

Importance of Oral Stories and Books

By Pavithra Rajagopalan

The Importance of Storytelling

As educators, parents, trained Montessorians, most of us are already convinced of the need for stories and books in the lives of children. We use them in our interactions regularly. This article is not going to focus on what kind of stories need to be told and what kind of books need to be read and how we need to it. It is also not about the age-old conundrum of why we do not introduce fantasy and mythology to children too early. That is a different conversation in many ways. The author is taking it as a given that we all read to the children and we tell them stories on a regular basis, no matter the content.

Looking at how we use it and what we know already, in our primary classrooms (3-6 classrooms), stories and books make up an important aspect of the spoken language work. Children gather for stories which range in topics based on factual and fictional themes, which are seasonal, appropriate to the festivals being celebrated, related to their daily life experiences. Similarly the books are chosen with care to offer a variety of experiences visually through the art in the pictures and also with vocabulary that is varied and rich to suit the needs of the growing child. The adults are ever vigilant to make use of any opportunity to tell a story or read a book. Some adults are better story tellers than others while some use the books in a very effective way.

In the elementary classrooms, storytelling is taken to a whole new level as an application or tool, which caters to the needs of the child of this age group. Stories form a part of the elementary curriculum and many elementary teachers even call themselves the 'story tell-ers of the truth' because they present complex ideas pertaining to our world and the uni-verse in the form of stories that appeal to the immense strength of the elementary child's imagination. Books offer these children the opportunity to explore so many of the ideas that are introduced to them in their lessons further, and to use the information they find in books to expand their knowledge base. Even those of us who are parents to children in this group are very aware of the need to tell stories and are always given assignments of story telling and book reading by their children's teachers.

So this article is not about having to convince us of the need for oral stories and books. We are already a converted group in this regard, Instead, it will focus more on why stories and books are essential in the lives of children and what aspect of their development they aid. This article will make an attempt to understand the science behind the technique and understand what research is saying are the benefits of stories and books in child development. While oral stories and books are different from each other, their benefits are inter-linked. So they are going to be clubbed together as a set of related activities that we do and look at the benefits both of them bring to the children in their development.

Language Development

Let us start at the most obvious level. We know that stories and books have a very positive effect on children's language development. When we are an audience in any talk, the most impactful and memorable aspects of the talk are the anecdotes that the presenter shares. They engage the memory and beyond that, ensure recall as well. This is probably because, we as a people have a need to connect with the other. When we hear these stories related to the presenter, it makes us feel closer and more vested in the topic as well.

Additionally, stories and books offer very young children the possibility of listening to an expanded vocabulary, but that which is based around a certain idea or topic.

"A green hunting cap squeezed the top of a fleshy balloon of a head..."

When we tell stories, our language changes. Irrespective of the language we are telling the story, we are more precise in the terms that we use. In addition to the vocabulary, tell-ing stories with expression and using the body adds another dimension of making this language that we use, convey more than the meaning the words may hold. Children catch on to this aspect of the stories very quickly and try to do the same when they are telling their own too. They add all the right connectors at the right place to make up their own story – once upon a time, and then all of a sudden, do you know what happened, etc. When they see books, seeing the images and symbols that stand for an idea in the book helps them later when they have to write and read themselves,

where they have to use symbols to re-create ideas from their own head. It is also said that children who grow up around households that have books, any kind of books, grow up to have better chances of overcoming literacy difficulties in later life, because of the inherent nature and advantage that a literate and reading household holds in its attitude towards knowledge.

Creative Expression

Research also shows that stories are a legitimate tool for unleashing the children's capacity to be creative in their expression, problem solving and communicating with the world. When children have had enough experience of being told stories, and are in an environment where they are heard, they develop a cadence that is very particular to a story. They realise that all stories have a beginning which has an introduction, followed by the crux which has the denouement, and a resolution at the end. They internalise this structure, and in the stories that the children tell, we see them expressing themselves and offering us solutions in their own inimitable ways to the problems around us.

It has also been found that stories can be used in conjunction with what is called the Socratic method or dialogue - where we discuss, analyse and question. Stories can be used as tools to do exactly all of these. When we use the characters in the stories to discuss and analyse complex, moral, intellectual thought, it becomes more of an objective space to hold this discussion in. It offers an opportunity to expand the remit of these stories too. Teachers also have found that children's drawings are stories in themselves, and if probed children will give us a whole narrative around a drawing. Many teachers even write these stories down as a marker and milestone indicator for children's growing capacities. Stories and books help create order and help children see things in sequence. We have all been in situations where we have been reprimanded by children for omitting aspects of a story or skipping a page while reading. While creating the mental image in their minds, they are putting things in place.

Stories and books also pique children's curiosity to think about the characters in the story being told, open up their minds and imagination to the lives of other creatures through factual books. Stories and therefore, books, provide keys to study any specialty - history, geography, botany, zoology, art, science. All areas of human interest can be explored through stories and books, and

they open up immense worlds of innumerable experiences and countless wisdom to draw from.

Emotional Development

This then brings us to emotional development. Stories offer a very neat way to communicate, both for the adult and the child, about emotions within a safe framework. Sometimes children find it difficult to identify and name the exact emotion that they are experiencing. Coming to terms with them through stories makes it an easier hurdle to cross sometimes. Hearing stories about another child or human being who is experiencing the same emotion as me makes us feel less alone and even feel stronger. It even helps us feel empathy and compassion for the other. Even for us as adults, when we identify ourselves in the story of another, we feel a sense of kinship and want to reach out. Children are great empaths from the time of birth and stories provide a legitimate avenue for them to express this side of themselves. Reading books that match children situations in life make for great conversation starters. Having a sibling, losing a loved one, can be too complicated to talk about. Reading them as stories offers a safe space and a framework within which to discuss and acknowledge difficult emotions.

Stories as Human Creation

When we think about stories and books that are told for emotional, cognitive or creative development, we have to necessarily think about where they originate. What inspires us to tell stories and write the books that children enjoy. Where do they come from? When we examine this idea, we realise that first and foremost, stories and books are part of human creation. They stem from the life of humans in relation to the world around us. In our interaction with the people, animals, plants and things around us, through time, we have created narratives to immortalise this relationship with the world. Stories define us as a species. It is one of those unique things that is specific to us. It can be called a character trait even. Be it the cave paintings of early man, the stories passed down through generations, of mythology, the tablets from iron age, parchment from Alexandria through to the many varied and structured forms of storytelling popular today, recording human experiences is part of how we communicate. Stories and books have helped us preserve and pass on knowledge, create complex societal structures and add to our capacity for thought and language. Without stories, we would be a very different species.

Children are inheritors of this legacy. Every child is born a story teller and they help us to carry forward the stories of human experiences to the future generations. This needs to be acknowledged by the adults around. We need to realise how intrinsic stories are to human progress. It is much more than just a tool for language development. Therefore creation of a story and book friendly environment is essential because it aids the natural processes within the child. We know that when natural processes are aided, it helps in creation of a more harmonious individual. When we have harmonious individuals who are in possession of the knowledge and wisdom that stories and books offer, they learn from our past mistakes, take into account lessons learnt and they go on to creating a world order which is more in line with how we envision it in our minds. inclined towards peaceful co-existence. Through stories and books, we are able to re-create a natural order of things as they ought to be. We might think it exhausting when we have to tell the same story or read the same book for the umpteenth time. But for that child, we are helping them fix in their mind a state of affairs in the world, as they should be. When they encounter this order repeatedly, they internalise it and are able to re-create it in the outside world. So, if we offer them stories of the highest forms of human endeavour and virtue, that is what they will re-create in the world around them.

“That’s what we do, we storytellers. We restore order with imagination. We instil hope, again and again and again.”



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This article is based on a webinar organised by the Indian Montessori Foundation presented by Pavithra Rajagopalan on Saturday, July 11, 2020. Below are answers provided by the author to some of the questions raised by participants.

Question: My daughter is four years old. She speaks only in English though she understands other languages. Even if I try to tell stories in our mother tongue or Hindi, she is not interested. Or she likes me to explain the story in English. What can I do?

Answer: Do NOT translate. Do not worry about the children understanding. Their ability and skill for language is all powerful at this stage. So it is best that we stick to one language at a time. If you are reading a bi-lingual book, read it once in one language at one stretch. The next time you read it, you can read it in the other language. Do not mix up the languages in one sitting

Question: What kind of stories should we tell children of this age?

Answer: The stories we tell children must be related to life around us - people, flora, fauna and the human relationship with them all. Read both fiction and non-fiction. Look for books that have beautiful language and are beautifully illustrated. Books must be age appropriate. When we watch our children, we come to know what they are interested in. Follow your child's interests. It might be animals, plants or stories about other children. Listen to the children and choose stories and books accordingly. Read from day one, or from today - this will help us let go of our anxieties for the child. Even if they don't seem to be interested, or understand, if we keep at it, there will come a time when they will become involved. When you start, start with a story or book that you know well and enjoy. Start with a short story. We need to role model, interest, relationship with books - children become interested in whatever their loved ones show an enthusiasm for. So if we are genuinely excited, that will be passed on to the child

Question: Can we tell them stories about talking animals that wear clothes?

Answer: Do not tell children fantasy stories when they are very young - for the child under 5, they are still building their image of the world. So when they are young, their experience of what is real and what is not is limited. At this stage, if we bring in aspects which require a flight of the imagination, it might be too much for them to comprehend, or it might come in the way of their grasp and understanding of reality. So, it is important that we establish

aspects of the real world with them first, and use this very solid understanding to help imagine. For instance, for them to understand that the stories Jataka tales or stories with talking animals, we have to give them ample time and experience of the actual behaviour of these animals first. Once that has firmly taken root, they are now ready to use the stories of talking animals as metaphors for our own lives.

Question: My son wants me to read same story again and again? How is this helpful?

Answer: As adults, it is exhausting and even boring for us to tell or read the same story. For this young child, there are many internal processes that are happening which are helping them in their development. These are invisible processes, but if we have faith in them, then we will see the results of this patience and persistence soon. It might be in the form of the child's sudden interest in telling their own stories, or reading on their own, making up their own stories, using words from the stories in the right context. We will see the benefits of this repetition one fine day.