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Family Storytelling: Involving Caregivers in Promoting Successful Early Language and Literacy Development

Catherine Gutierrez-Gomez

There is increasing evidence that reinforces the belief that having strong oral experiences prior to entering school is one of the predictors for later success in literacy learning (Perez, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Routman, 1991). Children that come from homes where families have nurtured the development of oral language acquire pre-reading knowledge and skills, such as story comprehension and understanding story structure (Routman, 1991; Morrow, 1985, 1993), have a conceptual knowledge of the sound and meaning of language and have more extensive vocabularies (Heath, 1985). Among the powerful oral language practices that contribute to the acquisition of these pre-reading skills is the telling and retelling of stories.

Stories entertain and, therefore, engage and motivate learners. Instructionally, they are useful to teach a lesson, as well as to recount a historical event, as practice for the art of public speaking, to prompt memories of special people, times and place. It appears, however, that because of our changing world, we are getting further and further away from these practices. There is not much time for sharing stories of the day's events because we live in such a fast-paced, high-tech, commercialized world, where we are constantly on the run. Nevertheless, educators need to promote family storytelling as a mechanism for building strong oral experiences that will lead to successful early literacy development.

Although families may find it difficult to plan for stories at the beginning, instituting a regular family storytelling time can have valuable educational benefits for all family members; not the least of which is spending quality time together. Finding a time when everyone is available will probably be the greatest challenge given today's busy schedules at work and school. Possibly, with a little extra planning and effort, the family can enjoy a meal together and start a tradition of sharing dinnertime stories. People like to hear stories and many people like to tell stories. Stories can be drawn from real life experiences, the pattern of traditional stories, or they can be original creations. There are endless possibilities. Planning may run more smoothly if all family members are included in the planning.

It is probably wise to reach a consensus on a few ground rules to help set the stage for storytelling. For example, each family member

can take a turn, but no one should be pressured to tell or share a story. One recommended rule is, practice courtesy and kindness when listening to someone else's story. Story topics can be whatever the storyteller decides, though brainstorming story titles or themes can be fun in itself and provide some new or creative ideas.

Adults can set the example for young children by beginning with a story about an actual childhood experience from their past. Such stories are appealing to children who seem to find genuine humor in imagining adults as children. Include stories that children will relate to, for example, children enjoy listening to other people's scary experiences or embarrassing situations. They also like to listen to real or make-believe tales of bravery and adventure-filled accounts with endless twists. Including a variety of stories will encourage children to explore a diversity of story possibilities.

Storytellers offer some suggestions that will enhance the storytelling experience for both the narrator and those listening (Collins & Cooper, 1997). First, practice using animation and voice inflections to capture the audience's attention. It may seem a little awkward at the beginning, but with each storytelling event, the storyteller gains confidence and becomes increasingly comfortable with the storytelling experience. Sometimes adding a prop will help ease the storyteller's anxiety, this can be as simple as using a hat, a mask or costume jewelry or as involved as the storyteller chooses. With some stories, adding a particular type of background music will provide an added touch. For example, just the right sounding organ music could enhance a scary tale. Finally, stay focused on the benefits to be gained from the family storytelling experience and explore different ideas that will keep everyone interested and motivated.

Storytelling as a Tool in Teaching English as a Second Language

In many cultures all around the world storytelling has been used as a means for preserving cultural beliefs and values, practicing oratory skills, and as an educational tool for young and old alike. When storytelling is incorporated into modern classrooms the expected outcomes generally focus on promoting student skills in listening, reading and comprehension. For students learning English as a second language the emphasis should be on listening and comprehension as students acquire English proficiency. Storytelling can be a valuable tool for teaching English to second language learners. This is particularly the case when the storytelling approach is structured to address students' unique needs.

Storytelling as an educational tool with all students, especially ESL students, can be quite successful if the technique is used to develop the students' skills for listening comprehension. According to Morley (1999) in the second language field, aural comprehension as a skill in its own right was not, until recently, considered significant to instruction. Furthermore, Morley acknowledges that proficiency in listening comprehension, for second language learners, is crucial toward acquiring competency in the second language. A range of auditory in-school and out-of-school activities are recommended to emphasize listening, "stretch" time suggesting that more focused time needs to be devoted to developing listening comprehension skills (Morley, 1999). In addition to other types of activities, a variety of story forms, including read-along and sing-along stories are recommended. Traditional stories or family stories are also considered appropriate.

Family storytelling events have profound educational benefits for all children and are especially suited to supporting the home language

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while promoting proficiency in the second language. Additionally, it seems only natural that if family storytelling events occur in the home, that the language of preference would be the home language. However, it is a widely held misconception that continued development of proficiency in the home language as children begin school, necessitates that formal schooling and/or reading instruction also take place in the home language. (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Snow & Tabors, 1993). Although formal schooling will often be set in a second language, failure to also support the child's evolving literacy in the home language can place the student at risk of reading difficulties throughout a child's educational experience. (Perez 1998; Routman, 1991, Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

Strong family involvement is needed to support the child's ongoing literacy in the home language and help the child with transitions to storytelling. Involving the caretakers of the child's home environment is a particularly powerful way to support the child's ongoing improvements in both first and second language proficiency. The following story starters are suggested to help families get started in incorporating family storytelling events:

1. When I was ___ years old, I loved to play ___ ...
2. When I was little, I loved to eat ___ , but one day...
3. One of the most embarrassing things that ever happened to me was...
4. My first crush happened when...
5. The best dream I can remember was...
6. The scariest time in my life was...
7. My favorite family holiday celebration was when...
8. A fortuneteller told me that ten years from now I am going to...
9. In my last life I think I must have been a ___ , because...
10. In my next life I hope to come back as a ___ , then I will...
11. The best story my grandmother/grandfather told me was about...
12. When I was little I thought babies came from ___ , then one day...
13. One of the most wonderful trips I ever took was...
14. One of the most interesting characters I have ever met...
15. I may or may not believe in ghosts, but one time...
16. This is the story about when ___ came to America...
17. This is the story about how your grandparents met...
18. This is the story about how your parents met...
19. This is what happened on the day ___ was born...
20. This is the story about when you were born...

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