

Yes Virginia Storytelling Can Save the World

The Impact of Storytelling on Preschool Children

There can be no doubt that storytelling is a powerful learning tool for children of all ages... but we need to ask, what stories are they being told, and who is telling them?

Once upon a time wise men and women were revered as the storytellers in their communities. Most of these people were elders, whose role was to pass on their cultural heritage and life lessons through the telling of stories. The children clambered over each other to be closest to the storyteller, while their parents sat further back to feel the power of the storytelling on the whole assembly. They knew the stories, in their bones and in their hearts. The stories were a part of them.

As children they too had sat at the storyteller's feet, and listened wide-eyed and open-mouthed. They were nourished by the stories and like them grew with the telling. Now they watched as the next generation did the same.

Whenever I have a family storytelling session in a library, I feel the connection to the storyteller in times past. I welcome the children who cluster around me, the cries of the newborn nestled at his mother's breast and the grandmother who comes up to me later to say how she enjoyed the stories as much as the young ones. I know that stories resonate in the human heart and are a gift for anyone willing to receive them.

Fairytales, folktales and fables are the staple diet of everyone hungry for stories. Indigenous, Eastern and Western cultures have all honoured the tradition of storytelling by ensuring that each generation is told the stories that are their birthright. Preserving storytelling traditions is no mean feat. War, famine, pestilence and cultural imperialism have all conspired to deny the transmission of stories. This is especially so with the stories of indigenous cultures.

Recording indigenous storytellers and publishing their stories in their mother tongue, while not being a substitute for children hearing a 'real life' telling, at least ensures that they have access to their culture's stories. In this instance, television as a medium for storytelling plays an important role in passing on the stories. Not surprisingly, although few indigenous storytellers ever grace Australian television screens, television itself has become the dominant storytelling medium in Western society today.

While educators and parents welcome high quality, children's programming, a substantial amount of television and videos watched by children, doesn't fall into either category. Yet our kids are spending an increasing number of hours plugged into the tv. Many of the programmes they are subject too are

violent, inappropriate and mind numbing. Unsupervised television viewing is one of the hazards families face in trying to juggle the demands of daily life. Even when the material watched by children is deemed suitable, the amount of time spent watching television needs to be considered.

It has been my experience that in telling folk and fairytales to children under ten, there will always be a number who say that they've got that story on video or DVD at home. I can't remember the last time a child said to me, 'I've heard that story in a book!'

Cultural allusions to books are now superseded by film. Older children are more likely to watch 'soaps' on television, than read a book before they go to sleep. While parents are more likely to sit younger children in front of a film than read them a story. But is this such a 'bad' thing?

Like any technology, television can be put to good use. However the concern for me as a storyteller and a parent, is seeing it replace the 'real life' telling of stories.

Storytelling is a shared experience of wonder between teller and listener, which forges a deep and powerful connection to the hearts of both. Having worked as a professional storyteller for the past thirteen years, I am passionate about the power of storytelling to transform the lives of all who experience it. Not only can it be an inspirational and creative teacher, storytelling can help a child find her roots while simultaneously giving her wings to fly.

I have watched a child's first tentative interactions in a storytelling session. In the weeks and months of sessions to follow, I have seen their self - esteem bloom, as they discover a safe place to grow and explore through the stories.

Given that storytelling is not only highly enjoyable, but educational, why then isn't there more storytelling and less tv watching?

With cuts to public library funding, particularly for children's activities, many libraries no longer offer regular storytimes, let alone storytelling sessions. The work demands placed upon today's parents often leave them with little resources to tell or read stories to their children. Grandparents live too far away and there are other more urgent matters to deal with. Thus tv conveniently assumes the role of rescuer. And what parent hasn't at some stage turned to that knight in plastic armour?

Herein lies the challenge for parents and educators; to adopt an active, honourable and imaginative champion. That I believe is the Storyteller, a knight in shining armour who resides in each of us. We must summon our inner strength, deepest commitment and higher self to vanquish the stressed out parent who 'can't tell you a story right now'. In discovering the storyteller within,

we will be rewarded tenfold with a delighted audience. Besides all the other benefits of storytelling to preschoolers, it is simply a way to make kids happy.

I have often heard the astonishment in the voices of parents and childcare workers after a storytelling session. *'I can't believe you held them for so long!'* Invariably there is an explanation of how a few of the kids have attention deficit disorder. I smile, because I know that storytelling works! I've seen shy kids, angry kids and scared kids all touched by the power of storytelling. And these kids in turn have discovered appropriate and often highly inventive ways of sharing their own stories. We all have the ability to tell stories. Only sometimes we need a little help to get started. That's why I began putting stories and raps and rhymes into a written format. My books are essentially a resource for parents, teachers, librarians and child care workers for the oral sharing of stories.

Every day we tell stories in the form of anecdotes. It's our most common way to communicate. The next step is to tell a complete story, with or without props for added enhancement. Storytelling is an act of love and a good story well told is a meaningful and satisfying experience for everyone concerned... and, yes Virginia storytelling can save the world!

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