



Stories

Their Powerful Role in Early Language and Literacy

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Brendan, 23 months, spies cookies on the table after a family dinner. He reaches up to Grandpa, indicating he wants to sit on his lap. Once there, Brendan points to the cookies and says, "Have some?" Grandpa gives him a cookie and he immediately devours it. He reaches for another, asking, "More cookie?" Grandpa hands Brendan another cookie and the scene replays. This time Grandpa says, "No more."

Brendan gets down, but soon returns to the table and asks, "More cookie?" Grandpa has put them away and tells him, "All gone." Brendan responds, "All gone," and leaves the kitchen. When he returns moments later, he points to the table and tells all the adults in the room, "Cookies all gone." Brendan is telling a story about his experience.

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg..

Beginning in the earliest years of childhood, stories help us understand our world and make sense of our lives. Each day, through our experiences with the world and others, we build new stories that later become our life novels.

Stories are not static; plots and endings are ever changing and relevant in new and different ways depending on each person's understanding. From the start, stories are a central part of a child's learning and development. Through stories, infants and toddlers begin to organize events that occur to or around them. They also learn the essential skills needed to read and write.

How stories help our brains organize

"Storytelling is perhaps the most powerful way that human beings organize experience" (Engel 1996/1997, 3). The practice is timeless and universal. Stories help us define our relationships to the people we meet—an acquaintance, colleague, friend, family member, and so on—and prioritize daily events. Through stories, we organize and "put to voice" our life experiences, and then we pass along our wisdom, history, and culture from one generation to the next. Because stories are powerful tools we use to organize, share, and make meaning of our experiences throughout our lives, they become a natural part of the way we teach and care for the very youngest children.

Imitating the adults in their lives, children use stories to process and reflect on their own experiences. This is what Brendan did in the vignette above. He experienced something, thought about it, and then went on to tell his experience to oth-

ers. Brendan was sharing a story.

Adults can share stories through language, but infants and toddlers tell their stories with a flick of their eyes, the point of a finger, or a coo. Indeed, “as early as the first years of life, even with limited communication skills, [young children] begin to share their stories with people who are willing to listen and observe” (Jervay-Pendergrass & Brown 1999/2000, 25). Recognizing and responding to the stories that babies and toddlers share reinforces their will to communicate and their sense of themselves as powerful storytellers.

The meaning of stories

The meaning of stories in the lives of infants and toddlers follows a developmental process that evolves across time.

- A baby of six weeks rests comfortably in her father’s arms as he reads *Goodnight Moon* to her. The rhythmic, soothing inflections of his voice and the gentle rocking lull her into a quiet sleep. This baby does not have the cognitive capacity to understand the story’s plot or illustrations, but she is learning that Daddy’s arms are a safe, calm place to be and that language can be joyful and comforting. Shared experiences like these lay the foundation for an appreciation of language, reading, and storytelling.
- A 10-month-old boy is busy banging a board book on a plastic pail. As his family child care provider sits down next to him, he hands her the book. She responds, “Would you like me to read this to you?” The boy answers by climbing into her lap. She opens the book and begins to read. He looks intently at the pictures, occasionally hitting the pages of the book with his hand and giggling at the animal noises his caregiver makes as she reads. He is learning that he is an effective communicator and that reading stories is a fun and pleasurable experience.
- A 22-month-old tells her older brother the story of going to the store with her uncle. “Juice!” she says, and points to the bottle on the counter. Her brother nods and says, “It looks like you got something else, too.” “Gracie got balloon,” she squeals, as she looks up with delight at her new red balloon. The major points of her story are conveyed in short phrases or sentences or gestures, but also in her emotion. She is an expressive storyteller.
- A three-year-old loves to hear the story of his birth. With his family’s support and permission, his teacher shares the story: “Right before you were born, your parents went to the hospital. Your Nana and Grandpa and Aunt Mary all came to the hospital to wait for you to be born. They had to wait in a room outside, and your daddy kept going out to give them news. When you were born, your daddy ran down the hall to tell everyone you were finally here! Everyone was so happy.” He asks for this story again and again. Occasionally, he’ll tell his teacher the story, and once she hears him telling a classmate about his birth. He remembers the words and sequence, can repeat the story, and, most importantly, recognizes himself as the story’s hero.

Messages stories convey

Stories can be heard or told, read or written, and experienced. The message of the most important stories we tell our children is how much they are loved. Children who feel loved love themselves and other people, and they love to learn.

Remember that much of infant and toddler communication is nonverbal. Very young children need patient and willing listeners who can accurately read their cues (for example, cries, gurgles, coos, facial expressions, taps on an adult’s arm or leg, and gestures) and respond appropriately. When adults respond lovingly to attempts at communication from infants and toddlers, we encourage and nurture their narrative skills. We are also providing them with the implicit message that they are effective communicators and, most important, worthy of being noticed.

The strategies listed in this article are adapted from ZERO TO THREE’s forthcoming training curriculum, *Cradling Literacy: Building Teachers’ Skills to Nurture Early Language and Literacy Birth to Five*.

THINK FIRST

- What early memories do you have of experiences with books and story-telling?
- What are some of your favorite stories from childhood (books and family stories)? Why are they your favorites? When you recall these stories, how do you feel?
- What are some early stories you heard as a child that have had an effect on you, both personally and professionally?

TRY IT

Think about positive moments you have had with infants and toddlers in your care throughout the day. Share these stories with the children. From families find out about stories they cherish and that are especially important to them—a child's birth or adoption story, favorite children's books, a special time spent together, or an activity they love. Invite family members to lead a storytelling time at the center.

Babies love to hear our voices. Talk with them! Repeat their sounds, and encourage them to make sounds back. Respond to a baby's cues: If she shows you she is unhappy, comfort her; if he points to something, show it to him and tell him what it is. By doing these things, we tell babies that they are good communicators and they can count on us to care for them.

Share stories every day! It is never too early to share stories (written and oral) with babies. When they hear stories from loved and trusted adults, infants and toddlers discover they too can share stories, experiencing the joy of storytelling and the magic of words on a page coming to life.

References

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