

Something Happened! Sharing Life Stories from Birth to Three

This article provides insights into developing the communication skills of very young children. It is based on Jervay-Pendergrass' research and a demonstration project called the STORIES Project. The project trained daycare teachers and parents to encourage young kids' attempts to communicate their first stories and so lay the groundwork for later literacy skills.

Young children are remarkable storytellers. As early as the first year of life, even with limited communication skills, they begin to share their stories with people who are willing to listen and observe...

When "something happens" in their world that they feel a need to report or share, young children communicate this to their conversational partners in their own resourceful and creative way. As Bruner (1990:78) suggests, they "show early readiness to mark the unusual and to leave the usual unmarked."...

The supportive role of the adult listener is critical in helping children communicate their stories. Listeners must be prepared and ready to lend active support. As conversational partners, our job is to recognize and interpret children's utterances and nonverbal behaviors...

Understanding the child's experience

The first step in the STORIES training curriculum is helping teachers and caregivers recognize the ways very young children communicate "something happened" and the ways caregivers may interpret a child's message. The following vignette is an example of what this process looks like in a child care environment...

In the... classroom of one-to-two-year-old children, Gina initiates an interaction as she thinks back on something that occurred during the weekend at home. From her vantage point, something happened! And it is an experience worth telling.

"HEY HEY HEY," she says, and then continues talking: "...you... my mommy... don't say that 'cause...my (cousin) don't... ."

Someone interjects, "Your mommy said that?"

Gina [then] walks up to her teacher and initiates this exchange "... um ...my... um... Grandma," and her teacher... replies, "Grandma?"

[Then the teacher] asks, "Grandma said you're going to her house?"

Moments later Gina goes on to say "She go to my house... see my necklace... go to her house... she go to my dad's birthday."

...This fleeting interaction captures just moments in the day-to-day life of a young child in a childcare setting. The cries, gestures, and words communicated by the toddler in the example above tells the caregiver a story. Something happened! and the narrative force of her utterances and behaviors – cries, whines, changes in voice tone or volume, facial expressions, body movements, gestures, and/or words or signs – communicated this to the listener.

Each caregiver assumes a different role as a conversational partner to the infant and toddler storytellers in their classrooms. Their roles may range from that of a "teller," who tells the story for the children; one who is "told" the story; or a "scaffolder" who helps to build the story (Jervay-Pendergrass 1992)... Stories are a real and integral part of the day-to-day lives and interactions of very young children, just as they are of all humanity...

The story sequence [above] illustrates a prenarrative. Gina uses "HEY, HEY, HEY," repeatedly in a loud tone of voice, to draw attention to the fact that she is about to tell a story. At times, however, it seems to the listener Gina is recounting two different stories at once – the first story about "my mommy" and the second story about her grandmother ("she go to my house"). Her ability to sequence the events in her story is just beginning to emerge.

The teacher assumes the role of "the scaffolder" here by asking a question that enables the child to affirm a more coherent story line: "Grandma said you're going to her house?" This modeling enables Gina to better organize her experience and to be understood: "She go to my house ... see my necklace... go to her house... she go to my dad's birthday..."

In this age range, children's prenarratives begin to transition to recognizable narrative forms. A number of researchers have shown that nearing the age of two, children are able to relate information about novel experiences from the past as they interact with their caregivers (Eisenburg 1985; Miller & Sperry 1988; Sachs, 1983; Fivush, Gray & Fromhoff 1987; Hicks, 1991; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997)...

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First stories: What to expect from birth to three

Very young children's prenarratives or first stories are not what adults readily recognize as stories, nor can they be readily compared with the narratives of adults...

1. Expect that very young children's storytelling abilities progress along developmental paths consistent with their overall communicative and language development.

The [STORIES Project] training is designed to help caregivers recognize children's first stories, understand that children may tell their first stories without words, and appreciate the significance of these earliest stories. Here, for example, is a story told by an infant, just weeks old, with the support of her mother.

Six-week-old Erin Nicole lay in her mother's arm drinking water from a bottle. Her bright eyes conveyed delight. Suddenly, however, her facial expression changed; she stopped sucking; and her darkening gaze went first toward her bottle, then away. Something happened! Erin Nicole's mother, momentarily puzzled, took the bottle, and then turned it upside down to make sure that the liquid was flowing. It was not.

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Erin Nicole's nonverbal behaviors, her use of eye gaze and her facial expressions, communicate some simple but significant narrative intent to her mother – something happened! At this moment, her mother relies on her own background knowledge (occasionally bottles are difficult to use) and shared experience with her little one (Erin Nicole was thirsty) to make meaning of this event. She also uses context cues (the amount of water had remained the same though Erin Nicole had continued to drink) and her newborn's nonverbal behaviors (her happy baby looked away) to interpret that "something happened."

Babies use nonverbal behaviors or movements to produce prenarratives or first stories, and carry out a range of narrative functions. They may use different facial expressions to introduce their stories, but eye movements, especially the establishment of eye contact with their conversational partners, is a particularly effective prenarrative introduction (Jervay-Pendergrass, 1992).

Children also use movements or nonverbal behaviors to provide their listeners with orientation information (e.g. who, what, where), and combine gestures to communicate the past event. These gestures produce meaningful images that involve the listener in the interpretation of the story being conveyed. As Kendon (1982, p. 454) notes, "A gesture is not to be understood in the first place as an expression; rather, it gains its significance from the way it is treated by a recipient." Thus, the stories of very young children are nurtured in social interactions.

2. Expect that infants and toddlers will attempt to share their stories with others in their day to day interactions, but they need help from their conversational partners.

In order to apply this principle in their daily interactions with babies and very young children, many caregivers will need to expand their knowledge, skills, and behavioral responses. But people must be motivated in order to change. One way to promote change is to make people a bit uncomfortable with the status quo...

Through videotaping day-to-day interactions among infants, toddlers, and caregivers over the course of a year, we identified many occasions when children's stories were "missed." Children may not have been understood because of poor articulation, or because a teacher may have turned her head at a critical moment and not seen "signs" or noticed the gestures that communicated that something happened. The following example of a missed story has been a powerful teaching example...

Miss Joan is reading a story to Lily and watching Lewis build a tower of blocks. Miss Joan says, "Go ahead, Lewis...one more...one more, Lewis...one more..ye:::ah"... Lewis puts one more block on his tower; then it falls. Miss Joan says, "Yea:::" As Lewis kicks his fallen tower and blurts out a scream of excitement, Miss Joan says, "Here... Lewis do it again?... Here, Lewis."

Lewis sits down and Miss Joan asks, "You tired?" Lewis responds, "Mememe." Miss Joan, not understanding what he is saying, says, "Huh?" Lewis repeats, "Mememe," and Miss Joan responds with, "Excuse you?"

Meanwhile, Lily calls Miss Joan's attention to the book with "Uh uh" as Lewis begins to rotate his hand and wave his arm, saying "Me bebe... whoo::sh... me bebe... me bebe... whoosh." Miss Joan responds, "okay," looks back and begins to read to Lily. Then Lewis goes on to say, "In ding lalalala... me o:::w." Miss Joan continues to read to Lily, as Lewis stands up and walks away.

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Audiences who watch this segment of videotape express regret, in varying degrees. When viewers finally understand the story – that Lewis was saying, "I knocked down the tower" – they clearly experience an "aha" or learning moment. They realize that to miss a story is to miss an opportunity for insight and connection to the child.

...Once caregivers realize that they may be missing stories, they are very motivated to learn how to better "read" children's first stories. In the example above, Lewis tried to tell his story with a combination of verbal behaviors (different sounds in syllables - "mememe" and "me bebe"), gestures (waving his hand), and moving closer to his caregiver. Even though the videotape shows the sequence of events that led up to the story, "Something happened! I knocked down the tower!", this story is not obvious to most who view the segment.

However, when the scenario is replayed in slow motion with the sound turned off, viewers can be guided to notice how Lewis uses body movements, repeated gestures, and facial expressions to tell a story. When viewers finally understand that "mememe" refers to himself and that his hand gestures illustrate his knocking down the tower, then the meaning of his utterances and gestures becomes clear.

We have also experienced several "aha!" moments in the project that have refined our expectations about first stories in different cultural contexts. We found, for example, when reviewing the initial transcripts of videotapes that contained only verbal language, that the children at one site seemed to have fewer prenarratives than did children from two other sites. Later, once the nonverbal behaviors were transcribed and incorporated into the transcripts, we isolated more prenarratives. In many instances... it was the combination of nonverbal behaviors and verbal language, including sounds and words, that told the story. This leads to our third expectation, which has been reinforced in unexpected ways.

3. Expect that stories, including prenarratives, may be told differently by people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The STORIES Project is working with caregivers in inclusive day care sites in three cultural contexts – African American, Hispanic, and Deaf Culture – to understand the commonalities and the differences in the style and form of prenarratives in different linguistic and cultural communities.

Researchers have identified ways in which differing cultural values and beliefs affect language socialization, among other patterns of parent/infant interaction (van Kleeck, 1994). Caregivers from different cultural backgrounds may have differing beliefs and values about language and young children – for example, how children learn language and who should speak to whom and how.

Van Kleeck's review of the literature suggests that American mainstream culture is "low context" with respect to language – that is, the culture relies heavily on verbal explanation to communicate meaning. A "high-context" culture, in contrast, relies heavily on observable events, objects, or people to convey meaning. In a high context culture, nonverbal cues are often used to communicate information. A significant interaction could be communicated by a look.

Hispanic and African American cultures are both high context (van Kleeck, 1994). In a high-context language culture, features of language such as intonation, volume, and pitch can change meaning significantly. Elongating an utterance ("a:::::w" instead of "a::w") makes it more emphatic, and the meaning could change depending upon the intonation given it. An adult responding to these vocalizations made by a young child might interpret them differently depending on their own cultural or language experiences.

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A very young child who is deaf may look very similar to a hearing young child when they are telling a story or prenarrative using a combination of sounds and gestures to communicate that something happened. The hand to the mouth, accompanied by an expressive face, communicates that "something happened" to many people who do not know signs. Susan Mather, a professor in communications at Gallaudet University and consultant to The STORIES Project, has assisted with identification of prenarratives in the interactions and conversations of infants and toddlers, both deaf and hearing, who are using American Sign Language (ASL) in an inclusive day care environment...

4. Expect that every child, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, or disability has a story to tell.

The vignettes we have presented show that infants and toddlers tell stories – whether they are boys and girls, whatever their ethnicity or culture, and whether they are developing typically or have a disability. The training activities in settings reflecting African-American, Hispanic, and Deaf cultures, as well as the preliminary sociolinguistic research on prenarratives... support the richness and universality of these prenarratives told in the first three years of life.

Taylor (1987) points out that the way a person communicates depends on his or her culture. Thus we should expect that cultural differences will be reflected in very young children's "ways of telling" their stories. When young children's ways of telling differ from the mainstream culture, there may be a "mismatch between child language and school language" Shuy (1979, p. 34). This mismatch may significantly impact young children's educational experience.

We are also working to minimize this mismatch with young children with special needs in inclusive childcare settings. We are exploring the unique ways that children with disabilities tell stories, or have stories spontaneously told for them by their peers. For example, one child... had autistic-like behaviors, and never spoke. As we isolated the prenarratives of the children in this class, we observed that this child was the subject

of other children's stories. In other words, his peers used prenarratives to tell his story. When he did begin to speak, the achievement was celebrated by his peers as other children called attention to the event... to tell his story: "Look... look... .Carl said 'no no'."

Next steps

The STORIES Project is in its demonstration phase. As we continue to learn about how to best teach the concepts we have discussed here, we expect to learn more about the first stories of young children with special needs, and how caregivers interpret the prenarrative intentions of infants and toddlers, especially across cultural contexts.

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We also expect to learn more about how attention to children's earliest storytelling will support more sophisticated narrative and literacy skills in infants and toddlers from low socioeconomic groups. A recent study with low-income families (Rush, 1999) found that one component of language interaction – "one-to-one comments" – supports early literacy development. The relationship of this kind of language interaction to early literacy (phonemic awareness and vocabulary development) was found to be stronger than the effects seen with book reading.

The STORIES training also encourages caregivers to use commenting to talk about young children's experiences and support their prenarrative development. Further, in an intervention study with the mothers of three- to five-year-olds, Peterson and colleagues (1999) found that improving mothers' narrative skills resulted in significantly improved vocabulary skills and narrative ability in their children. We hope to eventually see similar outcomes with infants and toddlers using an intervention focused on prenarrative skills.

We expect to continue to be surprised by the "ways of telling"...that children with special needs devise in order to communicate and tell their stories. We are encouraging caregivers to recognize prenarratives, listen, observe, value, encourage, talk to, interact, model, and expand the children's first stories as a way to build their language and early literacy skills. But most of all, we hope to learn what will motivate adults to become conversational partners extraordinaire – who are eager to be told that "something happened!"