

Values and children

Storytelling remains one of the most effective ways to teach children about values

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HEARTLINES Feature Service

A wise ant and a frivolous grasshopper taught millions of children the value of saving for days of necessity.

This and other lessons learnt from the fables of Aesop, a slave who probably lived over two thousand years ago, still resonate with children and adults the world over.

Educational psychologist and senior lecturer at the University of Johannesburg Dr Elzette Fritz agrees that storytelling is an effective way to teach children about values.

“It’s especially valuable for moral education and learning life skills. Stories address children’s hearts, fantasies and curiosities. They also involve their problem-solving skills. Because they make use of metaphors, stories enable children to create a visual image,” she says.

Fritz says that stories appeal to children in multiple contexts and that those who are more linguistically or artistically inclined will find every story appeals to a specific domain.

She says it’s important to choose stories which children can relate to. Stories aren’t necessarily confined to those in story books, she adds, television and movie characters also play a role in storytelling.

“Go and see what is in your children’s world of experience and choose suitably. If your child watches Cartoon Network, it is important for you to be familiar with the characters. If you know what they’re watching, you can teach through these stories. Talk to children about who their favourites and heroes are. If it’s Spider-Man, find out what they like about him and what they can learn from him,” she says. Traditional stories, folk tales and ideas drawn from news stories and current affairs can also be valuable in the process of educating children about values.

“It’s the everyday stories that can have a huge impact. Parents and teachers need to think quite broadly about where they can source these,” Fritz says.

Children can be exposed to storytelling from birth. “The fact that a child can’t talk properly yet doesn’t mean they can’t internalise. You begin to set a culture of storytelling like this. I have a five-year-old son who wants to become a storyteller. That would not have come about if I had not told him stories or made him aware of people and how they live. I’ve sat with him while watching cartoons and movies and discussed these with him. You use these instances as points of connection with your child,” she adds.

Considering a child’s developmental stage enables teachers and parents to simplify values for a child in an effort to produce a values-based adult some day.

“One needs to tailor the lesson of the value to that stage. So when I’ve got a child who’s still in a fantasy mode, I need to start teaching them the difference between reality and fantasy, and the consequences involved. This is linked to honesty. Then you teach responsibility and tolerance,” she says.

Storytelling plays different roles in a child’s development. “It plays a huge role in sexual identity and development,” she says.

“It helps them differentiate between a right and a wrong choice. It teaches respect for self and for each other. Storytelling also assists in triggering imagination, problem-solving

and language development. It relates back to developing and catering for multiple intelligence.

“It’s also fun and that’s when children learn best,” Fritz says.

She adds that not enough good use is being made of the value stories around us. “We can’t just equate these to books and tales. We’re missing the richness of the other stories we encounter. Our own stories, other people’s stories, the everyday stories of media, TV and movies and what we can learn from them,” she says.

For Nazreen Dasoo, with the University of Johannesburg’s Education faculty, a good story’s effect lies in the story teller’s ability to evoke emotion, imagination and reflection through a personal tale which highlights a value. “For me, personal story telling that evokes an emotion is a conduit through which values are transmitted to children”

Teacher and parents could use stories in a one-on-one activity or a small group activity she said. “Human contact is the key element here. They should be full of drama and have an ethical dimension. Stories also become a catalyst for encouraging the child to make a “connection” with the underpinning value in the story and in turn retell their own life experiences,” Dasoo said.

Story-teller Gcina Mhlope’s rule is never to tell a story she doesn’t like. Mhlope is inspired by life experiences, people and history and says it’s important for stories to teach values. “It’s crucial that these stories be remembered and that’s why the content has to be memorable – and it’s this memorable element that helps you to recall the story and the values, even many years later.”

Bridget Krone is the author of *Can Little Pig Fly*, from the HEARTLINES children’s book *Stories That Talk*.

She believes that all storytelling is about conveying a lesson. “Even the most fun, goofiest, most entertaining stories have values embedded in them somewhere. They legitimise certain relationships, behaviours etc – we can’t get away from that. Obviously some will do this more overtly than others,” she says.

Krone thinks young children are very open to these kinds of lessons. “I suppose they get increasingly more resistant to overtly finger-wagging stories as they get older. There are so many ways children learn values: the strongest message probably comes from what they see being enacted around them – but storytelling can be a part of that. Most kids love the snuggly one-on-one time with their parent that happens when they are read to. I think that’s what makes it so effective,” she says.

She adds that parents can’t ensure that their children get the most out of every book they read. “If every story is squeezed for life lessons and “opportunities for learning“, most kids will squirm with boredom and go and watch TV! But these HEARTLINES stories are a bit different – and the questions/prompts at the end of each story can help to facilitate a little chat about the value in question,” she says.

The trick for her is to keep a light touch and not to wring a ponderous sermon out of each story. “Parents should move along swiftly when little people start to wriggle!” she says.

There are many methods storytellers can use to make sure their message gets across. “Personally, I find humour and a light touch works best for me. If the story itself is too thin or flat, even the most worthy message will be lost. The story must be compelling,” Krone says.

Nola Turkington, author of *Bear’s Haircut* in the HEARTLINES story book says the key to a good story is bringing the child’s imagination into play. “I quote Professor Edward

Rosenheim, Jr, of the University of Chicago who said good stories should invite the exercise of compassion or humour, exploit the capacity for being curious, use language that challenges the child's awareness of rhythms and structures, has characters and events that call for – and even strengthen – an understanding of human motives and circumstances and provide the joy that comes with achievement, understanding and new encounters.”