

# Developing Literacy Skills Through Storytelling

By **Linda Fredericks**

This article originally appeared in the Spring, 1997 issue of [\*The Resource Connection\*](#). It remains a classic that has withstood the test of time.

Linda Fredericks is an experienced storyteller who has lectured extensively on the link between storytelling and healthy human development, and has recently authored a manual on storytelling for the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL). She also conducts trainings on wellness and storytelling for the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps (NASCC).

*"Storytelling is an act of love. Sharing stories connects us to each other. When I tell my story, it connects to your story."*

Njoki McElroy, teacher and storyteller

Several years ago, while presenting a workshop on storytelling to a group of teachers, I invited participants to share something about their personal interest in the topic. When her turn came, one woman explained that she worked as a substitute teacher for an inner city high school located in a large Midwestern city. She was assigned to teach a group of students who had been removed from their regular classes because of their extremely disruptive behavior. No other teacher wanted to deal with those students, and she was, in fact, the fourth substitute teacher who had attempted to lead that class in as many weeks.

"Now," she declared proudly, "we have order in the classroom, those students are learning their subjects, and they're really interested in their studies. You know why?" She paused for a moment while all the other teachers, eager to hear her explanation, nodded their heads and leaned towards her.

"The reason," she said, "is that I begin every day by telling them a story. The stories help the students to focus their attention and calm down. After they hear each story, we have a brief discussion about the content. After that, we can move on to English, math, and history and they're ready to learn."

In many other cities around the country and from many other educators, I have heard similarly dramatic recollections of the ability of stories to promote discussion, positively impact behavior, generate interest in academic studies, and involve students who previously had shown no interest in their classes. The experiences of the teachers verify what a number of researchers have been discovering: storytelling is crucial to child development, and helps to strengthen neural pathways that make learning of all kinds possible. Storytelling, once viewed by many educators as being a pleasant way to spend time at best, and a complete waste of time at worst, is now being recognized as a powerful tool that can help build literacy and critical thinking skills.

The following are reasons for storytelling to be included in literacy programs:

## **Development of Imagination**

When children listen to stories, they respond by creating images of the characters and places described by the words. This process of developing internal images and meaning in response to words is the basis of imagination.

Author and educator Joseph Chilton Pearce, in his book *Evolution's End*, asserts that the repeated exposure to stories and the subsequent triggering of mental images stimulates appropriate neural development in the brain. It is the reason that children will insist on hearing the same



story again and again--the hearing of a story causes neural pathways to form and strengthen within the brain, and the strengthened connections between the different parts of the brain allow the child to more easily incorporate additional learning.

Researchers who study brain and behavioral development have identified imagination, not only as the essence of creativity, but as the basis for all higher order thinking. With imagination, with the ability to understand symbols, create solutions, and find meaning in ideas, young people are more capable of mastering language, writing, mathematics, and other learnings that are grounded in the use of symbols.

The capacity for imagination has profound implications, not just for academic learning, but for behavior as well. Several recent studies have shown that children who lack imagination are far more prone to violence. Such children cannot imagine alternatives to their immediate perceptions of anger or hostility; they are able to react only to what they believe is the situation in front of them. On the other hand, children who possess imagination have a very different experience. They can be exposed to the same hostile situation as an aggressive child, but with their ability to imagine, different solutions can be reached.

### **Improvement of Reading, Writing , and Speaking Skills**

Children who listen to stories are exposed to many new words. They may not know what all the words mean, but hearing or reading a story helps them to understand the meaning of the words through context. By developing vocabulary lists based upon the story, the teacher takes advantage of children's natural curiosity to understand the story, and children are more motivated to consult a dictionary or use the new words in stories of their own creation.

Storytelling can promote writing skills by encouraging young people to write their own stories, impressions of stories that they have heard or even a play based upon a familiar tale. Children who hear stories often improve their reading skills because they are interested in reading other related stories and information.

Storytelling can be used in a myriad of ways to improve students' oral communication skills. Once they have heard a story, children are usually anxious to discuss their understanding of the story and relate it their own experiences. Children can also interview members of their family or community to learn more about others' stories, and hearing these stories can stimulate the creation of their own.

### **Strengthening of Critical Thinking Skills**

Traditional stories from throughout the world address many difficult issues of life; they teach how to face adversity and move through it. A close look at traditional stories from any culture reveals stories dealing with death, loss, separation, abandonment, fear, and anger. The stories also show that love, compassion, understanding, and courage can be a part of stories as well. Students grapple with painful realities of life: parental divorce, poverty, substance abuse, the violent deaths of close friends--and stories can help them negotiate these difficulties of life and can be of inestimable value.

Stories are also effective in increasing tolerance and understanding of people from other cultures. Through the medium of story, the listener can safely explore what all human beings have in common as well as how they differ from each other. Stories have the power to gently remove the child from his or her usual reality and for a time immerse the listener in a different time and place. Through imagination, each child can venture beyond the boundaries of individual experience and know what it is to share in another person's travels or feel another's sorrow or celebration. No one could return from an imaginative journey to another culture without retaining a greater appreciation for the unique wisdom and experiences of its people.

Stories are not just incidental to the development of literacy in young people--they are essential. They are a powerful and indispensable tool to teaching literacy and critical thinking skills to students.