The Emergence of Story Telling During the First Three Years

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My 2 1/2 year old son, Sam, eagerly begins to tell a story he has heard and told several times before. He tells it to one of his brothers, who already knows the story. “When I was a born baby? (voice goes up as if asking a question) Jake was carrying me down the stairs and he, and he, he... (he turns to me) Mom, you tell the rest.” At 2 1/2 Sam is already a budding raconteur, eager to share experiences from his past.

In this case he is sharing an anecdote that has been told to him by others in the family, an event he couldn’t possible remember. As he has heard me tell it many times, at 2 weeks of age, his nine-year-old brother was carrying him down the stairs and slipped and fell all the way down. I watched from a distance, horrified, as they disappeared behind the staircase wall and bumped their way down. I ran over to them at the bottom of the stairs, where Jake sat holding his baby brother, sobbing and saying to me, “Its alright, he’s okay, I didn’t let him go, he’s fine.”

One can imagine the different feelings and thoughts this dramatic story engenders in each family member. What is so fascinating is that Sam, at age 2 1/2, already knows it is a powerful story and wants to tell it again. He no doubt finds it more interesting than other stories he might have heard, because he is a central character in it. And though he cannot yet tell the whole story on his own, he begins in proper narrative form “...When I was a born baby...,” setting the scene in time and identifying the central character.

Story telling is perhaps the most powerful way that human beings organize experience. Some have argued that narrative thinking is the optimum form of thinking for learning and expressing what we know about our selves and about other people (Bruner 1986, Schank 1990). Sam’s retelling of his adventure falling down the stairs captures some of this. The story not only organizes an even from our past. Both the
story and the telling of the story convey important information about relationships and feelings in our family.

By the time most children are three or four they can tell many kinds of stories: autobiography, fiction, and reports they have overheard. They can tell stories with other people, and to other people. By the time most children are adolescents, stories both formal, conversational, and unspoken, pervade daily life. In adulthood narratives provide a form for organizing huge amounts of information and serve a host of powerful psychological and social functions. What goes on in the first three years to prepare us for this astonishing array of abilities?

How is it that children are born with no language, let alone narrative skills, but that within 24-30 months most have learned the rudiments of story telling: how to sequence events, how to set action in place and time, and organize a story around characters. Where did Sam learn that telling a story is a good way of getting the attention of others, and that you can get a lot of social and emotional mileage out of telling a good story? How and where did he figure out what his community deems to be a good story?

Until about 10 years ago the common wisdom among early childhood specialists was that children are rooted in the here and now. Research had suggested that toddlers are only interested in what they can see and do at the moment, unable to think about things that have happened in the past or will happen in the future. But over the last 15 years a number of studies have shown that, in some cultures at least, parents and their babies talk about the past and future much more frequently and in greater depth than we had ever expected (Nelson 1989, Engel 1995).

Studies have shown us that social interaction is not only the site of emerging abilities such as conversation and story telling, but that the input of conversational partners can have a strong influence on what a child learns (Snow and Ferguson 1977, Miller and Sperry 1988). Studies have shown, for instance, that communities (and cultures) vary not only in how much they talk about the personal past, but in what kinds of stories about the past they value (Brice Heath 1983).

Before taking a look at the developmental path of story telling, it
might be helpful to outline a working definition of narrative. For my purposes, a story is a description of an event, set in a time and place. Things happen to someone, and they happen over time. The sequence of events must be meaningful; in other words there must be a theme that emerges through the chronological account, there must be at least a hint of a problem or tension, and the resolution of that problem. Choose any great and lasting novel, or well loved story, whether it be Great Expectations or the story of Noah’s Ark, and it fits these criteria. This then, is the basic narrative structure that children must master. And it turns out children begin using this narrative structure even before they can do it with words. As you will see in the following pages, the first narratives look quite different from the narratives of the 15- or 50-year-old. But all human abilities have to start somewhere.

**Play and narrative**

Just as Bruner suggested that grammatical structure is embedded in the early play actions and routines of young children, so too the elements of storytelling are implicit in the play scenarios of toddlers. A 20-month-old girl, Sarah, holds a small figure of a horse in her hand. She moves the horse as if he is running, and then drops him. “Oh no. Poor horsey. That horsey is sick. But here comes his mommy. His mommy gave him medicine and made him better.” While this may not be Oliver Twist, it is a story. Sara is describing a sequence of actions. The actions have an underlying theme that is meaningful. There are characters in her story, there is emotion, and there is an ending.

Even children who do not narrate their play are enacting a narrative with their gestures. It has been shown that children engage in this kind of symbolic play more and in richer ways when they do it with a facilitating adult, usually a parent or caregiver. A typical interaction consists of a young child moving a toy around, guiding the toy or toys through a sequence of actions. Often it is the adult who provides the language that highlights the narrative form embedded within the child’s play gestures. For instance, a 22-month-old boy moves two figures on a table top. His father says, “Oh look. Are those knights fighting? Oh look there, the green knight pierced the blue knight. Hurrah. Sir Greenie is the champion!”
Reminiscing with others

The other primary way that young children acquire and explore the narrative form is by talking about the past with their parents.

Just as with symbolic play, telling stories about the past also seems to take place in a kind of intersubjective transaction in which child and adult collaboratively build the story. The youngest reminiscer depends on his partner to create a description of the past. Equipped with an innate drive to tell stories, and the most rudimentary tools for doing so, the youngest story teller looks to the adult to evoke the past so that the child can contemplate, contribute, go over, and ultimately internalize a narrative rendering of his experience.

Long before a baby can refer to his or her past, or even converse with another about the past, parents talk to their children about what has happened. A mother looks at her fourteen-month-old daughter, and holds up a photograph of them standing under a tree with ice cream cones. “Remember when we went to Friendly’s and got ice cream? That was fun wasn’t it? You got white ice cream with colored sprinkles. And there were sprinkles all over your face. We laughed, didn’t we?”

What is happening here? The mother is teaching her daughter that it is interesting, useful, worthwhile, and satisfying to reminisce. The mother is also building up a shared past with her child. Parents and their toddlers tend to talk about experiences they have had together. Not only does this enable them to collaborate in the telling, it is also one of the ways we build and maintain intimacy (even into adulthood). When this mother talks about the ice cream incident she is also teaching her child what makes a good story. Interchanges like this can be found wherever parents and their young children are together. But the nature of the collaboration changes as the child develops.

An early stage

At a first stage children are attentive and responsive observers to their parents’ tales. They not only watch their mother’s face carefully as she tells stories of personal experience, they nod, repeat a word now and then as a way of showing interest and or keeping the mother going,
and respond with emotion, sometimes anticipating emotion in a well learned story. An interesting detail that will be familiar to any adult who has spent a great deal of time with the same child is that children love to hear the same story over and over again. From a cognitive as well as emotional perspective there are good reasons for this. My son liked to hear the story of falling down the stairs over and over again, not only for the slight dramatic buzz and pleasure of resolution it gave him (just like a game of peek-a-boo for a nine month old). It also gives him a chance to internalize the story and master the pieces.

A second stage

At a later stage children begin to participate, adding elements to the story, taking on greater pieces of the authorial responsibility. The mother of George, 30 months, says, “Georgy, wasn’t that fun going to the lake?”

George nods attentively.

The mother continues, “You loved the water didn’t you? You weren’t scared one little bit, were you?”

George offers, “I said Wow.”

His mother replies, “Yes that’s right. You jumped right in and the water was very cold, and you shouted out, “Wow,” didn’t you? That was funny.

Georgy adds more, “There was fishes.”

His mother again elaborates his contributions. “Oh yes, there were lovely fishes weren’t there? And we tried to catch one. But they were too fast for us.”

At this point, mother and child construct a story across turns. Though Georgy (or any other toddler) may not yet be able to organize a story, frame it in time or place, or know the syntax for representing past experience, he can join in his mother’s description, adding information, details, and perspective at just the right point. Together the conversational pair constructs a story.
A third stage

Finally, by the time children are three they can tell a whole story by themselves, or contribute pieces to a parent’s story that the parent didn’t even know about.

While the youngest story tellers (18-36 months) depend on conversation and a strong conversational partner to construct stories, slightly older children are eager to recount stories on their own. By the time children are three they have a well internalized notion of what it means to tell a story, and what the basic requirements of a story are. My son Sam, for instance, at 2 1/2 says, many times a day, “Do you wanna hear THIS story?” and proceeds to tell stories such as the following: “When Ariel was swimming he saw a huge humongous sting ray and it stung him and he had to go to the hospital.”

Typical of this stage, Sam’s stories often draw on some kernel of a real even (He knows someone named Ariel who did in fact take kayaking trips in Mexico, where there are sting rays). A different man, related to Ariel, did in fact get stung by something in the water. Sam has mixed up these two people and events, but with good reason, and then added a dramatic touch, that Ariel had to go to the hospital (totally made up). But Sam also shows that he understands the social, linguistic and cognitive requirements of the story telling situation.

It is only at this point that children actually negotiate the past with their parents, suggesting that it is only now that they have an individual internal representation of the experience, separate from the one they might co-construct with a parent. It is typical for a three-year-old to bring up an event from the past and feel quite frustrated and distraught when a parent not only doesn’t recall the episode but cannot echo and elaborate in a way that fills out and reflects back the story.

Not all parents and children tell stories equally frequently, for the same purposes, or in the same style. What are some of the individual differences we have found in the way parents and children tell stories?

Reminiscers and practical rememberers
In our study Learning to Reminisce, we found that some mothers talk a great deal about the past with their toddlers. They tell fairly well embellished stories about the past that include many details. Parent and child take many conversational turns in describing a shared experience. Perhaps most interesting, these mother/child couples seem to talk about the past for no other reason than because it is an enjoyable, interesting thing to do together.

For instance a child points to a flower in a vase on the table. The mother says, “Isn’t that a lovely flower? Remember when we picked that flower? We walked way out into the field. The grass was wet, and you wanted to take off your shoes. Do you remember what else we found out there?”

The child offers, “Slug!”

And the mother continues her story, “Oh yes. That was really slimy wasn’t it? Ick. We hated that slug.” All the while her child is staring at her attentively, sharing in this review of experience.

On the other hand, some mothers and their young children seem to refer to the past fairly infrequently. These mother/child couples tell short, spare stories, with few conversational turns, and few details. Again, perhaps most revealingly, they usually only refer to the past as a way of explaining or clarifying something they are doing in the present. For instance, a practical remembering mother might say to her toddler, “Find your sneaker, Zoe. Did you hide it yesterday? I think you put it under the chair.”

We found that by the time these children were 3 1/2 the reminiscers were more able to contribute new information to conversations about the past, keep a conversation going longer, and more likely to initiate conversations about that past. In other words, it appeared that the style the couple had at the outset of the study predicted how much and how the child would talk about the past 6 months later.

Having found stylistic differences in the way toddlers and their parents talked about the past, we decided to see if these differences showed up in the peer interactions of preschoolers. We observed three-and
four-year olds in a day care setting and found that the children did in fact use the two narrative styles: reminiscing and practical remembering. Some research has indicated that shy children are less likely to be reminiscers than outgoing children. What we don’t know is what causes what. That is, perhaps if you are not adept at story telling you become outgoing. Perhaps the two characteristics tend to coincide, or perhaps shyness inhibits story telling. Any one of these possibilities would be fascinating to explore further.

By the time children reach their fourth year they begin to explore the array of narrative genres available to them. At this point, one striking characteristic is their sensitive ear for style. Children are quite attuned to different kinds of formats, tropes, and other stylistic aspects of story telling. They reveal this sensitivity in the narratives they tell in response to ones that they have heard. For instance, in one study children heard poems and stories written by authors such as Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath. When invited to write their own stories in response, many of the children incorporated the rhyming patterns, formats and metaphorical imagery used by Plath, Dickinson and others (Engel, 1995). A perfect example of this is children’s eagerness to tell knock knock jokes long before they really understand the mechanics of such a joke. They capture, and use, the format and sound of the joke, filling in with their own content. Before children can explain a metaphor, or make up ones that are easily interpretable, they get the basic structure and love exploring its possibilities.

A three-year-old girl, Justine, paints with water colors. Her mother asks her if she would like to write anything to go with her picture. The young painter nods immediately and dictates, “The guy who went up the steep nicken and then he fell down and hurt his nicken on the schnocks of the nicks.”

This example shows how alive the narrative form is for young children. They are equally consumed by what the story is about, how it is told, and the reasons it is told. The process of telling the story is often as satisfying and psychologically rewarding as the story one ends up with. In the example above, the process of making up words and creating alliterations is as important as the content of the story. This is a child who has been encouraged to play with language, and to use stories as a form of play.
A three-year-old boy, seemingly out of nowhere, recounts to an adult friend: "'You know what?' said the mommy. 'You have a stomach ache.' 'No that's not true' said the little boy. He put his nose right up to his mommy, 'I have a bear on my tummy.'"

This story, though brief, is remarkably complex. He tells the story in terms of tightly interwoven dialogue. The characters in the story respond in contingent sentences (sentences that relate to one another both grammatically and in terms of content.). Moreover, the dialogue is used not just as an elaboration or detour, but to build the story. This story-through-dialogue conveys a narrative “problem”—the mother’s belief that the boy has a stomach ache. The story ends with a surprising turn of events (the bear on the stomach) that also serves as a resolution to the dramatic problem. This child, as it happens, has been talked and read to a great deal since infancy. It is possible that his precocious mastery and use of narrative techniques comes from his exposure to a wide array of narrative material.

It turns out that story telling is the single strongest predictor of literacy. Gordon Wells has shown in his wonderful study of Bristol children that those who told and heard stories at home under the age of four were the most likely to have ease and interest in learning to read once they got to school (Wells 1986).

**What story telling can do**

A 2 1/2 year old recounts to an uncle, “We were on the plane. And a man yelled at Dan (his brother). And Mommy got mad at the man. And after we sat down, I said to Mommy, ‘That man was jerk. Right mommy?’ And everyone laughed.” His audience (his uncle) explodes in laughter.

When a child tells a story, he not only means something, feels something, refers to an event; most important, he DOES something.

What was this child doing? He was sharing part of his life experience, entertaining, surprising and amusing his uncle, practicing his skills as a raconteur, and establishing his identity as brave and audacious. Austin’s brilliant book, How To Do Things With Words, showed us that
words not only mean and refer to things, they do things. We can promise, threaten, marry, decree, etc. The same is true of stories. People do things with stories.

One of the things they do is to narrate an inner life, and an identity, and share that inner life and identity with others. In studies of Baltimore families talking about the past, Peggy Miller showed that children often describe upsetting experiences to their parents. The stories create two levels of emotional transaction: a replay of whatever they went through, and whatever emotional response they elicit upon telling the story (Miller and Sperry 1986). Bruner has suggested that narratives act as cooling vessels, in which emotionally and cognitively powerful experiences can be reconstructed with less impact than they originally had. When children retell upsetting experiences they benefit from the distance the retelling gives them. Similarly the adult’s reaction has the potential to be vivid enough to make the retelling cathartic, and at the same time calm enough to make the retelling safe, and helpful.

As I have described elsewhere, story telling is an essential, perhaps the essential activity of human beings (Engel, 1995). It serves a myriad of functions for the young child. Stories allow children to learn about their culture, but also serve as a kind of passport into the culture. Children tell stories as a way of solving emotional, cognitive and social puzzles and to sort out problems or concerns. Perhaps most importantly, stories are one of the fundamental ways in which we each create an extended self. The developing child’s cumulative repertoire of stories gives him or her a sense of self across time and situation. As we tell stories about our selves we weave together the underlying constant inner self with the many different selves that emerge in context, William James’ experiencing “I” and many “mes.”

Children are not only “set” to tell stories but highly attuned to the responses of their listeners, eager to be good story tellers, driven to tell about what matters to them, and to communicate who they are. Interesting to think that by the time children are 2 1/2, an age we have traditionally thought of as physical (i.e., sensory motor) children seem so absorbed with shaping experience into stories, and using those stories to affect the people around him. As they create an identity with their stories, children also reveal their inner lives. If you
want to know what a child thinks about, listen to his stories.

**Promoting story telling in the early years**

One might ask, then, what can we do to promote story telling during the early years? There are three kinds of experiences that promote storytelling ability during the first three years. Having conversations, plenty of them, and long ones, with adults. Talking about the past and the future, even before your child can do this on his or her own. Hearing and participating in stories of all kinds.

Let me elaborate on each of these ideas. As anyone knows who lives or works with young children, sustained conversation can be a rare commodity in any kind of group setting. Whether its breakfast with three siblings or playtime at day care, having a conversation that involves more than three turns (someone speaks, the other responds, the first person speaks again) can be hard to come by. This is particularly true with children between two and four years old whose conversational skills can be uneven. Typically a three-year-old offers a tidbit to get a conversation going, but depends on the adult to use that tidbit as a basis for a longer fuller discussion. When a young child announces, “I went to a museum and saw a shark,” it is easy to nod as you continue what you were doing, or say “You did? That’s nice.” But these responses close the door to story telling. As our research with mothers and children show, what a three-year-old story teller needs is a participatory audience, an adult who can ask a genuinely interested and substantive question, one that leads the child to built the story.

Some of the time, what this requires is simply attentive listening, another somewhat scarce phenomenon in a busy day. Many of us now know that play is truly a child’s work, and that most of their days should be spent at what is commonly called free play. But conversation is equally important to the budding story teller. As wonderful as play doh, dress up, and blocks are, conversations are a powerful part of any curriculum and very alluring to a child. While circle time gives children a chance to share toys or news with one another, group meetings are not conducive to long conversations. These take place most often around the snack or lunch table, at a drawing corner, or snuggled up against some pillows (Engel 1996). These conversations in which stories are embedded are at least if not more likely to happen
spontaneously as they are during a time earmarked, “Story telling.”

Listening attentively to your student, patient, or child’s stories not only has a powerful effect on their experience of telling the story, it is an invaluable source of insight into your child’s experience. One reason why it is so important to have plenty of adults working with children in group settings is so that there are enough conversational partners to go around. If you are responsible for 8-12 children by yourself it's hard to have real conversations with all of them, each day.

A second related way to promote the development of story telling is to talk frequently about the past and the future. Children at least as young as 16 months love to hear about their own past and about plans for the future, whether it’s what they will do later that day, or about a holiday coming at the end of the month. Long before children show a full understanding of the past and the future, or of time itself, they love to hear about their extended selves from those around them. In day care or therapeutic settings, having conversations with children about their lives is an essential means to building up a relationship that extends beyond the immediate context. Moreover, the more this kind of planning and reminiscing takes place, the more opportunities for them to develop an internal repertoire of stories. Children also love to hear about the lives of the adults around them. In order to develop a real relationship with a child in your care, you need to have genuine conversations. This means that you have to talk about yourself as well. Clearly we make choices about what to share and what not to share. But one-sided conversations are skimpy versions of the real thing and bar children from learning about the adults around them, and from experiencing genuine dialogue.

Finally, children need to hear and participate in a wide array of stories. As I have tried to show, young language learners have amazingly sensitive ears for style. They relish and absorb all kinds of stories, story telling formats, and genres, from allegories to poems. It is natural to choose stories to read aloud that fit a topic of interest. For instance teachers choose stories about separation at the beginning of the year, and stories about the harvest in the fall. But it is important to choose stories as much for their language, style, and sensibility as well. Children love and benefit from stories, poems, and songs that they don’t fully understand, but that contain something (tone, rhythm,
imagery, for instance) they can relate to. A good example of this is the wide appeal of T.S. Eliot’s Book of Practical Cats. Too often stories written for children about popular topics lack any kind of narrative or linguistic power.

One of the most effective ways to show children that people live in differing communities is to share stories with them that come from those cultures. Thus, rather than hearing about a culture, they hear the culture through its narratives. It is important not only to introduce children to other communities through stories from those communities, it is also an effective way to validate the narrative styles and habits of the children one is working with. As I have tried to show, children internalize the story telling values of their community. It can be seriously limiting for a child to enter a setting where their way of telling or responding to stories is neither accepted or celebrated. Instead of correcting the way a child tells a story, or what they put into their story, listen, respond, and assume their style is a worthwhile one.

Stories need not only come in the form of books. Many communities have a flourishing tradition of oral stories. One of the most important lessons I have learned from my own research is that stories can form a tremendously rich strand of everyday spoken conversation. Here again there is room for all kinds of story telling. These differences can reflect personality, culture, and interest. The richer the repertoire of story telling styles a child is exposed to, the more possibilities for that child to develop his or her own powerful narrative voice, one that reflects both his community, his family, and his inner life.
Supporting the Narrative Development of Young Children

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This article presents the developmental continuum of children's storytelling skills and provides examples at each of five levels: labeling, listing, connecting, sequencing and narrating. The authors connect these developing narrative skills to communication, literacy and cognition. Strategies to facilitate development from one level to another are described.

KEY WORDS: preschool narratives; teaching narratives; storytelling; oral language; narrative development; preschool classrooms; language teaching strategies; retell; original story; causality; sequencing.

Children develop language skills from birth as they participate in interactions with other, more mature language users. These interactions teach children about the meaning, structure, and use of language, which is typically expressed in a conversational format. Beginning at about the age of 3 or 4 years, children begin using another language format—storytelling. These narrative skills develop over time and are valuable for three reasons. First, narratives are a useful tool for the development of oral language (Morrow, 1985). Second, narratives are thought to form a bridge to literacy (Hedberg & Westby, 1993) and predict academic success (Bishop & Edmundson, 1987). Third, there is evidence that narratives are related to conceptual development (Applebee, 1978; Vygotsky, 1962).

Research supports using narratives as an effective format for the facilitation of oral language skills because stories require more complex language than that needed for daily conversations. In order to describe an event to a listener who did not share in that event, the storyteller must use explicit vocabulary, be extremely clear with pronouns, and have a command of temporal connectives such as "when," "so," and "while." Narratives provide opportunities for children to develop this higher level of language before they become readers.

Oral narratives are an important link to literacy. Hedberg and Westby (1993) described this bridge in terms of topics and functions. The topics of conversations tend to revolve around familiar and immediate experiences, whereas literate topics are more abstract and occur in the past. Narratives serve as a transition with familiar, but past topics. So too, narratives often assist children in moving from the sharing function of conversations to the teaching function of written language by imparting lessons based on one's experiences. Oral narratives have been linked to school success reflected in emergent literacy (McCabe & Rollins, 1994) and reading studies (de Hirsch, Jansky, & Langford, 1966; Feagans & Applebaum, 1986).

Applebee (1978) described narratives as related to a child's development of concepts. This presents us with a connection between language and cognition reminiscent of Vygotsky (1978). In order to tell a good story, children must have knowledge of the following concepts: temporal and cause-effect relationships and theory of the mind (knowing that others can think and feel differently than we do). Westby (1991) made a similar observation noting that the narrative form facilitates the use of language to monitor and reflect on experiences and reason about, plan, and predict experiences.

Narrative content and structure are greatly influenced by culture (Bloome, Champion, Katz, ¹ University of Wisconsin – River Falls, River Falls, WI, USA.
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Morton, & Muldrow, 2001; Collins, 1985; Hedburg & Westby, 1993; Jalongo, 2003; McCabe, 1997). For example, retells of folktales by Western Europeans are told in cycles of three, whereas cycles of four are more common with Canadians and Alaskan Athabaskans (Collins, 1985). Audience participation varies from dialogic with African Americans, Hawaiian-Americans and American Indians to monologic with middle-class white Americans (Collins, 1985). The stories of Euro-Americans characterized by a single topic focus and clear beginning, middle and end contrast with those of the African American culture in which one topic flows into the next. Euro-Americans are more likely to value storytelling as a pathway to literacy whereas African-Americans generally place greater value on oral virtuosity and the oral tradition for performance, communication and moral education (Bloome et al., 2001; Hale, 2001; Jalongo, 2003). These differences (and others) must be considered so that narrative performances are interpreted within a broad range of cultural contexts.

Applebee (1978) presented six developmental levels of narratives that build on the critical elements of centering (focus on a topic) and chaining (sequencing events). These levels are thought to be most appropriate for understanding how the stories of children develop from about 2–6 years of age. Stein and Glenn’s (1979) model of narrative development, based on story grammar elements, parallel and go beyond Applebee’s to describe the stories of children through elementary school. Both of these models are based on the European storytelling tradition and may not be appropriate for all cultural groups.

We implemented a pilot study to gather and explore a variety of narratives from 14 preschoolers, aged 3–5 years. Eleven children were typically developing and three were diagnosed with speech or language impairments. Each child told one original and one retold story to a small group of peers. Then each told another original and retold story to the researchers. Children told the original stories using a single picture as a prompt (e.g., birthday party or circus). Retold stories were prompted using familiar books of folk tales (e.g., Snow White (Grimm & Grimm, 1996), Goldilocks (Galdone, 1979). Each story was transcribed from videotape and classified into one of five narrative levels described in the next section. Our levels were guided by Applebee’s (1978) and Stein and Glenn’s (1979). However we combined their levels and renamed them to more clearly reflect their descriptions. (See Appendix for comparison of

narrative levels). Following the study, we continued to observe the same classrooms noting strategies that facilitated the construction of oral narratives by the preschoolers.

Narratives are a valuable, yet typically underused format for facilitating the language development of young children. It is our contention that knowledge of how narratives develop and a description of strategies to facilitate their development could benefit professionals in their work with young children.

**DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVES**

Children begin learning to tell stories by recounting personal experiences. We attempted to elicit these experiences by providing the children in our study with single pictures of common childhood events (e.g., birthday party, amusement park, trips to the farm or beach). Sequentially, children then begin to tell stories in play and finally retell and create fictional stories (McCabe & Rollins, 1994). We used books of folk tales (e.g., Cinderella (Cohen & Hogan, 1999), Beauty and the Beast (Titlebaum & Hogan, 1999), Snow White (Grimm & Grimm, 1996) as the stimuli for eliciting these higher level retells. Below are descriptions and examples of each of our five levels.

**Labeling**

Our first level is *Labeling*. Stories in this stage are characterized by nominal labels and repetitive syntax which aptly describes the conglomeration of assorted and unrelated thoughts found in the following story told by Eric, age 4. This story was prompted by a picture of a cat and a girl watering flowers. Eric references a cat, bee and girl using demonstrative pronouns (that, this, here) over and over.

No, that’s not my cat. That’s my cat. That’s her cat. This is, and this is bee. Here’s my girl.

**Listing**

Our second level is *Listing*. Stories at this stage sound like a topic-centered list of perceptual attributes or character actions as evidenced in the following example. Even though this story is more than a listing of things, the characters’ actions, are presented as a list with no temporal or causal relations between them. Amy told this story from a picture of a school classroom. Her story is more advanced than
Supporting Narrative Development

the previous level because she not only labels things, but uses verbs to list the actions of characters and conjunctions to connect items logically. Note: “XX” indicates an unintelligible word.

My picture is a XX. And it have, and it has kids with music. And there’s some guy who’s teaching them how to do music. And then trying to make it. Some of ‘em are not listening cat that one’s who’s being, like (gestures) are doing that. This one’s doing that. And so he broke the wire with the call the phone. (claps) He break it and the guy’s drinking some soda. And they’re doing their music concert. And the end.

Connecting

Connecting is our third stage. Stories at this level include a central topic with character actions that linked to related characters or events. Jennifer, age 5, selected a picture of a cat and a girl with a watering can and related the next story. The topic was clearly a garden and she had moved beyond the previous stage by linking her characters’ behaviors. Her use of pronouns alerted the listener to these character connections. For example, “my grandma and gramp” became “they” in the next utterance. And then Jennifer connected herself with her grandparents with the pronoun “we.” This child’s story is still missing temporal sequencing. The major events (e.g., putting poop in the garden, flowers blooming, watering flowers) could have happened in any order, not necessarily the one she presented here.

I have a garden by my house. And, it, um, I have a dog. And my dad puts her poop in the garden. Yeah, because that’s the only place we can put it. So he puts it in the garden. And we have some little pink flowers growing in there. And, um, they, um, my grandma and gramp came over. And they were going to check one day. And then we saw those red flowers and they were blooming. And, um, um, my mom always goes to the garden. And she takes a watering can and waters them so they grow. They grow, but not too often in the spring.

Sequencing

Once a child is able to use consistently correct temporal sequencing and cause and effect, s/he has moved on to Sequencing. These stories attempt to answer the questions “when” and “why” and therefore they usually contain more advanced language, such as “but” or “because.” A story told by 5 year old Vicky from a birthday party picture demonstrates these skills. Not only does Vicky connect the actions of Cindy, the vet, and the cat, but she also sequences them in time and tells us why the cat no longer has front nails.

On my birthday, I was holding my cat. And then my Mama took a picture with my brother holding it. And I was holding his head. And it was Jessica, my big sister’s cat. And her name is Callie. But she doesn’t have front nails. And she’s very little, because Cindy took her to the doctor. And then the doctor cut all her nails out. But it didn’t hurt at all. She couldn’t feel a single thing.

Narrating

Given that we collected narratives from children between the ages of 41 and 68 months, our sample only included one story at our highest level of Narrating as Jennifer retold the story of Cinderella. This level includes all of the components of the previous four levels as well as developed plots with evidence of planning to reach goals. The listener can now predict the end from the beginning of the story. We hypothesize that this level story necessitates some reversibility of thinking typical of concrete operational learners. Below are two excerpts from Jennifer’s multiple episode story. You can almost read the godmother’s thoughts as she plans to create Cinderella’s gown and we begin to sense what the king is thinking before he says it.

As she looked up, she saw her fairy godmother. And the fairy godmother said, “No wonder you’re so sad. I must make you a coach.” And she did. And Cinderella said, “Don’t you think my dress?” “It’s wonderful!” her godmother said. And she looked again. “Oh, good heavens, my child, you couldn’t go in that.” So Bibbety, Bobbety Boo. There stood Cinderella in the most perfect gown. And Cinderella said, “This is wonderful. It’s like a dream.” And the prince danced with the charming Cinderella. And the king said, “That prince danced with that girl all night. So I think that means he found the girl that he wanted to marry.”

The sample stories presented above are not perfect examples of each level. This is because these children are in the process of developing their narrative skills. We classified each story based on our overall perception of its level, rather than how consistently the child kept the story at that level. Although we hypothesized that the youngest children would only tell stories at the lowest levels and the oldest children would tell stories at the highest levels, we found that this is not always the case. In fact, we
discovered that stories from any one child may represent different levels depending on the stimuli. This was supported by the fact that the only story told at the Narrating level was a retell of a familiar folk tale. The original stories (elicited with single pictures) told by this child were at the Connecting level and her other retell (of Snow White) was at the Sequencing level.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS**

Carr (2001) notes that the child uses event knowledge to carry on discourse for multiple purposes: to frame language structures, to learn and use new words, to engage in fantasy play, to make up stories, to remember specific happenings and to form object categorization. Providing opportunities and encouragement for children to use language in multiple ways would seem to be an effective way to scaffold the merging of language and thought reflected in the sequential development of narrative as outlined above.

Our background research, our conversations with teachers, and our experience in listening to the narratives of preschoolers have confirmed our belief in the importance of storytelling for language development. These experiences have also helped us evaluate the effectiveness of strategies for scaffolding both original and retold stories in the preschool classroom setting. We believe that various strategies can be employed to scaffold sequencing, cohesion, vocabulary development and event and audience awareness and to support a child’s development from Labeling to Narrating.

**Choosing an Appropriate Catalyst**

Some of the props used as story telling catalysts were pictures, sequences of pictures, wordless picture books, puppets, miniature items, children’s memorabilia from home, blocks and other constructive play materials, dramatic play “scenes,” drawing, painting and stamping. These props were used with various strategies to encourage children to incorporate more complex elements in their stories. Although all of the props were developmentally appropriate for each stage of narrative development, the adult focus and guidance varied according to the developmental readiness exhibited by the child being supported. Props and strategies were employed to ensure that a meaningful, purposeful context for language expression was provided.

**LEVELS OF NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT**

**Labeling**

Labeling people and objects is a necessary stage for the development of narratives. One of the settings we visited was an inclusive preschool with several children requiring language support. Another had a mixed age grouping of 3-5 year olds. In both of these settings, there were children who benefited from language activities devoted to labeling. Below are some suggested techniques to encourage labeling.

The “Me Bag” was a turning point for two children who had previously had very little verbal interaction with peers. Larry shared his Halloween mask and some artifacts from his birth country in South America. Ben shared his love for drawing and Lego construction. In both these cases, the teachers noted that verbal interaction with peers and adults changed significantly after the special sharing time.

**From Labeling to Listing**

To support children moving to the Listing phase, we used strategies and props to encourage the use of verbs and to help them focus on a central topic. In

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modeling, questioning and dialogue</td>
<td>Child: (pointing to painting) “Fish.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult: “Yes, you are painting a striped fish.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult-directed activities</td>
<td>Use a mystery bag for child to feel and label objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading aloud or shared book reading</td>
<td>Child is asked to explain drawings and paintings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding symbolic play</td>
<td>Adult labels and describes pictures in response to child’s indications of interest.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adult prompts in dramatic play area, e.g., “Who is that?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is that? What are they doing?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal narrative construction and providing</td>
<td>Utilize the “Me Bag” project (Dougherty, 1999) — children bring objects that have been chosen with parent assistance as a mnemonic for personal histories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Supporting Narrative Development

Strategies to Support Listing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modeling, questioning,</td>
<td>Ask closed questions “What did you see at the zoo?” and open questions “Tell me about your trip to the zoo.” Model listing of actions within personal narratives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and dialogue</td>
<td>Review activities at end of the day using children’s words to create newsletter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult-directed activities</td>
<td>Read themed books of varied genres. Ask questions to link characteristics of characters to child experiences, e.g., “What made ‘the rainbow fish’ so special? What kinds of things do you share?” (The Rainbow Fish, Pfister, 1992).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading aloud or shared reading</td>
<td>Encourage grouping of related objects and concepts, e.g., restaurant vocabulary of hungry, menu, salad, and hamburger. Teacher models vocabulary use.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guiding symbolic play</td>
<td>Implement the “Froggy” project—A stuffed frog is sent home over a weekend with note to parents to write a description of Froggy’s adventures. Child then tells the story with Froggy as central character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal narratives and providing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an audience</td>
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</table>

In consultation with the teacher in one of our pilot study classes, we replaced the “Me Bag” project with a “Froggy” project as we felt this would retain the emotional and social benefits of sharing personal stories while helping children move beyond the labeling of unrelated objects or the listing of unrelated happenings. This excerpt from Haley’s story clearly demonstrates how the “Froggy” adventure ties her list of ideas together.

We went in my jeep car, and then we go and swing with Froggy. We went and chased Daddy, and then we go on the trampoline....

**From Listing to Connecting**

After children begin to describe topic-centered lists of actions of characters, they can be encouraged to relate characters and events within their stories. Connectors are beginning to prioritize as they choose to group certain related ideas and they use more pronouns to link sentences back to the appropriately

![Fig. 1. Sharing my froggy tale.](image)
Strategies to Support Connecting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modeling, questioning, and dialogue</td>
<td>Invite children to dictate stories about their pet or imagined pet following a visit from the Humane Society with adult questions to encourage links from children to pets, e.g., “What do you like to do with your pet?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult-directed activities</td>
<td>Designate a “story writing person” to record children’s stories in writing center. Make characters and props with play dough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading aloud or shared book reading</td>
<td>Ask questions to connect characters with events, e.g., “Why is Nora doing so many naughty things?” (Noisy Nora, Wells, 1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding symbolic play</td>
<td>Incorporate miniature items into constructive play area. Schedule “Talktime” (Selman, 2001)—Teacher sits with children at snack table, presents a topic and invites each child to contribute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal narrative and providing an audience</td>
<td>Adult expands and links children’s contributions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Referenced characters. Scaffolding strategies at this phase encourage children to use language in more fully developing a topic by connecting characters and events throughout.

From Connecting to Sequencing

In moving to the next level, students’ oral narratives should include the “when” or temporal sequencing and the “why” or causality of events. In so doing, we guided them to view the sequence of events leading up to the climax of the story and encouraged them to identify the reasons for actions and events.

During a paired discussion, Mollie and Amy had a debate concerning Snow White’s fate (Grimm & Grimm, 1996). Mollie insisted she was “only sleeping” and would be saved by the prince. Amy thought she had “died.” Amy supported her view by pointing to the poison apple, whereas Mollie suggested that she had to be sleeping to be awakened by the prince. Together they were exploring causality.

From Sequencing to Narrating

As mentioned above, it is rare to hear a true narrative in the preschool setting. One reason is because most preschoolers tell narratives based on personal experiences, which do not lend themselves to true narratives as easily as story retells of literature do. In addition, reversibility of thinking is required to move back and forth through time to help the listener predict the end from the beginning. And finally, longer, more complex language than most preschoolers are capable of is required to create multiple episodes typical of plot construction. Our classroom experience leads us to hypothesize, however, that children who are read to and are told stories frequently are better equipped to retell stories and use these as models for their own stories. We recommend that teachers utilize a variety of stories from other cultures to enhance appreciation for different story forms and cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

Teachers can most effectively support children in developing oral narrative skills by recognizing children’s developmental needs and meeting those needs through a varied repertoire of strategies. We have suggested five levels that will be encountered in an early childhood classroom: Labeling, Listing,
Supporting Narrative Development

Strategies to Support Narrating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modeling, questioning, and dialogue</td>
<td>Teacher tells stories and demonstrates story elements with puppets, hats and miniature objects, or story apron. Children draw pictures while listening to stories. Use questions to prompt prediction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading aloud or shared book reading</td>
<td>Read folktales with predictability, temporal sequencing and cause/effect. Provide props in dramatic play area to act out stories read aloud in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic play</td>
<td>Encourage telling stories about personal experiences such as vacations, seasonal activities or a class trip which can be shared in pairs, small groups or at circle time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal narrative and providing an audience</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Connecting, Sequencing, and Narrating.** A child will likely relate stories indicating two or even three narrative levels at any age, but with support move to higher levels. For example, most of Erik’s stories were *Labeling* or *Listing* at age 4. By age 5, they were mostly *Connecting*. He benefited from guided questioning, the provision of Froggy as a central character, and the opportunity to retell favorite stories and dictate his own. At 3 ½, Mollie’s stories were often *Connecting*. Her *Sequencing* was supported by frequent opportunity to retell and dramatize known stories and by supporting her own storytelling with drawing. She also benefited from paired discussion about characters and plots. The best teachers match carefully chosen strategies to the learning needs of their students—stimulating narrative through questioning, dialog and discussion, stimulating language use through activities, reading aloud, guiding symbolic play and encouraging personal narrative construction to an audience. It is our contention that narrative development is important for all children and when teachers know how narratives develop, what level stories their students tell, and how to foster story telling at higher levels, they are better equipped to help all children develop oral narrative skills critical for ordering personal experiences, communication, concept formation, and literacy preparation.
APPENDIX. Comparison of Narrative Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stadler and Ward’s levels</th>
<th>Applebee’s levels</th>
<th>Stein and Glenn’s levels</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labeling</td>
<td>Heaps</td>
<td>Isolated description</td>
<td>Unrelated statements that label or describe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listing</td>
<td>Sequence</td>
<td>Descriptive sequence</td>
<td>Statements around a central topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting</td>
<td>Primitive narrative</td>
<td>Action sequence</td>
<td>Statements around a central topic with perceptual, not temporal links.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing</td>
<td>Unfocused chain</td>
<td>Reactive sequence</td>
<td>Temporally related statements without a central topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrating</td>
<td>True narrative</td>
<td>Abbreviated sequence</td>
<td>Temporally related statements around a central topic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


REFERENCES


CHILDREN’S BOOKS


