

Families & Learning

A PUBLICATION OF THE CONNECTICUT FAMILY LEARNING INITIATIVE, A PROJECT OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Storytelling: A Learning Tool

Stories are how we make sense of things. Researchers now verify that storytelling is crucial to child development, and works in many ways to strengthen neural paths in the brain that make all learning possible. The best part is this powerful educational tool is great fun and requires no special equipment or schooling. Here are a few ways storytelling builds learning:

Imagination: Listening to stories prompts children to form internal images of things that are not present. This is the foundation of imagination and fosters listening and reading comprehension. Recent research indicates that hearing stories over and over strengthens paths in the brain that allow children to more easily integrate new learning.

Imagination is the basis of creativity, problem solving, and social skills. Without imagination, children cannot envision alternatives to perceived hostility, nor can they find creative solutions to conflict.

Vocabulary: Children are exposed to new words while listening to stories, and more importantly, they are given context from which to extract meaning. Vocabulary is a powerful predictor of school success.

Communication Skills: Children enjoy talking about the stories they hear. They naturally relate the stories they hear to their own experiences, and this prompts them to share their own stories.

This can boost both written and oral skills.

Critical Thinking: Old stories like folktales expose children to challenges and promote confidence about overcoming them. They teach how to face adversity, and illustrate the benefits of compassion, friendship and courage. Stories can be invaluable to students facing real traumas such as divorce, poverty or substance abuse. They also increase tolerance and understanding of differences. Stories provide a safe way to explore and ask questions about difficult issues. Through stories children develop compassion and better understanding of another's feelings and experiences.

Honoring Parent Stories

Personal narratives help people make sense of their lives and transmit culture. But are you aware of their power to improve school-family relationships? Schools don't often draw on the rich storytelling traditions of many parents. What can schools learn from parent stories? Researcher Susan Auerbach argues that educators traditionally dominate discussion with families, and family frustrations are often silenced. She concludes that "eliciting parents' stories may defuse tense family-school relations—if educators are ready to listen."

She suggests schools seek out families explicitly to listen carefully and honor their stories. Sharing stories builds stronger social networks and trust. It helps parents better understand conflicts and ways to negotiate them. Educators gain insight into family struggles, perceptions and practices that shape student success. "Honoring parents' stories can help bring disparate worlds together and build more inclusive learning communities."

For more information: *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 104, No. 7, 2002.
www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=10990.

How to Tell a Good Story

Telling stories is an art. Like many art forms, anyone can dabble, and the more you do, the better you get. The tips below are compiled from the advice of several expert storytellers:

1. Pick a story you really enjoy.
2. Tell the story over and over. Practice is essential.
3. Dress it up. Add repetitive words or phrases, rhymes, and dialog to make the story come alive in listeners' minds.
4. Make the beginning strong. A phrase like "Once in a land far, far away..." prepares listeners for something wonderful.
5. Don't be afraid to use some words children don't know. Elicit possible meanings of key vocabulary. This helps children remember words they learn.
6. End your story clearly by slowing and dropping your voice with a phrase such as "And that's the story of..." or "And that is how I..." Listeners are a step behind forming images in their minds. Slowing helps them finish the tale with you.
7. Most importantly have fun with the telling. It's contagious.

For more ideas, visit the Connecticut Storytelling Center at www.connstorycenter.org.

Your Home is a Learning Place

Everyday Activities Provide a Foundation for School Success

Families engage in learning all the time, often without even knowing it. Everyday activities offer a wealth of opportunities for learning. They arise naturally from the places and social interactions of daily life.

Spending time together engaged in family learning activities helps make families stronger and builds important reading and learning skills that are the foundation for school success. And family learning is fun! Share the below ideas with families to help them use everyday activities as sources for learning.

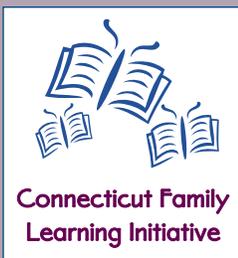
When You ...	This Helps Your Child ...
Make a family scrapbook, photo album or memory box, and tell stories about family history.	Learn that a story goes with pictures, that events take place in order, and about the elements of a story such as characters and setting.
Take a walk in your neighborhood. Notice street and store signs and talk about what they mean.	Learn to recognize symbols and read them.
Play bank, store or restaurant using blank deposit slips, newspaper coupons or empty food containers.	Learn that most careers use reading and writing.
Talk about your day over dinner.	Build vocabulary and language skills.
Make up silly rhymes.	Hear the small sounds in words and the rhythm of language.
Sort and fold laundry together.	Learn the names of shapes- triangles, squares and rectangles- and ways to group objects. These are essential math skills.
Set out plates or bowls for a meal.	Learn numbers, shapes, how to count things, and match one-to-one.
Write notes to put in pockets or lunch boxes; read messages on greeting cards together.	Connect letters and words with important and special information.

Everyday activities are a great way to learn. But remember, children benefit most from learning opportunities that are interesting and engaging to them. Daily activities that provide children with opportunities for exploring, practicing and perfecting a new skill are particularly enjoyable to children and show the greatest payoffs in learning. It's important to let families know that what they do at home makes a difference. By following children's interests, they can get things done while they help children build a foundation for success in school and in life.

For more information on family learning visit www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Family/

Resources: Bickart, T.S. & Dodge, D.T. (2000). Reading Right from the Start: What Parents Can Do in the First Five Years. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc. Dunst, C.J., et. al. (2001). Characteristics and consequences of everyday natural learning opportunities. Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 21 (2), 68-92. A version of this article appeared in All Children Considered (Vol. IV, 2003/04).

What's in a Name?



Roses might smell just as sweet by any other name, but would they be as popular if they were called swamp weeds? While names should not prevent true love, they are important. In our research with families and providers, we found that the term "family literacy" is not particularly effective with parents.* The term "family learning" is slightly more so, and is broader than literacy, capturing a broad range of learning opportunities in the home and community including math, science, and the arts. For this reason, the State Department of Education's Connecticut Family Literacy Initiative announces its new name, the Connecticut Family *Learning* Initiative. We hope this change sounds sweet to you!

*From *Listening to Families: A Family Learning Outreach Study* available from Judy Carson, 860-807-2122, judy.carson@po.state.ct.us.