

Children's Podcasts

Igniting Imaginations *AND* Sparking Conversations

By Rebecca Sheir

HOST/WRITER/PRODUCER, WBUR'S *CIRCLE ROUND* PODCAST

IN AN ERA WHEN SO MANY OF US ARE ABSORBED BY SMARTPHONES, tablets, and laptops, you may not be surprised to hear that young people are not immune. More than 40% of children in the US have their own tablet, and kids 8 and younger spend roughly 50 minutes a day captivated by a mobile device's glowing screen (according to the 2017 study *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight*).

To these children – and their families – I am pleased to offer an antidote that's both high-tech and high engagement:

Children's podcasts.

Remember when family entertainment meant huddling around the radio and feasting your ears on the latest serial drama or comedy program? Well, from science podcasts like *Wow in The World* to literary podcasts like *Book Club For Kids* to storytelling podcasts like *Circle Round* – which I produce for WBUR, Boston's NPR station – today's children's podcasts harken back to those sepia-toned days ... no glowing screen necessary.

Well, almost no glowing screen necessary; you do need an internet-connected device to download a podcast. But good news: once you hit 'play,' you and your kids can let that screen go dark and let your imaginations light up, whether you're driving to soccer practice, staying in on a rainy day, or winding down before bedtime.

And the experience and engagement don't have to end when the episode does. A survey by the podcast consortium Kids Listen shows that 80% of children listen to the same podcast episode more than once, and nearly 20% gobble up the same episode more than ten times! Not only that, but 75% initiate a conversation about what they learned, reenact something they heard, or ask to take part in an activity inspired by the podcast.

On *Circle Round*, we adapt folktales from around the world as sound- and music-rich radio plays for modern audiences. As the host, I end every episode with "Now, it's your turn," an invitation for listeners to take part in a specific activity (e.g., telling a personal story, creating a dramatic scene, drawing a picture) that helps them reflect on the themes in the folktale they just heard. Then I ask them to share their story, scene, or picture with someone they love. The goal is to spark dialogue and get children to connect with others as they explore timeless, universal themes and virtues – from self-acceptance and generosity to persistence and imagination.

It's just one way of using the podcast format to encourage young people to engage with the world and people around them. All they have to do is turn off those glowing screens ... and turn on their imaginations.

Circle Round is one of our favorite children's podcasts. That's why we're so excited to team up with producers Rebecca Sheir and Eric Shimelonis to bring *Onions & Garlic*, a classic Jewish folktale, to a new generation of PJ Library readers. Families with 8-year-olds, look for it in your mailboxes come May 2020!

FIRST LOOK

Illustrator Sabina Hahn brings a scene from *Onions & Garlic* to life.

