: The main character wants something (e.g., the goat wants grass); an obstacle gets in the way (troll appears); and the hero overcomes the obstacle (goat outsmarts troll). Success has little meaning if it is obtained too easily. Even preschoolers can sense this. Imagine the goats without the troll? Pigs without a wolf? Peter Rabbit without Mr. McGregor?

If your kids already have been acting out traditional tales, they will intuitively understand the need for conflict in a story. Often, another player will choose to be the main character's foe. But if no one opts to be an obvious obstacle, I add one myself. When Max was a bird who wanted his eggs to hatch, and Simon wanted to play a "brother bird," I became an egg-hungry snake. When Lightning Man wanted to rain on a thirsty earth, and Simon wanted to be a lizard hiding under a rock, I turned into a giant evil sponge that would greedily soak up the rain.

In the beginning, you may want to prepare the actors by spelling out the three-part framework of your story. "Okay, here is our story: A superhero named Lightning Man wants to send rain; an evil sponge is going to try to stop him; and Lightning Man is going to win." Don't fill in the details. When the "curtain" goes up, lightning men, lizards, and sponges can figure out for themselves what they will do and say within the framework.

After you've talked briefly about the framework and made your masks, launch into your story. From there, refrain from interfering as much as possible. The magic comes when you let the story unfold as it will. What you'll find is that your kids will get intense satisfaction out of even a one-minute play, whether they are playing a hero, a helper, or a villain. Every improvisation is a lesson in problem-solving, as the "actors" decide who they'll be and how they will act within the story line. On the spur of the moment, your kids will come up with very inventive and

surprising ways to build up or knock down obstacles. And because everybody knows in advance that the main character eventually will complete his or her mission, you are all really working toward the same goal.

Do not become impatient if your children demand almost constant repetitions of their favorite improvised tales. These reruns might seem boring to you, but they are important for children. Playing certain roles can help your child work out inner conflicts. When Max was experiencing the first pangs of sibling rivalry, he wanted to mask up as a fierce, ravenous Tyrannosaurus Rex almost every day. Confusing and frightening changes were taking place in Max's real world, but at least in his fantasy he got to be the lizard king.

Usually I let my kids decide when and how to play mask games. But sometimes I initiate. One morning when my kids could not stop bickering, I suggested that we mask ourselves up for "The Bremen Town Musicians," a folktale in which the characters must work cooperatively to scare away a robber. Max turned into a donkey; Simon turned into a cat; and their moods turned right around. They had such fun scaring the pants off the robber (me) that the story ended in a big brother-to-brother dancing hug.

The most wonderful thing about making masks with your children, however, is that someone will always surprise you. My now five-year-old Max recently astonished and pleased me by taking on the role of narrator. And yesterday, Simon shocked all of us. For weeks, he had desired only to be Tiger or Snake. But when we began a mask game this morning and I asked him who he wanted to be, he invented a completely new character. "Mean Wolf in spaceship," he said.

We could hardly wait to begin.

Mary Koepke Amato is a danceldrama teacher as well as a freelance writer. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with her husband, two sons, and a full wall of masks.

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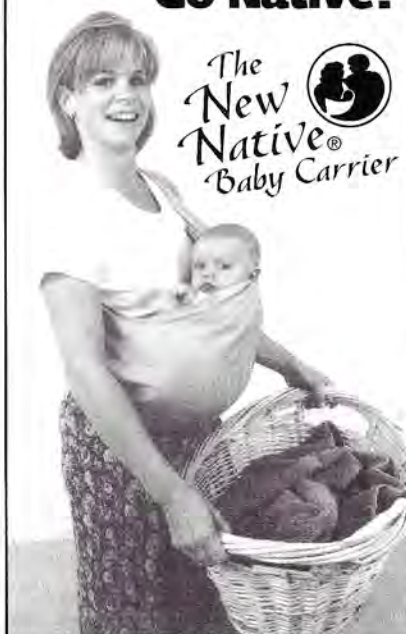
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making masks

We make our masks out of old file folders. They are sturdy, cheap, easy to cut, and – this is an important consideration – comfortable to breathe through.

Here's how to get started.

1. Decide what kind of mask you're going to make: a cat, a bug, a robot, a space alien . . .
2. Draw the basic shape of your character's head on the file folder. (See some examples below.) If, for example, you're drawing a cat, make a simple oval shape with triangles on the top for ears. If you are drawing a ladybug, you might want a fat, round face; but for a robot, you might want a square face. Make sure the basic shape you or your child draws is at least big enough to cover your child's face.
3. Cut out the shape.
4. Hold the mask up to your child's face and draw eye holes approximately where the child's eyes are. Carefully cut out these holes.
5. Decorate the mask with markers or paint.
6. Staple elastic to the sides of the mask near each eye hole. Knot the ends of the elastic first to prevent it from slipping through the staple. You can buy elastic at fabric shops and discount stores; it's usually near the thread.

If your children aren't old enough to draw and cut independently, offer help with the mechanics. But let them decide how their masks will look. When my son made his first mask, he ignored all the brilliant blue, green, yellow, and purple paints and dipped his brush in black. The result was a very idiosyncratic – and magnetic – pitch-black bird.

Keep your first mask project simple. But as you make more masks, become more elaborate with designs and decorations. Add dramatic embellishments such as feathers, sequins, foil eyebrows, or a mouth cut from bright red fabric. For terrific whiskers or bug antennae, bend a pipe cleaner in half and poke the two ends through the back of the mask.

For even more ideas, I recommend the following books:

- *A Collector's Guide to Masks* by Timothy Teuten (Wellfleet Books, 1990)
- *Making Masks and Crazy Faces* by Jen Green (Gloucester Press, 1992)
- *Masks* by Meryl Doney (Franklin Watts, 1995)
- *Masks of Bali* by Judy Slattum (Chronicle Books, 1997)
- *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Masks* (DK Ink Books, 1997)
- *North American Indian Masks* by Frieda Gates (Walker and Company, 1982)

