

Nutrition, Health and Safety Children's Reflection on Tragedy Using an Oral Storytelling Approach

Eugene A. Geist, Ph.D., Ohio University

It destroys the value of a fairy tale for the child if someone details its meaning for him • (Bettelheim, 1975).

In the book *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim explores the psychological significance of fairy tales to children. He contends that children are attracted to these stories because on a deep level they speak to an aspect of their psyche that is under development or they address a conflict or stress that the child is dealing with (Bettelheim, 1975). The present study attempts to take this idea one step further and examine children's invented fairy tales to see if children use them as a way to reflect and deal with anxiety and tragedy (Deskin & Steckler, 1996).

In light of the events on September 11, 2001, the issue of helping children deal with tragic events has been thrust into the spotlight. Children around the United States are dealing with this tragedy, even if they do not live in New York or Washington D.C. because of the immediacy of television. I have even heard anecdotally from 3 parents that they had to turn off their televisions because each time the video of the event was replayed the children thought that there was another plane hitting another building. The parents did not realize the stress and anguish this was causing because they did not understand the child's comprehension of the event.

Children have many outlets for their fear and anxiety such as play (Sanders, 1970; Arnold & Farrell, 1992) and drawing (Allan, 1988) and writing (Allan & Bertoia, 1992). Another among these that is often overlooked is storytelling. Teachers, parents, and counselors can use these stories to identify anxieties that children are dealing with and give the child a safe outlet to explore these feelings. Allan and Bertoia (1992) found that children and adolescents incorporated stressful events into the stories that they told in therapy sessions. They used this information to help the children work through stresses and fears they were experiencing.

This study examined the orally invented fairy tales of children in kindergarten through third grade. These fairy tales were recorded in February and March of 1995. In December of 1994, a little girl in the first grade class in this study was kidnapped while playing in the neighborhood with children from the kindergarten and second grade classes in this study. Her body was discovered 2 days later in an empty field about 200 yards from the school and 3 of the subjects in this study, one second grader and two first graders discovered the body and alerted authorities. All these children directly involved were interviewed multiple times by the police and the whole school received many programs on personal safety and talking to strangers.

This qualitative study, which was already underway in the school to examine the

cognitive aspects of storytelling, began to take on another important aspect. The children's stories obviously contained reflections of the children's fears, concerns, and stress over the shocking tragedy of which many of them played an integral part.

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Review of Literature

Storytelling helps children make sense of their world (Gee, 1985; Howarth, 1989; Ricklin, 1915). A story is a living context for making meaning. It can reinforce the imaginative framework of a developing child, give validity to important feelings, promote insights, nourish hope, reduce anxieties, and provide a rich fantasy life. Story gives children ways of dealing constructively with inner experience, communicating an intuitive, subconscious understanding of their own nature. Being human means having to accept difficult challenges, but it also means encountering wonderful adventures. One task of childhood is to test oneself in imaginary situations.

Storytelling helps children make sense of their world. They play out their lives through stories (Barton & Booth, 1990). Storytelling helps children realize that life will go on in the face of horrible tragedy, as it gives form to what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen. Stories help children gain understanding of the complexity of emotional responses, displayed by the expressive voices of characters speaking eloquently and powerfully of their feelings. Children must filter their emotional experiences through their intellects, making sense of all kinds of information, turning story experiences over and over in their minds, integrating their thoughts and feelings.

Children are not immune to stress; on the contrary, they deal with more stress than many adults (Elkind, 1974, 1981, 1987). Fairy tales and storytelling can give children an outlet for their emotions and stresses, as well as tools for dealing with tragedy in a positive manner. Allan and Bertoia (1992) read a succession of fairy tales to older children. After each reading, they discussed the setting, plot, characters, problems, goals, ups and downs, climax, and resolution of the fairy tale. Evaluation of the children's writings showed that

the writings could help counselors understand some aspects of the inner world of the children. They found that the children reflected developmental issues in the stories. The stories not only provided Allan and Bertoia (1992) with information about current issues, crises, and development of the children in their study, but also what was symbolically represented in their fairy-tale inventions.

For many children, death, separation, and divorce are a part of their everyday experiences (Howarth, 1989). Talking about these problems and telling stories in which children experience similar difficulties give children an opportunity to bring these problems into the light and look at them, with other people in the lead roles (Howarth, 1989). Children begin to pinpoint various aspects of their feelings and learn the identifying words for their feelings. Fairy tales amplify this process while projecting the effects of acting on these feelings into a hypothetical future.

Children deal with the very tragic in much the same way. The difference is that there needs to be more intervention and opportunity for children to understand the experience. This means 1) more opportunities for children to use art, play, and storytelling to deal with their feelings 2) more understanding and guidance from an adult and 3) a safe, supportive, and understanding environment for children to work on their feelings of fear and anxiety without judgment or criticism (McCreesh, 1970; Passe, 1986; Ross & Myers, 1996; Tramonte, 2000).

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The timeless and fantastic nature of fairy tales is an important device in that it implies that the story's primary concern is not necessarily the specific environment of the child, but the inner process taking place. Occasionally, this is achieved in a more obvious fashion: the tale begins in what seems like a familiar environment, and then propels the child into the distinctly separate world of fantasy. According to Scollin and Scollin (1981), making the characters fictional and putting their actions in the past tense distance

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the character from the storyteller. This gives the storyteller greater freedom from the constraints of everyday life and greater ability to manipulate the elements of this symbolic vehicle.

Magee and Sutton-Smith (1983) stated that there is some sort of creative expression in every child. As children progress into being capable storytellers, they often express, in story form, their feelings, fears, and joys that they cannot express in regular conversation. Storytelling can be a healthy outlet, creatively and emotionally, and a way to develop communication skills.

Method

The children involved in this study were kindergartner through third grade children who had recently experienced the tragedy of the death of a classmate. As a result, heightened security, interviews with police, and school assemblies about personal safety and "talking to strangers" became everyday events.

Students from one each of kindergarten, first-, second- and third-grade classes were taken to a classroom during their independent work time and asked to make up a fairy tale. A semi-structured interview format was used to collect the data. The children were asked to make up a fairy tale and tell it to the researcher. The researcher prompted the subject if there was a long pause. The data were then analyzed using a content analysis method.

All the subjects were African-American and from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The subjects for this study were students in four classrooms at an elementary school in a low socioeconomic area of an urban city in the Southeastern United States. The racial makeup was 100% African-American.

The students were each assigned a subject number when they were interviewed. The number and grade level of the subjects were used to identify each subject for the rest of

the study to ensure their confidentiality. No real names were used in this report. The recordings were transcribed. A content analysis of the children's stories was then undertaken. The stories were examined for evidence of the reflection of trauma or story and plot lines that dealt with death, grief, rescue, or other traumatic experiences for children. From these themes, results were determined.

Results

Every Day Anxieties

The results suggest that children imbue their stories with the fears, concerns, and anxiety of everyday life. A normal part of children's invented stories are concerns about making mistakes or being punished by a parent for transgressions. However, when children are exposed to a tragic event, they often try to make meaning of the event by putting it into stories. These stories act as a safe place for children to relive the experience, explore its meaning, and deal with their anxieties.

Fears and concerns of everyday life were reflected in the children's stories. Children who were more distant to the tragedy of the first grade girl's murder, still revealed concerns for their personal anxieties. Josh, a third grader, tells this story that reveals a degree of performance anxiety. The child even uses his own name for the child in the story. This turned out to be a commonality among many of the older children. One might be lead to believe that this was a personal non-fiction narrative. However when Josh was asked at the end of the story if this had ever happened to him, he replied with an emphatic "NO".

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J: Once upon a time, there was a boy named Josh and he lived in California. He was having a show in three days. He wasn't doing good in practice and then it was the day for him to do the show and he got on there and all the sudden he knew the part. Then when the show was over, he got fired for some reason. He didn't know why. Then he went home and his mamma asked him how he did in the show. He said, "Good, but I got fired." (Laugh) And then his uncle came to pick him up for a birthday party. (pause) Then he went back home.

R: Then what happened?

J: He was riding his bike and he wrecked and got his head broke and he had to ride around in a wheelchair. That's all.

R: OK. That was good. Who was your favorite character?

J: Josh, cause he is like me.

Many of the older children in this study also used their own names when telling their stories; however, there seems to be an effort to keep the experiences at a distance. Dante seems a bit more connected to the events in his story than Josh, but still attempts to keep a distance. Again, we see a plethora of anxieties in his story. Dante was an overweight child who teachers' reported to be a loner.

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D: Once upon a time there was a boy named Dante. He could not stop eating. He just kept on eating and eating. One day he had to go to the hospital. He had to have an operation. And four weeks later, he was at home riding his bicycle. And he rode in the street. And, one day a drunk man ran into him off the curb. So, he was in the hospital again, had to have another operation and the mother was upset because she had to pay a lot of money plus her baby was hurt. And the bill had come to \$1465. His mamma started to cry ... four weeks later because the bill came. She was very upset. So, she wouldn't let him eat again, she wouldn't let him ride a bicycle again, especially, not in the streets. It was okay if he rode his bicycle on the sidewalks, but not in the street, because he had to go to the hospital for any riding in the street. So, most of the time he stayed in the house and he played Sega Genesis. Then he got tired of Sega Genesis of NBA Jam, so he decided to play with his toys. He got GI Joe toys, he had the X-men toys, he had the Power Ranger toys, and he had Batman toys. So, he played with the Power Ranger toys. So, next thing you know, he took all his toys cause he got tired of them. So, his mamma told him she wasn't going to buy him no more toys; no more, cause he kept tearing them up and she ain't going to buy them. So, that was the last straw. She said, "I ain't going to buy you no more toys cause you keep tearing them up. If I get you a bicycle you going to tear it up when you riding in

Sometimes the stories not only contained fear of external punishment or losing the love of a parent or grandparent, but also of self-examination of the child's own attributes. Martin, a third-grader, told a story in which he seemed to reflect his own feelings about being "lazy". It is evident that many adults have spoken to him about this, but he seems to have anxieties based on personal reflection. Again, as with most of the stories of the older children in this study, the child actually used his own first name for the name of the character.

the street. I ain't buying you no more stuff. You are going to have to stay in the house or stay in the house and play Sega Genesis." So he did that. He stayed in the house for four weeks and then he was allowed to go out and play football with his friend. So, that was the end of his story.

R: Is the Dante in your story you?

D: Yes.

R: Did all that really happen to you?

D: Sort of.

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M: Once there was Once upon a time, there was a boy named Martin. He was lazy. One day his mamma told him to do something and he did it and he was happy because he had did it and he felt real good about it and he ...

R: You're doing fine. Keep going.

M: Then he cleaned up and it was real shiny and his mother had thanked him for doing it. Then she asked him to clean up his room, too. And he did it, too, but when he finished, he fell back lazy.

R: OK. Then what happened?

M: Then, he got right back up and made up his bed, went downstairs, ate supper, and he went outdoors and played with his friends and when it got dark, he went to the bathroom took a bath and went to bed. The end.

R: Is that character you?

M: Yes.

R: Are you lazy like the character?

M: Yes.

Tragic Events

While everyday anxieties are reflected and dealt with in invented stories and fairy tales, tragic events and their repercussions also make an impact on children's stories. Again, children are using the safe medium of stories to deal with the tragic event. Four months before the stories were collected, a first-grade girl, who was known by all the kindergartners and first-graders, was violently murdered. Her body was discovered 100 yards from the school building. Nobody was arrested for the murder. Since the time of the murder, the police, school administration, and counselor had been dealing with the shock and grief that the students were experiencing. Children were constantly warned about the dangers of talking to strangers or getting in their cars.

Rupert, a kindergartner told a standard story about witches and princesses. However, the most telling part of his story came after what seemed like the end of his story. When he was asked if there was anything else he wanted to tell about his story, he then launched into a new story that had content directly related to the tragic experience.

R: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your story?

T: Yup. It's about a boy. A boy that had a purple teacher and he walked outside and it was a sunny day and a stranger got him.

R: Is this a new story?

T: Yup

R: OK. Then what happened?

T: The stranger killed him. (Long Pause)

R: And that was it?

T: Uh . . . Yup.

The story showed the influence that contextual fears have on a child's invented story. It was evident that being kidnapped was a fear for this subject. The counseling and intervention programs that warned the children about strangers were reflected in subject Rupert's story. Linda's story was about a clown that was chasing and terrorizing the children. She was also a kindergartner and teachers reported that she was very verbal. Her story, while hard to follow from a narrative standpoint, contains many aspects of fear of abduction and murder that many of the other children in the kindergarten and first grade showed.

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L: Once upon a time, there was a boy and a girl and three . . . and one . . . and a boy named Jason Michael and Jerry and they went to the circus and they said he was a scaredy (sic) cat and then they see a man come out of some smoke and then he said go on in. And, then, he opened the door and there were some hands that were clapping. And he opened the door number nine there was a clown and he snatched off his nose and ran back home and he saw a clown smoking a cigar around the corner and then he throw his nose around there and then he came and got it. Then, last night, his mamma was going on a date with her boyfriend and then she left a note. She said, "there's some spaghetti in the oven." And then he said he already knowed (sic) that. Then she said there is some pudding for the dessert. Then, he ate the pudding first and then some pudding . . . some pudding splashed on the floor. Then he went to see who it was . . . then he went to see his friends and his friends say eight o'clock in the morning. And then he said come over right quick and, then, his friend didn't know it was the clown on the telephone saying, "Give me back my nose". And then a balloon he popped . . . he blowed (sic) a balloon up under the door and said, "Give me my nose back." Then he ran to the circus. He bought some cigars and his nose back and then he was laughing.

R: The clown was laughing?

L: Yes.

R: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your story?

L: Yes.

R: What?

L: The end

This theme was also seen in subject Jackie's story about the lady who lost her children and never got them back. Again, we see children being taken from their parents and never returning.

J: Vampire!

R: Is that the title of your story?

J: (Nods head yes and pauses).

R: What happened to the vampire?

J: Eats people up.

R: OK. Can you start at the beginning of your story and tell me everything that happened?

This was an example of how fears and concerns were reflected in the children's stories. Children were concerned about the eventuality that something like this might happen to them. The safety education the children received was a double-edged sword. Although necessary and effective, it also increased the fear that the children had in their everyday lives. This should be taken into account when interventions like this are conducted.

J: When a butterfly was flying, a vampire ate it.

R: OK. Then what happened?

J: Then, a little girl came and it was her butterfly and the vampire said he

J: She was running to me and she disappeared and she was going to run and get me. Then, she I had a bad dream.

R: Then what?

J: Then she had never went in the house to eat her dinner. Then, she went to bed. The end.

This was an example of how stressful events and everyday fears can find their way into children's invented stories. Although there was no direct reference to the murdered girl, it is likely she was making reference to the slaying of the girl. Elissa's story was an example of a second-grade story in which fears and concerns were reflected. The stranger that did the kidnapping was portrayed as a crocodile to make the experience easier to handle. This was consistent with Allan and Bertoia's findings (1992).

E: Once upon a time, there was a little girl she lived with her mom and dad and when she was eight when her birthday was coming up, her . . . her mom and her dad they went shopping and when they got to the mall there was this old lady begging for some money. But, they didn't know the lady was a crocodile. So, they gave the lady some money and she took the child when the mamma and dad wasn't looking. When they looked around the little girl was gone. The mamma looked back and said, "The girl is gone." And, then, they called a policeman. And the policeman said, "The girl is just lost in the mall." But, they searched everywhere from the front of the mall to the end of the mall. They couldn't find her anywhere. They didn't know that she was in the bathroom, which was the crocodile's swamp. And when they found her the crocodile was to be held in the zoo.

R: Did they ever get the girl back?

E: Yes.

R: How?

E: They looked everywhere and they asked for clues and they were told about the old lady but it wasn't an old lady. It was a crocodile and they knew just where to find her at.

This story was an example of how fearful events were incorporated into children's stories. The subject matter was so disturbing that the child had to set the story as a fantasy. She made the stranger a crocodile so that she could deal with her fear more readily (Allan & Bertoia, 1992).

Many of the second- and third-grader's stories also contained kidnappings and strangers. All the children in the school had been subjected to many lectures and assemblies on dealing with strangers. Many of these lessons and the anxieties that they are associated with are evident in Laquesha's story.

L: Once upon a time, there was a good little girl named Sugar May. She always. . .she went to the park but her mamma told her not to go to the park. But, she went anyway. And a man came up to her.

R: And what did the man tell her?

L: He said to come home with him. But she didn't. She ran home and told her mamma. She told her mamma she missed her and what the man said.

R: Then what? Did they find the man?

L: Yes. The little girl told them where he was and they arrested the man.

Affective content in the form of fears, hopes, concerns, and wishes were expressed in all grades in their stories. Jung (1958, 1959, 1964), Allan and Bertoia (1992), and Allan (1988) proposed that the symbolism in fairy tales, and children's stories reflected unconscious conflicts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The evidence suggests that story telling can be a valuable and therapeutic tool for children. While many psychologists use this practice in therapy sessions (Allan & Bertoia, 1992), encouraging children to tell stories and recognizing aspects of anxiety and tragic events are techniques that can be used by parents, teachers, or any professional working with children. Giving children the opportunity to express themselves in stories allows the child to examine their fears, anxieties, and lives in a safe and comfortable manner by distancing themselves from the immediate threat. The World Trade Center event is exactly the type of occurrence about which children should be allowed to express their inner conflicts and questions about the event in a constructive and engaging way.

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