

The Priceless Gift of Stories

Children love stories. Most young children do not get tired of hearing the same story over and over again. They love make up stories, especially those related to their daily lives. Make up stories about Johnny or Nancy – not eating, not sharing, and needing to be courteous or kind – can be used to impart relevant and valuable lessons to children.

Parents can tell stories while walking or driving their children to school, while in the kitchen cooking or washing the dishes, during meal-time or when tucking their child in bed. You can tell a story to your baby as young as 6 months old by putting her on your lap and reading from a picture book. As she gets older, she can help turn the pages of the picture book and even join you in narrating a familiar story.

Children live a large part of their lives in the world of fantasy, often till the age of eight or nine. During this period, they are using, to a large extent, their faculty of imagination, which according to Albert Einstein, “is more powerful than knowledge.” They would not have fully developed their capacity for logic till they are seven and they cannot fully comprehend abstract thoughts until they are much older. They need this time to adapt to the real world. Stories help them to make sense of this world in a coherent manner.

When in the form of a fetus, the baby in the womb of the mother receives physical sustenance through the placenta as it develops limbs and organs for movement and sensation necessary for her interaction in the physical world. Similarly, the young child is fed through its imagination with lucid and memorable stories as he or she develops the faculties of logic and comprehension necessary for interaction in the human world.

Parallel to the development of imagination, the young child also develops creativity and the concept of self. The child develops beliefs of what makes a human being happy and fulfilled, what other human beings like him do in times of conflict, sadness or trouble, and what they strive after. Positive stories of human beings who have resolved challenges courageously, peacefully and constructively help to equip the child with skills to cope with and resolve problems later in life, and to develop a positive self-concept that can withstand the onslaught of life’s ever increasing complexity.

Art of Story Telling

Story telling is an art that can be mastered with practice. Narrate the story with emotions to convey feelings of joy, sadness, fear, anger and courage. The change in tone and volume of voice as the story develops creates an atmosphere of anticipation and drama. Combined with adequate pacing and rhythm, the story comes alive, making the whole learning experience an enjoyable one.

A good time to read to the child is in bed before he or she goes to sleep. A good story relaxes the child for a good night’s rest. More importantly, this act of reading and sharing helps in the bonding between child and parent.

The world of sleep is the world of dreams and imagination. Stories with good moral values are particularly good as bed-time stories. They stay and accumulate in the subconscious pool of child's resources and, in the long run, help in the child's character development. Most stories lend themselves to a dialogue about virtues manifested by the hero or heroine of the story to overcome trials and challenges. From the dialogue, the child discovers the deeper meaning of the story and understands the underlying virtues at the very heart of each scene.

Stories also help distract the child when he or she is misbehaving. Our 3-year-old son would suddenly become quiet, even when at the worst of his tantrums, on hearing the magical phrase, 'once upon a time...' He would be all ears to hear a new episode in the adventures of the 'goodie goodie boy', an imaginary character that in many way resembles him. His intense love for stories was nurtured. Ten years later today, he is a voracious reader and an excellent story writer.

Selection of Books

Parents often wonder what kind of story books to select for their child. Consider the analogy of an orange: when squeezed, only what is inside comes out. If you fill a child's mind with thoughts of love, kindness, generosity, patience, optimism, forgiveness, care, courage and compassion, these virtues will be manifested when he or she is under the pressure of life's tests and difficulties. Choose stories that illustrate principles, virtues and moral values, highlighting the positive results of virtuous behavior. The Virtues in Us Virtues Stories book offers over 200 virtues stories for children, aged 3-7. Do look out for one of our Virtues stories in the next issue.

The saying 'as you sow, so shall you reap' is often true in child education. If the gardener cultivates his garden with care and love, providing the right conditions to the plant, it can blossom beyond the gardener's wildest expectations. But if the gardener lets the weeds take over, the garden will never reveal its full potential.

Nowadays, parents have to compete for the children's attention with the ever increasing influence of the public media. Children absorb many negative traits from violence- and sex-driven movies, weakening their very foundation of morality, corrupting their faculties of imagination and creativity, and undermining their self-concept.

Parents must lead by example as young children learn best by imitation. Choose to read books and watch movies that inspire and uplift the spirit. Reading develops your child's imagination, advances his or her capacity for discovery, and helps to develop his or her full potential. Telling stories is, indeed, one of the most precious gifts a parent can give to his or her child.

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