Tell Me a Story!

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Stories are filled with lots of new words

Sharing books is a great way to help your child learn to read and write. But there is something just as important that you can do every day that will help children grow into becoming future readers—sharing stories through everyday conversations. Sharing stories is a bridge between speaking and reading that begins in infancy and continues throughout childhood.

Sharing stories is a way to build vocabulary, improve language skills and develop the love of learning. These are the foundations of reading and writing well (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999).

Sharing stories is a simple way to use everyday moments with children to respond to their curiosity and interest in the people, things and events that fill their world. Like sharing books, sharing stories with children takes advantage of the fact that knowledge and love for reading develop through social experiences—the relationships children have with caring adults in their lives. The good news about this valuable tool for building literacy is that it just takes two—you and your child—and every parent can do it every day.

From a picture comes a story

“Honey, do you know who that is? That’s Grammy when she was a little girl.”

Your daughter looks surprised. She asks, “Grammy’s horse?”

“Yes, that’s Grammy’s horse Dakota”

“I like horses,” your child says.

“Grammy likes horses, too. Dakota was Grammy’s favorite horse. She raised her from a baby horse. She brushed her every day and fed her every day and when she was big enough, she rode her every day. What do you think it would feel like to ride a horse?”

“Big, but fun. Mommy ride with me?”

Sharing stories is as easy as that. The mother noticed her child’s fascination with the picture and took the opportunity to tell a story based on that curiosity, using language to add to her daughter’s understanding. The next time they’re at the library together, they might choose a book about horses, helping the child connect oral stories with books.

Research Spotlight
1 to 5 years

Helpful parenting tips answers some of their questions, sparks their curiosity, and builds your relationship.

Skills and understanding of how stories work. It is also a way of engaging with children that

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Be a good role model. Just as reading in front of a child sets a good example, so does having a favorite story, singing together, reciting a favorite rhyme, or even telling knock-knock jokes.

Be creative. Learning about language and stories can take many forms, such as retelling a story or using open-ended conversation starters. "What do you suppose that tree got to be so big?" Open-ended questions provide a window into what the child is thinking and feeling and open up dialogue.

Encourage your child’s imagination by using open-ended conversation starters, such as, "How do you think our family could celebrate my birthday?" or "What would you name this new dog?" Just like sharing books, sharing stories with children is a bridge between speaking and reading that begins in infancy and continues throughout childhood.

Tune into your child’s attention and interest. If he becomes bored or distracted, end the story right there. Be ready to keep going or to stop altogether. Sometimes a parent might want to pick up the story later and continue where they left off. Keep stories and conversations fun and interesting.

Curiosity will lead children in many directions, so let them choose the subjects you discuss as much as possible. The more involved, interested, and motivated they are, the more they will learn.

Research-based Information for Successful Parenting
Stories are filled with lots of new words that children hear. Experiences—the relationships children have with caring adults in their lives. The good news about this interest in the people, things and events that fill their world. Like sharing books, sharing stories with the foundations of reading and writing develop the love of learning. These are the building blocks of literacy that can also shape a child’s attitude toward reading later in life (Burns et al., 1999).

Even babies love stories
Even the youngest children can be the star of shared stories. As you change your baby’s diaper, have a “conversation” with her about what the two of you are doing. “Tasha is kicking her foot. Look at that foot move up and down! I wonder if Mommy can catch that little foot.” Even though your infant can’t yet participate in this conversation by talking, you can encourage her to participate by taking turns just as you would with an older child—stopping and letting her respond with smiles, giggles or eye contact with you.

Everyday conversations are little stories
Questions are the child’s way of asking the parent for an answer that makes sense on the child’s level (Gray, 1997). In other words, some answers to a child’s question can turn into stories and encourage further conversation and others do not. Let’s say you’re in the kitchen cooking and your preschooler wanders in and asks, “What are you doing Mom?” If you say, “Just cooking,” the conversation might stop there. But if you answer, “I’m chopping up the lettuce for our salad. What else do you think we could put in the salad?” then you’re inviting your child to continue the conversation.

Here’s another example of starting a conversation:

“Why do we have to go to bed?” a three-year-old asks.

Mommy responds, “Well, one reason is that our bodies get tired and we have to rest them so we can be strong and healthy. Why else do you think we have to go to bed?”

Her toddler adds, “Because you have to be asleep to have dreams.”

“Are you right? What do you dream about?” Mommy asks with a smile.

At home with sharing stories
Your home is a great place to share stories and conversations with your child. Infants and toddlers are curious about everything that goes on around them. Talking about a dream your child had, a play date, or what happened at daycare builds language skills and helps him understand how things work. By sharing a story, you are teaching your child how to listen and how to ask questions. These are important building blocks of literacy that can also shape a child’s attitude toward reading later in life (Burns et al., 1999).

Children also benefit when they see parents sharing stories with each other (Burns et al., 1999). Hearing dinner table conversations in which each parent shares the events of their day with each other exposes young children to even more examples of shared stories. Parents are role models for their children in the literacy process. When children observe their parents sharing stories they will imitate what they see (Bergin, 2001; Burns et al., 1999).

References:

For more information on parenting and early learning, or to order copies of this Spotlight, visit www.ParentingCounts.org.