

The power of storytelling

BY PAULA OXOBY-HAYETT

DURING THIS unprecedented era of separation and isolation due to COVID, people, particularly children, urgently need to build relationships, connect with community and foster a sense of self.

Parents can help restore their child's sense of self and belonging through storytelling activities. Storytelling is a human pursuit that crosses all cultures and generations and can help restore some of the missing elements in our children's lives today.

AT HOME WITH TWIRL

and Friends

Your brain on storytelling

Stories "light up" more of the brain than factual reporting.

Facts and figures activate just two areas of the brain: those responsible for language comprehension and processing.

Stories activate up to eight areas of the brain: those involved with touch, movement, scent, sound, color and shape, in addition to language comprehension and processing. This implies that the brain responds to the story events as if they were actually happening to the listener. If you're skeptical, think about why you cry while watching a movie, even though you know the story and characters are fictional.

Stories command attention

The human brain has a strong tendency to lose focus. It is estimated to engage in up to 2,000 daydreams a day. In the presence of a compelling story that creates tension, however, the brain snaps to attention due to the release of the stress hormone cortisol.

Stories synchronize the listener's brain with the teller's brain.

Perhaps the most fascinating research is this: evidence of connectedness through mirror neurons. Studies found that when a speaker is telling a story, the same areas of both the speaker's and the listener's brains light up despite the fact that one is producing information and the other is receiving it.

Essentially, even though speaking and listening are two very different activities, when a story is told, the speaker and listener share very similar



COURTESY PHOTO

Storytelling is a human pursuit that crosses all cultures and generations and can help restore some of the missing elements in our children's lives today.

brain activity. Even more incredible, this activity has a permanent impact on the brain and is forever changed by the story.

Information presented through story is more easily remembered than plain statistics or facts.

According to Stanford Graduate School of Business' research, stories are 22 times more memorable than facts alone. This is likely because stories universally activate brain regions dealing with emotional processing and memory.

Bring it home!

Telling personal stories with your kids is a powerful way to begin because the story is their own. Stimulate story ideas by asking direct questions about emotionally charged experiences that resolved well. For example, "What was the best present you ever received?" "When were you the most scared?" "Tell me the story of your scar." "What was the funniest thing Grandpa ever did?"

To further build self-esteem, sug-

gest specific stories that position the child as the hero. "Do you remember the time you found your aunt's keys?" "Tell me about the time you saved that bunny." Personal telling fosters a sense of self and helps them find meaning in their own experiences.

One tool that is really fun is a family photo album. Here are some ways you can use family photos to encourage storytelling:

Flip through pictures with your child and tell stories about what you see. My 7-year-old loves hearing about his birth and my 12-year-old likes to recount the story about our trip home to Argentina.

Print out some pictures from a fun occasion like a birthday party, family vacation or holiday and tell the story about it.

Behind the surveys

Enos Garcia Elementary conducted a parent survey to learn about how COVID-19 has impacted them and what supports are most needed. We learned that parents are managing distance learning; however, they cannot do it alone and are relying on other

family members like grandparents and external resources for support.

As the main providers for their families, parents are struggling with basic needs (food, child care, paying bills, housing), school needs (supplies and tutoring) and the lack of out-of-school activities.

COVID-19 has affected families in many ways: 25 percent of our families lost their jobs, 40 percent had their hours reduced and 6 percent lost a loved one. Through surveys we learn numbers and percentages.

However, behind the numbers are the stories of our families, neighbors and community – stories of struggle, loss, resilience and the grieving for connections. While we are socially distant it is crucial to remain emotionally connected. Storytelling is a good pathway – give it a try!

Paula Oxoby-Hayett is the community school coordinator at Enos Garcia Elementary School.

NOV. 5 – 11, 2020 | TEMPO 23