Family Storytelling

Nile Stanley and *Brett Dillingham* offer a powerful parenting strategy for developing intellect, language, literacy, and values

As fathers, we want to be there for our children. Parenthood for us takes priority in our lives and must be top flight. As educators, we want to create an intellectually rich home environment so that our children are successful while retaining values. We want for our children what most parents want — happy, healthy, self-sufficient children, who love to learn and who give back to society. Storytelling with our children is the best way we know to create this environment and educate our children in a meaningful way.

Family storytelling offers rich and powerful strategies filled with opportunities for parenting, learning, and teaching. Family storytelling is portable, is easy to learn, creates powerful bonds with your children, and is fun. Parents and educators often are unaware of storytelling, the breadth and depth of folklore, and the instructional potential for intellectual, language, literacy, and moral development. The purpose of this article is to explore the benefits of family storytelling and address the following issues:

- What is family storytelling, and how does it promote effective parenting and nurture language development?
- How can storytelling be used for stimulating intellectual, language, literacy, social, and moral development?
- Does family storytelling have wide acceptance and use by parents and educators?
- What types of stories are best for teaching and learning?

Family Storytelling is Effective Parenting and Teaching

Parents have the opportunity to tell stories at mealtimes, nap and bedtimes, on walks, in the playground, and during drives in the car. Parents and children spend quality time together learning and laughing when telling stories. Through storytelling, beginning at about age two, our children can receive four years of extremely high-quality home schooling before they enter kindergarten. This teaching repertoire focuses on developing the whole child (Levine, 2012) and may include expansive activities based on storytelling, such as reading books aloud, playing computer learning games, doing puzzles, drawing and painting, taking walks, exploring nature, and playing sports. There is an enormous amount of time spent on task learning through narrative stories, and the stories provide ongoing mental growth and stimulation.

Telling stories to your children can maximize the amount of quality time you spend together. Storytelling is not the same as reading stories to your child (Stanley and Dilligham, 2009). A story remains fixed upon the page, the words read one by one. The language of text is more formal than speech. While the reader may embellish the text with vocal inflection and tone, and by pointing to illustrations, the creative repertoire for enhancing meaning is limited. In contrast, telling a story often involves improvisation and, more importantly, audience participation. A storyteller is more likely to embellish a story with facial gestures, body movements, sound effects, props, and audience participation.

Storytelling for Intellectual, Language, Literacy, Social, and Moral Development

According to Mayo Clinic Guide to Your Baby's First Year (2012), multiple studies have shown that a child's mental development and grasp of language are strongly associated with the amount of language that a child is exposed to in the first three years of life. Parents should limit TV and talk more to their children, but, more importantly, engage in back-and-forth communication. Interactive storytelling provides such ample opportunities for conversations between parent and child. It conveys to the child that he or she can be a listener, a teller, a co-constructer in the learning and expressing of language. Literacy and reading specialists tell us that reading comprehension depends on language abilities developed through storytelling and other oral language activities that have been developing since birth.

Telling stories teaches your child important personal, social, and cognitive skills (Stanley and Dillingham, 2009). These skills enhance the ability of a child to interact with and respond to his or her surroundings in intelligent and heartfelt ways. Through stories, a parent teaches the beginning skills of problem solving — the mother lode of genius. Every conversation with the child is an opportunity for that child to think, reason, use language, and understand — even at meta-cognitive levels. Think of conversations like a mental workout. Just as flabby muscles improve with exercise, so IQ levels improve through cognitive stimulation.

Shanahan and Lonigan (2013) reported that "the more complex aspects of oral language, including syntax or grammar, complex measures of vocabulary (such as those in which children actually define or explain word meanings), and listening comprehension were clearly related to later reading comprehension." The implication for family storytelling is that parents and educators should tell a variety of different kinds of stories, because oral language development is the foundation of reading. Telling folktales and literary tales enhances the type of reading comprehension done in school.

Parents and teachers should consider exposing their children to as much language as possible, through conversation, reading, singing, and storytelling. Research by Sobol, Lindauer, and Lowrance (2004) indicates that language development is a two-way street and emphasizes the importance of frequent interactive conversations where children practice responding, verbalizing, and conversing. Nonverbal communication by both parents and children may include drawing, gesturing, mimicking, babbling, and even signing for the deaf to create rich communication. Language development can benefit from complex storytelling that goes beyond simple conversation.

Acceptance and Use of Storytelling by Parents and Educators — A Survey

Palmateer, Fair, Grant, Passi, and Buley (2011) conducted research investigating pre-service teachers' earliest memories of reading and writing and found that personal reflection serves as a springboard for what we believe about teaching and learning. They found that pre-service teachers telling stories of their literacy journeys helped them understand why teachers teach the way they do.

The question of how pre-service teachers experienced family storytelling was investigated in an urban university teacher education class with 19 pre-service teachers, of whom one was male and 18 female. All of the participants in the survey were members of the white racial/ethnic group. The prompt for the open-ended survey was:

In a minimum of 150 words, reflect on your childhood and the role of storytelling. You will want to discuss this with your parents to refresh your memory. Did you grow up with your family telling you stories? Not just reading stories aloud? If you did not experience much storytelling, why do you think not? What kinds of stories did they tell you? Do you tell stories to children (not just read)? Do you think storytelling is used as it could be?

The narrative results were analyzed to help understand how this class of pre-service teachers had experienced storytelling. Results showed half of the pre-service teachers had experienced family storytelling as a child. Almost half had not experienced this storytelling. In contrast, all of the participants had experienced being read to as children.

The results of the survey indicated that family storytelling is not being used as it could be. Interestingly, all reported having been read aloud to by parents. The primary storyteller tended to be grandparents, followed by parents, occasionally relatives, and rarely the father alone.

The participants in the survey were asked why they thought storytelling was not more prominent in their memories of childhood. Divorce, lack of time because of parents' work schedule, and an emphasis on reading stories instead of telling stories were possible reasons that participants felt that storytelling was not emphasized.

When asked, "Why do you think you did not experience storytelling as a child?" the most frequent reason cited was divorce. One participant reported, "My childhood was very painful because my parents divorced and there was a lot of strife in the home." Another reported, "There was much yelling and screaming, and little time for storytelling."

The primary storytellers were grandparents for the participants in the survey. The oral tradition may be part of the older generation, or perhaps the grandparents had more time available to them to tell stories to their grandchildren. Perhaps those who were told stories as children are now telling stories themselves as adults and using them to teach literacy. Parents and relatives were storytellers also, but to a lesser extent than grandparents. Fathers were storytellers in a minority of cases.

Slightly more than half of the 19 pre-service teachers who took the open-ended survey reported that they practiced telling stories to children currently. It was expected that if a person did not experience family storytelling, he or she would be unlikely to be a storyteller. Without rich storytelling experiences and explicit modeling of how to use storytelling for teaching, it was unlikely that storytelling would have a significant impact on parenting or educational practice. The survey results were consistent with this expectation.

Types of Stories for Teaching and Learning

The types of stories reported in the pre-service teacher survey were most often family stories. The other types of stories consisted of folktales, literary stories, and blended stories. Personal stories typically focus on a family member overcoming challenges. An example of the start of a personal story is "Let me tell you about how Uncle Joe started his own business after the war." Literary stories are those from books. These are beneficial to children due to complexity, syntax, and a format that is aligned with future reading and reading comprehension of children. Blended stories are a mixture of personal stories and literary stories.

Parents and educators will want to connect the stories told at home to the books read at school. Blended storytelling is the way to do this. Literary tales and personal tales teach the academic vocabulary needed for success in school; blended storytelling connects these two types in a meaningful way.

An example of blended storytelling is a parent and child exploring a narration of daily experiences. This is a tremendous way to load up on new vocabulary that stimulates learning and forges new brain connections. Using the popular children's literary story "This Is the Way" (Fuge, 2008) can provide a blended storytelling experience. The benefits of blended storytelling are enormous. They combine personal narration with literary tradition. By the time a child enters kindergarten, he or she may have been told hundreds of the greatest stories of all time.

Here are some examples of how parents and teachers can use storytelling for the benefit of the child. They may interact with a child to increase participation, complexity, and elaboration, including the following:

- What do you think will happen next?
- What would you do?
- Can you finish the story?
- Retell the story.
- Now tell another completely new adventure for your favorite character.

Parents and teachers can immerse children in oral language development, the foundation of literacy, through rich storytelling experiences, beginning at preschool and continuing through high school in the following ways:

- Using different types of storytelling, such as emergent stories (not complete narratives) of show and tell or sharing of daily events. "Let me show you the interesting rock we found on our hike toady."
- Using personal family stories for building character and values. "Let me tell you about Grandpa Dillingham and how he got a favorite pocket watch."
- Using folktales for developing story sense and vocabulary. "There once was a gingerbread man…" (See Brett Dillingham's storytelling at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdtagE_8zhg)
- Using literature (literary storytelling) for developing story sense and vocabulary. "Let me tell you the story of And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street by Dr. Seuss (1937)"
- Using blended stories (personal tale + literary story). See Affinito (2010)
- Using http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/blending-fiction-nonfiction-improve-262.html for lesson plans that support students demonstrating what they have learned about the topic and about genre by writing an original piece that blends together narrative and expository elements. "After I climbed the beanstalk, I met the giant and taught him how to heat his house with solar energy instead of coal."

What Stories are the Sources of These Blended Stories?

Questions

1. The family decided to move to Florida, to the land of milk and honey. New Mexico, where they lived, had become a dust bowl. So dad loaded up the whole family in the old truck…

2. This is the story of how a girl came to live with us. One day I heard a baby crying. I went out the front door, and in a basket was a beautiful baby girl. A note said, "This is a little girl, she is an incredible wizard with magical powers… take care of her."

Answers

1. (Steinbeck, 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath*)

2. (Rowling, 1997 *Harry Potter*)*

• Using place-based (personal tale + content). "Wilder pulled a great big fish out of the Juneau creek and then told all about the creatures that lived there." Have your child tell stories as a tour guide for your town or neighborhood. Take a notebook and have your child become an expert for places around town. This will make family trips educational.

• Using digital storytelling. "These pictures of our trip to New Mexico show how we…" See Stanley, N. & Dillingham, B. (2011, February). "Making Learners Click with Digital Storytelling." *Language Magazine*, 10 (6) 24-29. https://languagemagazine.com/?p=1756

• Using informational texts or nonfiction stories. Mosel (2012) argues that for students to meet the demands of the Common Core Standards they will have to "read and write more narrative nonfiction: writing that tells a factual story, sometimes even a personal one, but also makes an argument and conveys information in vivid, effective ways." She recommends teachers use more models of fine expository writing found in newspapers and magazines, like the "Talk of the Town" stories found in the New Yorker. ProPublica.org is an excellent source of narrative nonfiction by an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest. It focuses exclusively on truly important stories, stories with "moral force." Stanley (2012) recently wrote how the art of storytelling accomplishes Common Core Standards. This can be read at: https://www.maupinhouse.com/media/upload/CCSS_for_Performance_Literacy_through_Storytelling.pdf

Since ancient times, stories have been shared in every culture and every land as the means to educate, entertain, and instill knowledge, values, and morals. Educators should consider the privileged role of family storytelling as a powerful tool for developing literacy, language, and values. Research shows that storytelling is much less common than reading and not as prevalent as it should be. Family stories and folktales are the mother of all literacy; literacy is the foundation for all academics. Many different kinds of stories are available, but parents tend to favor personal stories and folktales. Research suggests using different kinds of stories, including nonfiction narratives, will optimize students' growth in oral language abilities, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension.

References

Affinito, S. (2010). "Blending fiction and nonfiction to improve comprehension and writing skills." *ReadWriteThink*. Retrieved on Nov. 23, 2012, from http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/blending-fiction-nonfiction-improve-262.html

Dr. Seuss (1937). *And to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street.* NY: Random House

Fuge, C. (2008). *This Is the Way*. NY: Sterling Publishing

Good, P. P. (Ed). (2012). *Mayo Clinic Guide to Your Baby's First Year*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books

Levine, M. (2012). *Teach Your Children Well*. NY: Harper Collins Publishers

Isbell, R., Sobol, J., Lindauer, L., & Lowrance, A. (2004). "The effects of storytelling and story reading on the oral language complexity and story comprehension of young children."*Early Childhood Education Journal*, 31,3, 157-163

Mosel, S. (2012, November 22). "What children should read. The Opinion Pages of the New York Times." Retrieved from *New York Times* on Nov. 22, 2012, from http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/22/what-should-children-read/

Palmateer, K., Fair, A., Grant, S., Passi, A., & Buley, J. (2011) "Using personal literacy as catalysts." *Language Magazine*, retrieved on Nov. 20, 2012, from https://languagemagazine.com/?page_id=2099

Rowling, J.K. (1997). Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. NY: Scholastic

Shanahan, T., & Lonigan, C.J. (2013). Early Childhood Literacy: The national early literacy panel and beyond. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing

Stanley, N. (2012). Storytelling Accomplishes Common Core Standards. Maupin House Publishing Author Website, retrieved on November 22, 2012 from https://www.maupinhouse.com/media/upload/CCSS_for_Performance_Literacy_throughStorytelling.pdf

Stanley, N. & Dillingham, B. (2011, Feb.). "Making Learners Click with Digital Storytelling." *Language Magazine*, 10 (6) 24-29 https://languagemagazine.com/?p=1756

Stanley, N., & Dillingham, B. (2009) Performance Literacy Through Storytelling. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House

Steinbeck, J. (1939). *The Grapes of Wrath*. NY: The Viking Press.

Uchiyama, T. "Reading versus telling of stories in the development of English vocabulary and comprehension of young second language learners." *Reading Improvement*,168-178

Dr. Nile Stanley is the graduate coordinator of the Department of Childhood Education, Literacy, and TESOL at the University of North Florida. He can be reached at nstanley@unf.edu.

Brett Dillingham is an internationally known educator, author, and storyteller from Juneau, Alaska and director of the Performance Literacy Institute. He may be reached at brett@brettdillingham.com.