

## The Power of Stories

# Good Ships: The power of stories to connect, grow, teach and heal

Whilst the therapeutic usefulness of storytelling has long been understood, neuroscience is offering new insights into the role stories play in children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Stories help children to make sense of the world and provide safe ways for them to talk about challenges and trauma in their lives. Stories engage the whole of a child's brain. They offer a healing medium that provide children with the ability to learn, feel and know through use of their imagination. Stories help children develop empathy. They can be used to prepare children for coming events, to bring healing by offering a more helpful way of looking at difficult situations; and to help change difficult behaviour patterns by modelling through the medium of a story.

### Our predisposition for storytelling

All known cultures, both past and present, practise storytelling. Not surprisingly, researchers have found that the human brain has a natural affinity for narrative construction. All normally developing humans acquire the ability to process and generate stories. Studies indicate that the ability to tell stories emerges spontaneously between the ages of two and a half and three, and children as young as 30 months can distinguish between narrative and non-narrative uses of language.

In contrast to reading, writing, and arithmetic, no special education is required for narrative competence to develop.

### When the brain lights up

Neuroscience is revealing some amazing things about what happens in our brains when we are involved in storytelling. Studies show that people tend to remember facts more accurately if they encounter them in a story rather than in a list. This is probably because when we are attentive to a story, whether through listening, reading, or watching a film, the whole of our brain is engaged.

The brain, it seems, does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life. In each case the same neurological regions are stimulated, suggesting why the experience of reading can feel so alive. Words like *lavender* or *dung* for example, elicit a response not only from the language-processing areas of our brains, but also those devoted to dealing with smells.

Perhaps even more fascinating is the way in which our brains align when engaged in the same story.

A team of scientists at Princeton University discovered that when someone listens to and understands a story, their brain becomes synchronised with the storyteller's brain.

When a story teller showed activity in her insula, an emotional brain region, the listeners did too. When her frontal cortex lit up, so did theirs, with a time lapse of about a one second.

A 2010 study of pre-school children found that the more stories they had read to them, the keener their 'theory of mind', or their capacity to construct a map of other people's intentions.

There is a substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals, and in particular, interactions where we're trying to work out the thoughts and feelings of others.

Stories are powerful because they transport us into other people's worlds but, in doing so, they change the way our brains work and potentially change our brain chemistry.

*Stories help children make sense of the world and provide safe ways for children to talk about challenges and trauma in their lives.*

*Good Ships* is an initiative of Relationships Australia Victoria to produce a series of engaging, beautifully illustrated story-books for children, with accompanying resources for parents, teachers and counsellors. The books can be read simply for pleasure, but each is also focused on a challenge or difficulty children commonly face. The idea behind the series is a simple one: stories help us connect, grow, learn, and heal. For more information visit [www.rav.org.au/goodships](http://www.rav.org.au/goodships)



For example, stories that elicit empathy have been shown to increase the release of oxytocin. Present in breast milk, oxytocin is known as the bonding chemical. Behavioural studies have shown that when the brain synthesises oxytocin, people are more trustworthy, generous, charitable, and compassionate.

Reading stories to a child therefore is not just a fun activity. It can also be a powerful bonding experience and support the child's emotional, social and cognitive development.

### The healing power of stories

It is unlikely, if not impossible, to grow to adulthood without experiencing adverse events and trauma. Children need tools to help them to support the development of resilience, including the healing of traumas. Storytelling helps children develop these tools. Stories promote adaptive strategies, mastery and problem-solving.

Bruno Bettelheim wrote that a journey into the woods, a common motif in children's stories, is "a voyage into the interior of our mind, into the realms of unawareness and the unconscious". Fairy tales help children to grapple with their fears in remote, symbolic terms. The child intuitively comprehends that although these stories may be unreal, they are not untrue. Indeed, children's capacity to learn from stories relates to our ability to be both observer and participant, to create a 'neural balance', allowing us to be immersed in a story without being actually threatened by it. Conversely, stories that symbolically represent the experiences and feelings associated with real traumatic events or difficulties can help a child begin to break loose from the tyranny of those events.

Through these stories, a child understands that they are not alone. Through cognitive reframing and emotional processing they can start to take control of experiences over which they had no control, and begin to refashion their experience of the world.

A child who has been abused or who has witnessed violence may have trouble believing that positive experiences are waiting for them down the road. Because small children are used to seeing stories acted out on television or in books, stories are a good way to demonstrate that the negative outlook they have formed as a result of their experiences can change. A story can therefore resonate with a child in a way that helps them become more hopeful. This is an important part of helping them heal.

### The use of books in therapy (bibliotherapy)

*Book therapy* can help children to overcome problems by reading stories about characters who have successfully resolved a dilemma similar to their own. Identification with a literary model can foster thought and possible resolution to a problem such as dealing with a separation, illness, death, disability and alienation.

The underlying premise of bibliotherapy is that interpreting stories is an ever-changing process to which children bring their own needs and experiences. Since children often have difficulty identifying and communicating their feelings, stories can serve to facilitate open discussion and self-understanding. If children become emotionally involved with literary characters, they are more able to verbalise, act out, or draw pictures describing their innermost thoughts.

For more information about bibliotherapy see the separate *Good Ships* resources.

### Our child-focused services

Good Ships is part of a suite of programs and services provided by Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) to support children, young people and their families.

Our core expertise is in supporting individuals and families through difficult life events, such as separation and divorce, experiences of family violence, mental or emotional health difficulties or any relationship issue that is causing trauma, stress, or concern. We focus on a whole of family approach with expertise working across the life cycle. We have a commitment to helping children, young people and their families:

- in a preventative way with whole communities, such as at schools and in maternal and child health centres;
- in an early intervention way to assist individuals and families to maintain healthy relationships;
- by offering high quality services to families that have been through or are going through difficult life experiences.

RAV's services for children, young people and families include: child and family counselling, family dispute resolution (FDR) (including child-inclusive FDR), case management, family violence prevention and support programs, early intervention programs and relationship education programs.

RAV also has a dedicated website for young people.

Visit [www.connectedspace.com.au](http://www.connectedspace.com.au)