

Building Resilience and Fostering Hope with Children's Stories

I started bugging family members to "Read me a story!" at a very young age. This led to a life-long love of reading. As I look back over my life, I can say without a doubt that books taught me, shaped me, and helped form my views on life and my place in this world.

The Little Engine That Could was one of my favorites. To this day, the phrase, "I think I can, I think I can!" reminds me to keep trying when things get tough.

The ability to understand and relate to stories is a basic function of the brain. The process is similar to the way we interpret the 'real world'. "When people read stories we invoke personal experiences. We're relying not just on words on a page, but also our own past experiences." (Mar, R.)

Many books for children explore feelings and the situations that create those feelings. These stories offer empowering experiences, as children learn ways to improve their own lives while gaining a better understanding of their relationships and interactions with others. *

Stories can be a useful tool for caregivers looking for ways to help their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many children are experiencing significant stressors at this time. Stories about resilience build inner resources by helping children discover ways to support themselves and others.

There are several things to consider when choosing a book for this purpose. 1) Is the story appropriate for your child's age/stage of development. 2) Will your child relate to the story and its' characters? 3) Does the story plot present some type of difficulty, relate how the problem started, and offer possible solutions? 4) Will your child be introduced to problem-solving and/or self-regulation skills that can help them overcome difficulties in the future?

For young children, repetition plays a key role in learning. Be prepared! Your child may want to read and look at the same book multiple times. While young children certainly relate to and understand stories on their own, caregivers may find it helpful to facilitate learning by talking with them about the story. Conversations build connections and help develop understanding and self-awareness. Open-ended questions can work well for drawing out children's thoughts and feelings. *

Stories have been around for a long time. One ancient book, Aesop's Fables, is still popular with children. Most of us are familiar with 'The Tortoise and the Hare'. In the story, everyone expects the rabbit to win. As a child, I identified with the turtle, cheering him on and hoping the rabbit stayed asleep. This did not seem to be a fair race for the turtle. In the end, of course, the moral of the story was "slow and steady wins the race".

Reading together can lead to interesting conversations. Are there other messages, or possible interpretations, that might present themselves? For example, I recently reconsidered the story of 'The Tortoise and The Hare'. The tortoise's nature was to be slow. His shell protected him, so

he didn't need to run. The hare's nature was to stay alert, run swiftly, and hide from danger – which likely tired him out. From the hare's point of view, was this a fair race? Instead of competing, what might happen if the tortoise and hare decided to cross the finish line together? How would that look? What could they do to help each other? The next time I read this story to one of my grandchildren, I may try starting a conversation by asking these questions? What do you think they will say?

Resources:

* Social Emotional Story Books: <https://www.scanva.org/public-education-program/resiliency-resources/childrens-stories-that-build-resiliency/>

* 50+ Open Ended Questions for Kids to improve Comprehension and Vocabulary:
<https://bilingualkidspot.com/2019/02/02/open-ended-questions-preschoolers-kids-improve-comprehension/>

Cassidy, K., Ball, L., Rourke, M., Werner, R., Feeny, N., Chu, J., Perkins, A. (1998). Theory of mind concepts in children's literature. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 19(3), 463-470. doi:10.1017/S0142716400010274

Raymond Mar, "Fiction and its relation to real-world empathy, cognition, and behavior." Thursday, August 7, 1:00-1:50 am ET. American Psychological Association's 122nd Annual Convention. Walter E. Washington Convention Center, 801 Mount Vernon Pl., NW, Washington, D.C.

Leonard, T., September, 2014. "Building Resilient Children One Story at a Time". SCAN of Northern Virginia. https://www.scanva.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/06/WhitePaper_BuildingResiliencyChildrensStories_FINAL.pdf

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