Oral storytelling is important for reading, writing and social wellbeing

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If there was one skill that could positively impact many other areas such as reading, writing, and social development, wouldn't you want to teach it? Could oral storytelling be the key?

The link between oral language and later reading, writing, and even social-emotional health is well established. Children with better listening and speaking skills do better on academic tasks and have more friends. But how do children become good listeners and speakers?

They listen to and get regular practice telling stories orally.

Oral storytelling is a pivotal skill

Researchers have known that oral storytelling has a unique and powerful influence on many academic repertoires for decades. In fact, storytelling abilities at age 5 is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension in the 2nd, 4th, and 8th grades. There is such a strong correlation because oral stories are made up of the same complex literate language typical of written stories. This complex type of language is often called academic language.

Oral storytelling is a decontextualised activity, meaning the storyteller talks about events the listener did not experience. This type of communication requires a level of complexity, precision, and elaboration that is not needed in "here and now" conversations. When children practice academic language in the context of oral storytelling, they get better at understanding and using complex word and sentence patterns. They learn how narrative discourse is organised. Once proficient in the easier oral modality, knowledge of these patterns transfer to more challenging written academic tasks such as reading comprehension and writing.

Because humans think in story format, knowledge of narratives help children make sense of their world. The canonical story elements in English include character, setting, problem, feeling, plan, attempt, complication, consequence, and resolution. Events within a story are causally and temporally related, which reveals cause-effect and problem-solution relations. Stories can also help children understand emotions from a character's perspective. As a result, oral storytelling proficiency gives children a powerful tool to explain to their parents about their day, describe to a teacher what happened over the weekend, and process adverse childhood experiences. Finally, children who can report abuse are less likely to be abused.

Oral storytelling or storybook reading

Oral storytelling has several advantages over storybook reading. This is not to say storybook reading should be halted. Instead, we recommend adding oral storytelling to teacher-student and parent-child routines because it is a potent tool for enhancing academic language.

One of the best reasons for using oral storytelling is because it does not require materials, and it can be done anywhere and anytime. In a storytelling exchange with children, adults do not even need to be literate. This makes oral storytelling activities scalable and transportable. Oral storytelling is found in almost all languages and cultures. Unfortunately, those traditions are fading rapidly from many cultures as families are pressured to read books to their children.

Another reason to promote oral storytelling is that it can be adjusted to the children's development and background experiences without preparation. As opposed to storybooks, which primarily require children to listen, an oral storytelling exchange engages children equally in listening and speaking. While taking turns telling stories, adults model complex words, sentences, and the sequence of major story elements accepted in that community, as well as ask questions when critical information is missing or more precision is needed.

In storybook reading, the focus is often on vocabulary development, whereas with oral storytelling, vocabulary, complex sentences, and discourse structures are unavoidably integrated. Moreover, the causal and temporal relations within short stories that can be told and retold by children are perfect for supporting inferential reasoning.

It is often recommended that storybooks are repeated so that children have enough exposure to learn the new words. Reading a storybook may take 10-20 minutes. In the same amount of time in an oral storytelling exchange, the child could retell the story multiple times and, each time, improve their use of complex words and sentences. In other words, it takes less time to get more practice using oral storytelling than storybook reading. It stands to reason that when the two types of activities are compared in research, oral storytelling produces the largest and quickest gains in oral language.

Promoting oral storytelling

To engage children in oral storytelling exchanges, a few guiding principles can be followed. First, start telling (modelling) brief stories with all the canonical story elements of the relevant language and culture, making sure causal (e.g., because, so that since) and temporal (e.g., when, after, before) markers are used to connect story events. Stories should be relatable to the children or about something they have experienced (e.g., misplacing something, someone else playing with the desired toy, falling and getting hurt). Telling personally-themed stories makes it easier for children to tell a story about their own experiences.

After the adult's story, children should be encouraged to retell that story. While they retell the story, adults should help them include all the story elements and use complex sentences with causal and temporal words. This can be done by asking targeted questions and modelling sophisticated sentences, and having children repeat them. Visual supports

like photos, drawings, icons, or gestures that represent the story parts can be used if available. Children should retell the story multiple times within the brief storytelling exchange, but each time the visual and question support should be faded. This helps children become more independent and ensures they rely on their working memory.

Once children have retold the modelled story several times, and with fewer and fewer supports, adults can ask children to generate a personal story. A simple question like, “Has something like that happened to you?” can get children talking about their own experiences. As children draw on their long-term memory, they should be able to produce a story with the complex word, sentence, and discourse patterns that were present in the model story they had just practiced. This should be fun for everyone.

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