

Telling Tales to Help Children Cope

“ONCE UPON A TIME there was a little girl who woke up in the middle of the night and couldn’t go back to sleep. The little girl got up and played with her toys. But when she came to preschool the next day, she was very, very tired. She started crying and kicking her feet.” This story captured the attention of the “main character”—a tired preschooler in the middle of throwing a tantrum. Hearing the story of her “bad night” was soothing.

Research shows that personalized stories like this one have great potential for helping children to better understand situations and even respond to them more appropriately. The tired child in this anecdote not only stopped her outburst, she was able to move on to another activity.

Through the ages, adults have told children stories about their lives. “When you were little, you wouldn’t go to bed without your bear.” Parents also instill closeness when they recall the details of events that the family has enjoyed together. “Remember when we camped in Yosemite and looked at the stars before bed?”

Recalling events helps to build a child’s sense of an autobiography, which sometimes includes events she was too young to even remember. Stories give a sense of sequence, and hearing stories that recount their history helps children develop a sense of self. Research shows that allowing each family member to share his or her unique perspectives on events helps build self-esteem in adolescents. “I didn’t have a good time river rafting. I liked it when we went to the ocean.”

Recalling events as a story can help children let go of the difficult events of the day as well as relive the happy ones. Even hearing the words “Once upon a time” allows us a sense of distance from the events that unfold, making the process more soothing than simply asking a child to recount something like an argument with a friend.

In preschool, teachers frequently use stuffed animals to tell stories that explore interactions in the classroom. Common themes include the frustration of wanting a toy someone else is playing with or wondering what to do when your friend plays with someone else. Circle times are surprisingly quiet when these stories are introduced, since the children find such catharsis in hearing descriptions of these challenges and ways to resolve them.

At home, parents can help children cope with situations by telling stories about real concerns. One of our mothers wrote a story about a girl who sometimes went to the school office about various physical complaints when she actually might have been upset about other things.

Stories are a powerful way to expand perspectives and help children cope. Parents can tell stories from their own lives or make up simple plots about a child’s first visit to the dentist, the questions involved in starting at a new school, the reassuring details of a hospital stay. Stories like these reduce anxiety and help children feel more secure portraying situations in a personal, reassuring way.

Creating simple stories for children shows that we cherish events in their lives and take joy in their learning. Tales are also famous for unifying us. We learn that others have had the same dilemmas, feelings, and struggles but have learned to move forward with success.

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