

When children's storytelling says so much more

We take for granted that our children tell stories. But what if they can't? Oral storytelling is a bridge to literacy, yet many children do not develop this skill naturally. Research has shown that narrative skill at school entry predicts writing and reading comprehension up to ten years later. Narrative intervention is a form of language therapy and a classroom instructional approach that leverages personally and culturally relevant oral storytelling to promote school success. Drs Trina Spencer and Douglas Petersen in the US have developed ten principles of narrative intervention that can help guide practice.

There are few things more fascinating for a parent of a young child than listening to that child regaling a story in all its wide-eyed wondrousness. However, we underestimate the intricate interplay of cognitive and linguistic capabilities necessary for a child to structure and express a simple story. As such, analysing a child's storytelling capabilities helps assess their language, social, and academic development. Furthermore, training children how to tell and retell stories is an effective intervention for all children, especially for those who display language difficulties. There's a term for this kind of approach: narrative intervention, and two specialists in behaviour analysis and speech-language development are helping educators and clinicians implement this intervention to foster academically and socially important language.

Trina Spencer and Douglas Petersen make a powerful team and have been helping children develop critical communication

for 15 years. Dr Spencer is a behaviour analyst and associate professor in the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of South Florida and has a particular interest in literacy and early childhood special education. Her work overlaps with that of Dr Petersen, a professor in the Department of Communication Disorders at Brigham Young University in Utah. Petersen is a speech-language pathologist, or SLP, and as such diagnoses and treats people with communication problems. Together, Spencer and Petersen have combined their expertise and research to provide clear guidelines for educators and SLPs using narrative interventions.

STORYTELLING – NOT SO SIMPLE

For a story to be a story, as opposed to a disconnected stream of sentences, it must have narrative structure – causal and time-related components that follow a specific sequence. Despite differences in storytelling styles across cultures, most stories have a similar 'formula': a

protagonist presented with a challenge and the 'journey' that protagonist must undertake to address that challenge. However, simple though the 'formula' may seem, interwoven throughout this narrative structure is the language necessary to express it. Effectively telling a story to someone unfamiliar with it requires complex sentence structures to depict imagery and evoke necessary emotions, an appropriate expression style to keep the audience engaged, and sufficient social sensitivity to adjust the technique if necessary. This is challenging enough for any adult – witness the common fear of giving a speech – but especially so for children with communication difficulties.

According to Spencer and Petersen, to be an accomplished storyteller, a child must orchestrate simultaneously converging processes including attention, cognition, memory, inferencing, and the necessary receptive and expressive language. Receptive language is the ability to understand information, while expressive language refers to the way we use language to express ourselves. As such, a child's ability, or inability, to tell a story has considerable influence on their success in life. Children's narrative abilities are good indicators of their listening and reading comprehension, oral language development, vocabulary and writing, and thus academic development. So inextricably are these linked that research has shown that narrative skill at school entry predicts reading comprehension and writing performance up to ten years later. Furthermore, a child's ability – or not – to step forward and tell a story before a group of peers is a crucial indicator of social acumen. And, like other abilities, when storytelling is lacking, it can have profound impacts – parents of children with limited narrative abilities miss the seemingly simple enjoyment of hearing what their child did at school on any day. Therefore, ensuring all children learn the skill of telling stories is critical for their academic and social development.

Narrative interventions – helping children develop these skills – take various forms, but essentially, they involve supporting children telling or retelling stories orally with specific emphasis on intentional language targets. These interventions can be broad and diverse. For example,



some rely on a specific set of stories constructed for child-relevant oral storytelling exchanges; some focus on relating lived experiences, others on fictional storytelling. There is no one right way to implement narrative intervention, so what Spencer and Petersen have done to help is provide ten principles of narrative intervention that can guide interventionists' use of storytelling to promote language and literacy development. Their interventions have benefitted from a set of instructional

setting, problem, emotion, attempt, consequence, and conclusion. The reasoning behind this is that once the foundations are in place, interventionists can start folding in more sophisticated language targets, such as complex sentences and vocabulary.

Once children understand there is more to a story than just its content, they can start experimenting with their own ideas. By using different stories – Spencer and Petersen use the phrase

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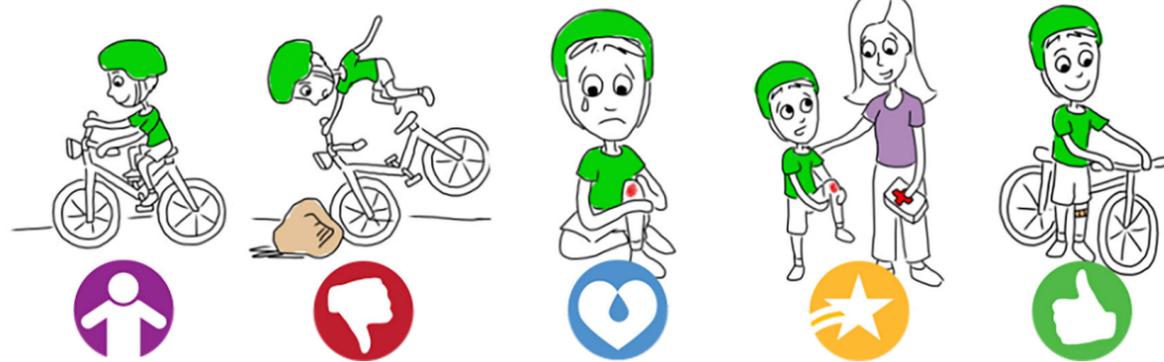
design efforts that have been applied and validated in research.

A STORY'S BUILDING BLOCKS

Spencer and Petersen suggest interventionists start by helping children recognise the basic building blocks of a story. They can do this by encouraging children to retell a short but complete story, with the interventionist focusing on the basic structure. This includes components such as characters,

multiple exemplars – the patterns consistent in all stories begin to emerge. Then, interventionists can help children generalise the patterns to personally relevant stories. Multiple exemplars also expose children to rich vocabulary and complex sentence structures they can recombine when telling their own stories.

For Spencer and Petersen, active participation is essential for effective narrative intervention. Focused practice,





Pictures, drawings or icons can help children remember the 'formula' for storytelling.

delivered at a suitable pace to prevent loss of concentration, will enhance children's opportunities to practice the necessary skills and use them outside the training environment. If children are in a group, interventionists can employ methods to increase active engagement such as choral responding – where children vocally name the key parts of a story, such as 'character', 'problem', 'feeling', 'action' and 'ending'.

While the goal is for children to tell complete stories independently, a strategic sequence of steps is needed to reach that goal. Spencer and

through repetition and association, serves to help children remember the 'formula' for storytelling, which is especially helpful when creating their own stories.

FEEDBACK, INDIVIDUALISATION AND GENERALISATION

The researchers place great emphasis on corrective feedback in narrative intervention. Importantly, they recommend that corrective feedback is immediate and specific. It doesn't help to wait until the end of a story to point out that the child forgot something and for the child to consider then what it could be; this is likely to confuse

Prompting is an effective tool to help children deliver a correct response.

Petersen emphasise the importance of contextualising the language practice in meaningful activities by first modelling a complete story before breaking it into parts. After the parts are taught and practiced, the children put the whole story back together – a process Spencer and Petersen call contextualising, unpacking, and reconstructing.

Because storytelling involves numerous higher-order cognitive processes and abstract concepts, the researchers recommend using simple visual aids, such as pictures, icons, or simple line drawings. This not only supports the more arduous cognitive processing but,

or frustrate children and entrench problems. Furthermore, the researchers recommend that corrective feedback targets what a child *should do* and not the problem or incorrect response.

Prompting is an effective tool to help children deliver a correct response, and on this, the researchers suggest using two steps. The first is to provide specific guidance; for example, 'What did John do to fix his problem?' instead of 'What happened next?'. If a child is unable to answer quickly enough, the second step would be to model the answer for the child: 'John asked for a bandage. Now you say that.' Spencer

and Petersen highlight the importance of *wh-* questions in two-step prompting, such as 'what?', 'who?' and 'how?' that require a complete sentence to answer, not a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

Language abilities differ significantly from one child to the next. Therefore, group classes using narrative intervention must have the capacity to differentiate, individualise, and extend practice for each child. This is not always possible, and school-based SLPs are especially under pressure to do more with less time and fewer resources. What can help, say Spencer and Petersen, is to create generalisation opportunities, such as inviting classroom teachers to help deliver narrative interventions. They are, after all, trained to work with children. Providing teachers with basic narrative intervention tools and techniques can allow them to work with larger groups of children at the same level of development, while the more experienced SLP focuses on at-risk children.

MAKING IT FUN

Finally, according to Spencer and Petersen, narrative intervention should be fun. Stories should inform and entertain, but also attract the listener's attention and approval. While there is value in children learning and understanding the structure of a story and replicating it, children need the tools to generate stories about their own lived experiences. Talking about themselves is much more fun than repeating someone else's story so interventionists should take advantage of that. They should listen carefully and enthusiastically to a child's story and encourage continued talking with simple but lively comments, even exaggerated facial expressions.

Spencer and Petersen have grouped the disparate methods of narrative intervention under a single umbrella of basic principles of effective practice. But their principles go beyond school-based interventions. Parents of young children can now better appreciate what is happening when their child tells a story. If that helps parents find those stories more fascinating and show it, then imagine the effect the application of Spencer and Petersen's principles could have on their child's development.

Behind the Research



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Research Objectives

Drs Spencer and Petersen have identified ten principles of effective narrative intervention for educators and clinicians.

Detail

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Bio

Dr Trina D Spencer is an associate professor at the University of South Florida. She is an educator, behaviour analyst, instructional designer, and intervention scientist. Her publications and editorial service span several disciplines, including speech-language pathology, early childhood education, special education, applied linguistics, and school psychology.

Dr Douglas B Petersen is a professor at Brigham Young University, Utah. He is a bilingual speech-language pathologist, and his research covers narrative-based language interventions, multi-tiered systems of support, dynamic assessment, screening, and progress monitoring of language and reading, and the prevention of reading difficulties through early identification and intervention.

Funding

Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education

Collaborators

Drs Spencer and Petersen wish to acknowledge the countless educators and clinicians who partner with them to conduct meaningful research that has immediate application in practice.

References

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Personal Response

Can you tell us more about your language curriculum, Story Champs®?

Story Champs® is a research-based narrative intervention curriculum for use in classrooms and more intensive arrangements. To develop it, we merged knowledge of language and literacy development with instructional design principles from behaviour analysis. The programme works for children, ages 3–10+, who are typically developing and who are at risk or have disabilities. It can be delivered by teachers, clinicians, and even parents. It can also be delivered remotely! There are Spanish versions of Story Champs®, and we are working with partners across the globe to create more culturally and linguistically appropriate versions for other countries.

What guidance can you give to parents to develop simple storytelling capabilities in young children?

To foster narrative language, parents should model oral storytelling as often as possible. For example, they can make up or tell personal stories about when they were children, ensuring the basic elements are included. Encourage children to retell your story or to tell their own and ask *wh-* questions to help them fill in the parts they forgot. Use complex sentences and sophisticated words and praise the children for doing the same. The most important thing is to not make oral storytelling too formal (like book reading). Integrate oral storytelling into regular routines. It doesn't require any materials so no need to hold back!