

A walk in the clouds with a pocketful of magic

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*Take if you must, this little bag of dreams,
Unloose the cord, and they will wrap you around.
W.B. Yeats*



STORIES are integral to human civilization, and have for time immemorial been a fundamental component of society. Stories have traditionally served as a means of projecting the society's core values from generation to generation, but more importantly provided a mechanism for bonding. Indeed, many of us may recount childhood interactions with wondrous stories which have forever come to occupy a special place in our hearts. It was often with the utterance of those few magical words "Once Upon a Time" or "whereafter we would be transported to an extraordinary world where the limitless boundaries of fantasy would enrapture our imagination and hold us blissfully captive.

Looking back, I can clearly recall the role of fairy tales in my own life. A major influence, when it came to bedtime stories, was my grandmother with whom I would spend oodles of time transfixed in silence, simply listening to tale after tale or sometimes true to life, and sometimes tales that were created by her on the spot. Perhaps it was not just her tales, but her way of storytelling which endeared not only her stories to me, but engendered a heightened affection for her in my heart.

Drawing on such joyous memories of travelling through "never-never land" and glimpsing the unknown, it is with conviction that one urges the guardians of the future generation to present their children with a gift of fantasy, by colouring their children's life exuberantly with the magical splendour of stories. It is thus that the child will build a voracious appetite for stories, and reap the fruits thereof.

In adopting the art of storytelling, one may explore the myriad hues with which it colours the child's life. To elaborate, in narrating a story the "author" not only generates

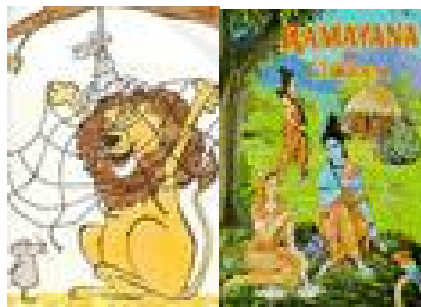
tremendous excitement but, at a latent level, also contributes to the holistic development of the child. For example, while entwined in the realm of stories, the child along with experiencing an overt enjoyment, is also in a position to assimilate new information, and develop a deeper understanding of numerous concepts.

Storytelling is a sure and effective means of forging an intimate bond with your child. It is an experience characterized by a high comfort level, complemented by being a thrilling joyride! It is important to point out that the key ingredient to storytelling is *you*, the storyteller. Storytelling is not solely grounded on the content of the story, the book and so on but signifies a total experience to which both the orator and listener contribute to in their own unique manner. Hence, in embodying the role of a storyteller, it is imperative that you acquire a genuine enthusiasm which, in turn, will be carried forward to the child. Remember, it is both the emotional and physical closeness of storytelling that makes this experience so special, and quintessential to a child.

Add Wings to a Fertile Imagination: In today's technologically equipped world, passivity in the child is reinforced. However, listening to and reading stories allows the child to be an active participant wherein he/she draws upon his/her imagination to lend a 'picture' to the story. Hence, apart from being an enjoyable experience, stories free the listener to unknown heights and encourage his/her imagination to take flight.

As mentioned earlier, stories traditionally originated so as to propagate certain values and/or 'proper' practices. Indeed, the popular *Aesop's Fables* clearly delineate to the reader what is right or wrong. In turn, the child while listening to such stories identifies with the protagonist and thereby comes to imbibe an appreciation for morally correct behaviour. Indeed, the 'lessons' that may be taught through stories are innumerable.

Dive into the Ocean of Mythology: Folktales and mythological stories serve the purpose of grounding the child, and developing a sense of pride and belonging. For example, stories about Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, initiate the child into Indian culture and promote an appreciation for all that it stands for. *The Panchatantra* is yet another poignant and fun-filled medium, which affords the child a taste of ancient Indian literature.



I Can Read! A stepping-stone to reading is the sense of wonder and appreciation that is aroused in the child vis-a-vis words that are written on paper. To elaborate, during the early years, as the child enjoys the oral telling of stories, he/she is also simultaneously exposed to

several sources ó for example, books, and starts to associate the written words as being the counterpart of your narration ó and thus commences a yearning to be able to read on one's own so as to discover the treasure that belies the written words.

It is important to point out that in inculcating an appreciation and a positive outlook towards reading stories, the narrator should ensure that the medium of storytelling is aligned with the mother tongue of the child.

I Know! Through the act of reading to your child, various cognitive abilities are further promoted. First and foremost, the child's *listening* skills are being honed. With the attunement of the ability to attend to and listen to the narration, the child is thus truly receptive to comprehend the gist of the story. To elaborate, through storytelling the child's vocabulary is compounded and built upon; and consequently the child internalizes language skills, and learns about important *concepts*. For example, the story of 'The 3 Little Bears' is often used as a medium for instructing children about the concept of big and small. Indeed, it is found that when a concept is disguised in the form of a story, the child almost always grasps it more intimately.

Subsequently, once empowered with the aforementioned language skills, the child is confidently able to *communicate* ó for example, the latter ability may be observed in his/her questioning, relating to and/or adding to the stories themselves.

Furthermore, an exposure to stories also stimulates in the child an appreciation of the sequence stories follow, and encourages in them an ability to predict and forecast what happens 'next' and thus, an active and thinking mind is born!

As adults, we often overlook the fact that the child, too, is often beset with anxieties and fears while dealing with the harsh reality of life. In such instances, stories are not only a welcome respite from the mundane but also assure the child that he/she is not alone, and that other children are also plagued with similar feelings. In turn, it is through such explicit validation and mirroring of the child's feelings that he/she in time comes to accept and manage these feelings; for example, studies reveal that to help a child overcome his/her fears of talking to others, one should tell him/her stories about people who overcame their shyness through positive interactions with others.

While storytelling possesses many obvious benefits, certain tips may prove to be noteworthy. For example, selecting a story to narrate does require some consideration. The following, in turn, are some guidelines that should be deliberated upon.

As a caretaker, one has innumerable stories to choose from ó right from fairy tales and fables, to stories about our own lives. However, in narrating a story one should keep the following parameters in mind:

* The book and/or content of the story should be age appropriate.

* The book and/or content of the story should relate to common experiences of the child (e.g. families, friends, animals, emotions).

* The story (especially for young children) should have a happy ending whereby a sense of closure is provided to the child.

* The story should be guided by the likes and dislikes of your child; allow her to choose the story.

* Choose stories which portray a variety of roles, rather than promoting stereotypical behaviour; that is, ensure that a balance is struck, e.g. read some stories where the prince saves the princess (e.g. Snow White), and somewhere the princess saves the prince (e.g. The Frog Prince).

What is age appropriate material? *Babies* (birth to 18 months) ó The young infant, too, should be exposed to storytelling sessions. Whilst the infant is as yet unable to understand words, she enjoys listening to the reader's rhythmic and repetitive sounds. Hence, for this age group, nursery rhymes and simple stories are grossly beneficial. The narrator, in turn, may use brightly coloured picture books made of cloth, for example, which the child may look at, and touch and feel.

Toddlers (18 months to 3 years) ó The toddler is ready to listen to short and simple stories. She enjoys picture books, and is able to name and identify the said pictures. The child, at this stage, is grasping an awareness of herself and her immediate surroundings, and thus enjoys listening to stories about feelings, and about people like 'Mama' and 'Daddy'. Towards the end of toddlerhood, the child acquires a better understanding of the difference between real and pretend; he/she now also appreciates stories about true things.

Preschoolers (3 to 5 years) ó The preschooler by this time has developed a longer attention span, and is able to listen to stories spanning a duration of 5-8 minutes. The preschooler too enjoys rhythm, and likes to have the story repeated. As the preschooler's immediate world expands to encompass school, and friends, choose stories that incorporate these aspects of a child's life. The preschooler is also becoming increasingly curious, and so enjoys stories about how things are made or done, and why things happen. Thus, stories now must satiate the preschooler's increasingly curious mind.

While storytelling may be fruitful to imbibe as a daily routine, it should not be enforced on the child in any way. Rather, you may assign a story-time session each day, and thereafter allow the child to decide whether she 'feels' like listening to a story or not. To ensure that the story session is truly enchanting, choose a well-lit, comfortable reading area which is devoid of distractions.

How YOU can wield magic! *Exercise your vocal chords* ó Storytelling is a personal communication between you and the child, hence, your voice ó your intonations ó are critical in supporting your story. So, enter the storytelling session whole-heartedly, and use your

voice and gestures to convey the story.

All round participation ó By encouraging the children to physically participate in the storytelling, you not only ensure their captive attention, but it allows them to experience the story, and thereby understand it (learning by doing). For example, the child better comprehends how the wolf blows on the piggie's house, by imitating the action him/herself.

Repeat over and over again ó The young child often demands the repetition of a story, which in fact enables him/her to better assimilate a story both cognitively and emotionally. Hence, one must cater to the child's need for repetition.

Props ó A variety of tools may be utilized to add to the experience of storytelling. For example, picture books and/or books with large print may be used in conjunction. In turn, use the opportunity of reading from a storybook to model the correct way of handling a book (e.g. the front, the back). Books, of course, are just one of the many tools of storytelling. Aids such as puppets, flannel boards etc. lend themselves tremendously to the comprehension of the story.

Taking it forward ó Whilst story-telling in itself is a complete enterprise, it may be taken forward through numerous activities so as to further consolidate the child's learning. For example, direct questioning, art activities wherein the child may portray a character, dramatization of the story, retelling of the story and so on, are just a few instances whereby the story may be transported to another medium.

Having outlined the multifaceted benefits of stories ó notably as a means of entertainment and disseminating knowledge, and above all as facilitating the all round development of the young mind ó can YOU, a potential 'magician' undertake a voyage into the memorable land of stories and douse your child with the raw power of magic? Finally, and most importantly, one must bear in mind that stories are not just meant for small kids! ó rather we all engender a basic underlying yearning to be sprinkled with fairy dust!

