

Stories That Teach Life Lessons

Use books and stories to share values with a young child.

Whether we share stories about our families, historical events, or emotions, stories are a way to encapsulate life's memorable moments and enduring lessons. We can harness the power of literature and use it to develop positive character traits in young children by reading often, choosing suitable books, and enjoying stories together.

The Power of Reading with Your Child

Reading together builds a bridge of understanding about what your family values are. At the same time, it helps your child associate books with pleasure — an important precursor for learning, and wanting, to read. To get the most out of shared stories:

Preview books carefully. Consider your child's interests, age, and attention span. Read book reviews, talk to your child's teachers, and find out what books other parents are sharing with their children. Select books about familiar, concrete experiences in which the main character is about the same age as your child. This will help him learn the words he needs to articulate his emotions. For example, *Practice Makes Perfect for Rotten Ralph*, by Jack Gantos, can launch a discussion about dealing with jealousy.

When books deal with sensitive issues, such as loss, it's especially important to preview them to make certain that they do not contradict your family's beliefs and values. If, for example, you do not believe in an afterlife or you are uncomfortable with the notion of animals having a soul, Cynthia Rylant's popular book *Dog Heaven* would not be suitable. Recognize also that a book about loss might spur a larger discussion, so you'll want to be prepared to respond to difficult questions.

Set a purpose for your reading. Rather than expecting your child to listen to a story and immediately appreciate the message, guide her in what to listen for. For example, if you are reading *One Duck Stuck* by Phyllis Root, a book about problem-solving, you might say, "As we read, let's look at what each animal does to help the duck get unstuck."

Draw attention to the point of the story. Think about "learning between the lines." Rather than interrupting the story's flow by quizzing your child, use the moment it takes to turn the page to wonder out loud about the meaning. For example, the motif of Mem Fox's book *Koala Lou* is unconditional love. Draw your child's attention to that theme by pausing on the page where Koala Lou is sobbing over her failure in the Bush Olympics: "She looks so sad about losing. I wonder what her mom will say?"

Encourage your child to think critically. Stories are a safe way for children to explore emotions and behaviors. A book like Frank Asch's *The Last Puppy* gives children a chance to think about attention-seeking. Lead your child to think about the strategies he uses to get others to accept him. Begin with a recap: "What things did the puppy try?" Then, underscore the point of the story with questions such as "What finally got the owner's attention?" "Why do you think it didn't work when the puppy bit and made a fuss?" and "What turned out to be the best way to make friends?"

You Are What You Read

Stories, whether fictional or based on real-life experiences, are ideal for reinforcing the virtues you want your child to develop. With literally thousands of books from which to choose, select those that are harmonious with what your family holds dear. Consider your child's unique characteristics and the virtues that you value most, then look for stories with an intersection of the two. The book *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues*, by Thomas Lickona, is an excellent resource for deepening your understanding of how children's character develops over the years. You can also find lots of titles addressing common childhood themes in *Books That Build Character: A Guide to Teaching Your Child Moral Values Through Stories*, by William Kilpatrick. The following strategies can help you use storytelling to help your child grow into the type of person you would like her to be:

Create traditions that strengthen family bonds through reading. Many adults remember with great fondness family traditions tied to stories, such as reading the poem "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" on Christmas Eve, or sharing Margaret Wise Brown's classic *Goodnight Moon* at bedtime. Consider reading an affectionate countdown-to-bedtime poem such as *Counting Kisses*, by Karen Katz, or *Animal Kisses*, by Barney Saltzberg, each night.

Share your own family stories. They serve to chronicle your child's unique history, model positive family interaction, and build a sense of closeness. Read Debra Frazier's picture book *On the Day You Were Born*, and then talk about how you prepared and waited anxiously for her arrival. Read *The First Thing My Mama Told Me*, by Susan Marie Swanson, to start a discussion about how you chose your child's name. You might select a book that suggests a new family tradition, such as making a book of promises inspired by Elizabeth Laird's *Promises. Creating a Family Storytelling Tradition: Awakening the Hidden Storyteller*, by Robin Moore, is filled with ideas for shaping your family traditions.

Use a storybook to calm anxiety and fears. Getting lost, worrying about school, or causing harm unintentionally are common experiences of young children. Reading a story about these fears can help you broach the subject in a more relaxed way. If you were ever late, and your child was the last one to be picked up at child care, you know the horrible feelings both of you felt. Try reading *My Somebody Special*, by Sarah Weeks, as a way to reassure your child and focus on the joyful reunion between parent and child.

Peer relationships can be positive or negative. Kindergarten children will revel in dramatizing school stories about know-it-alls, as in *Timothy Goes to School*, by Rosemary Wells, or about bullies, such as in *The Recess Queen*, by Alexis O'Neill. The vicarious experience of seeing misbehaving children get their comeuppance is reassuring. Invite your child to invent dialogue and enact the incidents that cause these characters to mend their ways.

Act It Out!

As children dramatize stories, they store them in long-term memory and make them part of their storehouse of ideas. Throughout life, they will draw upon these memories as they strive to understand what they read or to write stories of their own. During play, children invent stories and use their imaginations in ways that solidify their storytelling skills.

Provide your child with toys that encourage her to reenact and more deeply explore the ideas she has read in a book. Blocks, dolls, plastic people, toy animals, puppets, clay, and dress-up clothes are wonderful open-ended materials for dramatic play. An area set up as kitchen, or miniature toys like a house, farm, airport, or construction site, all invite dramatization.

Keep books related to these toys nearby to facilitate spontaneous reenactments. Help young children deal with the emotions of daily life by reading books that describe reassuring routines and then incorporating those themes in play. Toddlers, for example, need to feel secure and to learn that loved ones and children, while sometimes separated, are always happily reunited. Your child might enjoy reenacting *Baby Day!* by Nancy Elizabeth Wallace, or *The Day the Babies Crawled Away*, by Peggy Rathmann. You can encourage your child to dramatize by using toy animals to represent the characters in stories about being lost (*Have You Seen My Duckling?* by Nancy Tafuri or *Where's Spot?* by Eric Hill).

Sharing stories with your child — whether you open a book or whisper your own tale into her ear — not only teaches life lessons and enhances her social skills; it also introduces the beauty of language and literacy within the safety of your arms. As you snuggle up for a tale each day, you are sending a powerful message: Stories are precious and important.

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