

Connecting Through Stories

When your children ask for a story, do you head for the bookshelf, or look for a DVD you can play? If you do, you're missing a golden opportunity to do some easy connecting and coaching. You've got everything you need without moving an inch. Take a moment to think and remember, then sit down and tell them family tale. It may seem awkward at first, but soon you'll realize you've developed a useful parenting tool that's fun for all.

Family memories

Telling a family story involves choosing a memory and giving it some life. Here are some ideas:

- Tell them something **about themselves**: where their names come from; the day they were born; the first time their grandparents saw them.
- Talk **about yourself** and your own memories: the way you and your partner met, the best gift you ever received, the time you were most scared when you were little.
- Look back to your **family's roots**: try to remember stories about when your own parents' were growing up; if your family came from elsewhere, tell your children stories about that place, whether it was 500 or 5000 kilometres away.
- Get inspiration from the **things around you**: tell them how that vase on the shelf came into your collection; talk about the holiday you went on when you bought that souvenir spoon.
- Tell a story about the **season**: if it's fall, tell about Hallowe'en costumes; if it's winter, remember back to skating and adventures in the snow.

Storytelling can happen anywhere you and your children are together. You can be sorting laundry, driving to the grocery store, walking to the bus stop... or cuddling together in a darkened bedroom at the end of the day.

Stories are told, not recited

Telling a story is a **two-way communication**, very like having a chat. Expect your children to jump in to ask a question or correct a detail. You can tailor your story just to suit them. The story starts when they are ready and wraps up when they become restless.

Learn to use **gestures** and **tone** to enhance your story. With practice, you'll be able to pitch and pace your voice and use movements, gestures and pauses. A bit of exaggeration of usual mannerisms will captivate your young listeners. As in any conversation, forgetting a detail is not a big problem. Storytellers often make detours with phrases like, "Did I mention that..." or "What she'd forgotten until just this moment was that..."

The difference between stories and chatter is that stories have a **point to make**. Something happens that is worth knowing. Perhaps the main character is honest, stingy, confident or overbearing. and it caused a problem, a crisis or a humorous situation.

Play to your audience

You'll soon learn what kind of story your children enjoy. When they're very young, children like to hear the same story over and over again. They also like repetition of phrases within the story, like the refrain in a song. Sound effects, like cows that moooo and bells that go ding dong, are also a sure bet to get their attention.

Older children go for action, surprises and drama. Teenagers like personal experience stories, especially ones about times when you were embarrassed or anxious or made mistakes. It's reassuring to know that the same difficult emotions plagued you when you were their age.

What's the benefit?

There are all sorts of reasons to tell your children stories in your own words.

- Story time builds **family connections**. You and your children share a fun, creative experience. At the same time, your children are learning more about your life, your reactions and your roots.
- Children learn to **concentrate** and become active listeners.
- You stretch children's **imagination** with the word pictures you draw in your stories.
- When you tell stories that involve **dealing with difficult emotions**, you can give children relief from their own strong feelings. For instance, in a story, you can acknowledge children's fears and calm their worries. Even bad memories can inspire tales about difficulties lived through and overcome.
- Sometimes you can use stories **to provide children with guidance** without lecturing. If a child is facing a tough situation, you can tell a story where the main character is dealing with a similar problem. In this way, you help the child look at the situation one step removed. Often it's easier to consider consequences from this distance. You can stop at one point and ask, "What do you think might happen now?" or "What do you think this person should do?"

Once you get started, you'll catch the bug and start saving up stories for quiet moments together. Go ahead, tell a few tales!

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