*

# Want to raise a critical thinker? Try telling stories.

Engaging kids with storytelling skills has real brain benefits.

BYJULIA PELLY

PUBLISHED APRIL 28, 2021

Like most elementary and middle school-age children, Jennifer Aycock’s four kids, ages six to 13, love a good story. And though reading is a cherished family activity, the Aycock family doesn’t always rely on books.

“When we’re telling stories out loud, you can see the kids engage differently,” says Aycock, a longtime teacher who incorporates storytelling in her classroom. “They listen more intently, and it seems to really spark their imagination.”

Scientific research on how kids’ brains respond to storytelling is relatively new, says Katie Knutson, board chair of the [National Storytelling Network](https://storynet.org/)and a professional storyteller. “[But] it’s clear that there are significant cognitive and academic benefits to both story listening and storytelling.”

Telling stories is nothing new and has been around since before the written language. The practice didn’t just communicate information—like that an area was dangerous because of predators—but also preserved history, honored religious traditions, and entertained.

They also create cultural cohesion. “Often stories are told in families to connect the next generation to those who have gone before, or to help kids develop the values that are most important in their culture,” Knutson says.

Weaving this creative tradition into your household can foster cognitive, social, and emotional development, which many parents are concerned has been disrupted by COVID-19-related school closures and isolation. Here’s why storytelling is good for kids—and how parents can make it part of their family life.

## Storytelling and the brain

Although all kinds of story forms can provide great entertainment and convey valuable lessons, the ways kids process oral storytelling—whether they’re hearing a story or telling it themselves—elicits unique brain responses that are different from watching a television show, reading a book, or journaling.

“Using MRI imaging, neuroscience research has demonstrated that when a listener is engrossed in a teller’s story enough to forget about their surroundings—a[state called narrative transport](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1993-98290-000)—the functioning areas of the tellers' brains are [soon] mirrored in the listener's brain,” says[Cathy Miyata,](https://cmiyata.wordpress.com/) a professor at Wilfrid Laurier University and master storyteller. This phenomenon is known as [neural coupling,](https://www.pnas.org/content/107/32/14425) which is unique to verbal communication.

Oxytocin, a hormone involved in social bonding, may also play a role in narrative transport. “When children are told a meaningful or emotional story, their brain’s emotional response triggers a release of [the] neurochemical,” Miyata explains. [Researchers suggest](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4445577/) that this is because when listeners become emotionally engaged with the characters in a narrative, they are drawn deeper into that story world.

This social bonding experience—between the storyteller, listener, and story characters—can also help facilitate empathy building in kids. “Exposing listeners to emotional and meaningful stories influences their ability to empathize and actually motivates them to demonstrate acts of caring,” Miyata says.

## The cognitive and social benefits of storytelling

“When children hear stories, they practice many of the skills they’ll need to be effective readers, writers, and critical thinkers,” Miyata says.

For example, [research suggests](https://journals.ala.org/index.php/cal/article/view/5990/7646) that listening to and telling stories to an audience (even of one) can boost kids’ cognitive engagement, ability to identify patterns, and story-sequencing skills, or being able to identify the components of a story like the beginning, middle, and end.

Classroom studies in the United States and Canada also show a strong correlation between increased participation in storytelling—both as listener and teller—and children's problem-solving skills both at school and at home, adds [Kendall Haven](http://www.kendallhaven.com/), a professional storyteller and author of *Story Smart: Using the Science of Story to Persuade, Influence, Inspire and Teach*.

Then there are social benefits. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many children have been isolated from friends and communities, and storytelling can help them feel more [connected](https://theconversation.com/3-ways-to-teach-kids-storytelling-a-skill-that-matters-during-coronavirus-isolation-and-always-137833) at home.

That’s because sharing stories can help build the relationship between the storyteller and listener. “Reading to a child is a wonderful thing to do that has many, many benefits,” Miyata says. But storytelling without a script can remove barriers and open up the imagination. “When you take away the book, there’s just the parent and child, focused on one another, interacting and sharing in a unique experience.”

## How to make storytelling a part of your family life

Storytelling at home can help kids expand their imaginations and develop critical-thinking skills—but they might need some help to get started.

“When we ask kids, and even adults, to make up a story, the options are so unlimited that it’s often a struggle to come up with anything at all,” Knutson says. “When we give a limit to their freedom, often in the form of a loose prompt, it frees them up to get wildly creative.”

**Model storytelling.** With younger kids, a great way to get started is for parents to model storytelling. You can even make this a collaborative process. For example, Knutson recommends asking your child to think of a person, place, and thing, and then shaping a story around those details.

**Help kids practice active listening**. Instead of asking children to sit quietly throughout the story, parents can ask kids to predict what’s coming next. (“What do you think she saw behind that big red door?”) Invite them to move their bodies with the story. (“Let’s all tiptoe like Camilla sneaking by the snake!”) Or help them participate in the telling process with simple call-and-response prompts. (“When I say no, you say way!”)

**Encourage kids to ask why.** When kids are ready to start telling their own stories, Haven recommends encouraging kids to focus less on what happens and more on why it’s happening and what the motivations of the characters are. This is a kind of exercise in empathy. “Give details about why the character is doing what they’re doing, and ask listeners to make guesses as to the why’s in other parts of the story,” she says.

**Talk about feelings.** Prompts that focus on specific emotions can also help kids incorporate their own experiences and ideas into stories. Parents might ask kids to share about a time they felt surprised, sad, scared, or excited, or to create a story about a birthday, a friendship, or starting something new.

**Ask good questions.** While storytelling absolutely can be about dragons, fairies, or volcanoes, parents can help kids learn to tell good stories by helping them see stories in their everyday lives. Instead of asking “How was your day?” or “What did you learn at school?” parents can get creative. (“What did the food smell like in the cafeteria at lunch this afternoon?” or “Did anyone do anything unexpected in class today?”)

**Get the whole family involved.** Especially when kids range in age, story games can spark creativity and allow everyone to participate at their level. Popular storytelling games include retelling games that require family members to use puppets or toys to recreate a story; challenges that involve retelling well-known stories with a new twist (think Little Red Riding Hood, but all the characters are people you know); and round-robin games, in which one person starts a story and others take turns completing it.

Such round-robin games are familiar to Jennifer Aycock and her family. “It’s fun to see each person's personality come out in the part of the story they tell,” she says. “It’s a great way to connect as a family, learn more about what’s going on in each other’s lives, and have fun.”