EDUCATION

What Kids Learn From Hearing Family Stories

Reading to children has education benefits, of course—but so does sharing tales from the past.

By Elaine Reese

Arben Celi / Reuters

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"Dad, tell me a story from when you were little. Tell me the story about the time you met your best friend Chris at school." Six-year-old Alex, who has just started school

himself, snuggles into his pillow and catches his dad's hand in the dark. They have finished the nightly reading of *Tin Tin* and now it's time for "just one more story" before Alex goes to sleep.

Most parents know about the benefits of reading stories from books with their young children. Parents are blasted with this message in pediatricians' offices, at preschool, on TV, even with billboards on the city bus. Reading books with children on a daily basis advances their language skills, extends their learning about the world, and helps their own reading later in school. Reading with your child from a young age can instill a lifelong love of books. A new study published in *Science* even shows that reading literary fiction improves adults' ability to understand other people's emotions.

Reading books with your children is clearly a good idea.

The cozy image of cuddling up with your young child while poring over a book, however, doesn't fit with reality for some parents and children. Parents from some cultures are not as comfortable reading with their children because books were not part of their everyday lives growing up. For other parents, reading with children is a fraught activity because of their own negative experiences learning to read. And for some highly active children, sitting down with a book is a punishment, not a reward. Fortunately, parents can learn new ways of reading books with their children to engage even the most irascible customer–and to engage themselves.

Yet what most parents don't know is that everyday family stories, like the one that Alex's dad spun out that night, confer many of the same benefits of reading–and even some new ones.

Over the last 25 years, a small canon of research on family storytelling shows that when parents share more family stories with their children—especially when they tell those stories in a detailed and responsive way—their children benefit in a host of ways. For instance, experimental studies show that when parents learn to reminisce about everyday events with their preschool children in more detailed ways, their children tell richer, more complete narratives to other adults one to two years later compared to children whose parents didn't learn the new reminiscing techniques. Children of the parents who learned new ways to reminisce also demonstrate better understanding of other people's thoughts and emotions. These advanced narrative and

emotional skills serve children well in the school years when reading complex material and learning to get along with others. In the preteen years, children whose families collaboratively discuss everyday events and family history more often have higher self-esteem and stronger self-concepts. And adolescents with a stronger knowledge of family history have more robust identities, better coping skills, and lower rates of depression and anxiety. Family storytelling can help a child grow into a teen who feels connected to the important people in her life.

Best of all, unlike stories from books, family stories are always free and completely portable. You don't even need to have the lights on to share with your child a story about your day, about their day, about your childhood or their grandma's. In the research on family storytelling, all of these kinds of stories are linked to benefits for your child. Family stories can continue to be part of a parent's daily interactions with their children into adolescence, long past the age of the bedtime story.

All families have stories to tell, regardless of their culture or their circumstances. Of course, not all of these stories are idyllic ones. Research shows that children and adolescents can learn a great deal from stories of life's more difficult moments–as long as those stories are told in a way that is sensitive to the child's level of understanding, and as long as something good is gleaned from the experience.

Telling the story about the time the Christmas tree ignited because of faulty wiring and burned up the presents is fine, as long as you can find a tinsel lining. For example: Luckily you were able to save some favorite ornaments from the blaze, and your family ended up at a soup kitchen for Christmas dinner where you met Marion, who would become a treasured family friend.

Books contain narratives, but only family stories contain your family's *personal* narratives. Fortunate children get both.

RECOMMENDED READING

15 Books You Won't Regret Rereading

BETHANNE PATRICK

The Professional Triumph of the Firstborns

JOE PINSKER

4 Rules for Identifying Your Life's Work

ARTHUR C. BROOKS

They hear and read stories from books to
become part of other people's worlds,
and they hear and tell stories of their family to understand who they are and from whence they came.

As Ursula LeGuin said, "There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories." Oral storytelling has been part of human existence for millennia. Toddlers start telling primitive stories from nearly as soon as they can speak, beginning with simple sentences about past experiences such as "Cookie allgone." Adults quickly build on these baby stories, "What happened to your cookie? You ate it!" so that by age three or four, most children can tell a relatively sensible story of a past experience that a naïve listener will (mostly) understand. By the time they are in school, children will regale a sympathetic adult with highly detailed stories about events of great importance to them, such as scoring a goal at a soccer game, but they may fail to mention the bigger picture that their team still lost. In the preteen and early adolescent years, children tell highly proficient stories about events in their lives, but they still need help understanding difficult events, such as the time their best friend dumped them for someone else. It is not until mid-adolescence that teens can understand the impact of events on their lives and on who they are becoming. Even older adolescents still benefit from their parents' help in understanding life's curveballs.

The holidays are prime time for family storytelling. When you're putting up the tree or having your holiday meal, share a story with your children about past holidays. Leave in the funny bits, the sad bits, the gory and smelly bits–kids can tell when a story has been sanitized for their protection. Then invite everyone else to tell a story too. Don't forget the youngest and the oldest storytellers in the group. Their stories may not be as coherent, but they can be the truest, and the most revealing.

Family stories can be told nearly anywhere. They cost us only our time, our memories, our creativity. They can inspire us, protect us, and bind us to others. So be generous with your stories, and be generous *in* your stories. Remember that your children may have them for a lifetime.