



# Tell It Yourself!

## Tips for Telling Stories To Your Children From Storyteller Judy Lubin

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Ms Lubin is a storyteller and President of Storyteller Magic Productions LLC, a production company for storytelling CDs. Learn more about storytelling and about Ms Lubin's stories at [www.StorytellerMagic.com](http://www.StorytellerMagic.com)!

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### Why Tell It Yourself?

Why make the effort? TV is so easy, and the children seem mesmerized by it (or is it zombie – ized? According to modern neurological research, staring at the screen is a reflex reaction, not attention or learning. See my article on media format for more information.) Yes, it does take more effort to learn to tell stories, and then to find the right one, than it does to pop in a video. But, its worth it! Stories, told live and in-person, are one of the most enjoyable, and beneficial, bonding experiences a parent and child can have.

For thousands of years, going back before the invention of written word, parents have passed on the culture's wisdom to their children in the form of stories. Modern day cognitive scientists have "proven" that we learn better when we receive information in story form because the story gives meaning and context to the individual facts and data points. Human brains need context in order to help us sift through all the potential data.

This would not have been news to our ancestors, not in any part of the world. All cultures have an oral-aural story tradition (from the mouth to the ear), which represents the culture's reflections on life and its meaning. The lessons tend to be hidden below the surface in symbolic form. The stories themselves were likely created, or modified from real life occurrences, in order to "house" the lessons contained therein. But, the process is interactive. Once a lesson is housed into a complete and satisfying story, it is easier to remember. Our ancestors had no printed books to help them remember the pearls of



wisdom that they wished to pass onto the next generation. That generation after generation could remember the stories well enough to pass them on shows both that the story format aids in this process, and that we, too, can remember a story long enough to tell from memory at bedtime!

One of the benefits for children of listening to stories is that the process hones this ability to remember important reflections on life. But the benefit for parents can be even greater – we are the ones who pass on these valuable insights. Although our children may not consciously recognize it while they are young, they do come to view us as wise when we are continually able to provide them with meaningful pearls of wisdom, even if we aren't the originators of these pearls. As my children grow past the golden age of story (ages 9 and younger), I have found that they still come to me with their problems, seek out my guidance and view me as someone who does know about the world. I credit the relationship that we built through story when they were young.

Story has other benefits, as well. It increases imagination, empathy, moral fortitude, emotional intelligence, attention span, literary comprehension skills and even reading decoding skills. Because I have discussed these capacities in many other writings, I won't go over them here, except to say that the more guidance we, ourselves, give our children on important life skills, the more they will value our role as a parent. Stories are a great way to spend quiet, cozy time relating to your child while helping them to grow into the type of person you'd like them to be!

### **But how? Basic Techniques**

Now that you're motivated, let's get down to the nitty-gritty. Storytelling is not a very difficult skill to learn. Because it's an activity that has been with us practically since the dawn of time, we all have an inner storyteller. It's simply a matter of digging beneath our excuses (I'm too busy, TV is easier) and getting started. The most important point to remember is that your own children will always be the easiest audience you will ever face! All young children love to hear their parents speak. They don't care about performance; they don't care about "your skills". They love you and want to hear what you have to say! Here's a few more tips to get you started:

For the child, imagination dominates the story experience. The storyteller can only lead an imaginative experience by entering his/her own imagination while guiding. Every time you tell a story, imagine yourself as each character and allow yourself to feel what each character feels. In this way, you will relate to the story at a deeper level. Your children will sense this and will be willing to go deeper themselves. To accomplish this, instead of memorizing the story, when you first read or hear the story, before you tell it, try to imagine living it. Then, simply narrate your remembered experience. Create sensory details as you go by imagining the story as you tell. The skill of adding sensory detail as you go will come more easily if you practice in the "off-hours" by paying attention to sensory detail in your normal life. Often, I take walks in which I spend the entire walk noticing the sights and sounds around me and describing them in words.

As you tell, remember that the story and the experience itself are vastly more important than "performance". Children love listening to their parents talk. Remember

that your job is not to entertain the children. Instead, your job is to help activate their imaginations. The more entertaining you do as a storyteller, the less the children need to do to imagine the scene. You do not need special voices, dramatic gestures, costumes etc (unless you like these).

And, finally, take the story seriously, even if it's a humorous story! Set aside time when you are not doing anything else. Clear away distractions so that children can remain engaged throughout the story. Make eye contact and stay engaged in the story. Be present in the moment in order to help keep the children engaged. Remember that every story you tell your children is a gift to them, worthy of your time and effort. Take a minute to appreciate the gift of each story as you tell it, so that it will come across as something worthy of your child's time and attention.

## **The Story Itself**

Now, we're down to the heart of the matter. The story itself is always the star of the show. Technique is made easy by a child's willingness to listen, but that willingness to listen gives us a responsibility. Because a child will believe whatever we tell them, we must make sure that our message is appropriate for the child's age and personality and focus on passing on important human truths that reflect our values. Here's some more details that will help you to choose appropriate stories:

### **Tell Who You Are**

This one is easy to do, because we all do it by default. All storytellers tell who they are, even when they are using passed-on stories, just as all artists put themselves onto the canvas. If something doesn't feel right to you, don't tell it. Stick with the stories and types of stories that move you. It's not a cop out if you choose not to tell a story that others claim is important. Instead, it's a reflection of your values and interests. Your children are begging to know what is important to you.

If you do find a story that's not quite right, but something in it still speaks to you, take a serious look at what doesn't work for you and why. Perhaps it's just that your child is too young and the story is better saved for another day. If you do decide to change the story, remember that changes are always best made at the deeper levels with an understanding of the underlying symbolism.

The classic example of a failure to understand this premise is seen in Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The original story was a parable, better suited for older children and adults. Goldilocks enters the bears' house, uses their property without permission and is cruelly punished for her deeds. The bears chase her out the window where she falls to a painful death in the thorny bramble bush below. I can certainly see why the simple escape scene found in the modern version came to replace the horror of the original ending. But the escape scene does not respect the original point of the story. I remember hearing the story as a child and thinking to myself, "It's not fair that Goldilocks got away with breaking into the bears home!" And indeed, in the modern story, she does get away with wrongdoing.

The original story meant to show a consequence for misbehavior. But, times have changed and the original punishment feels harsh by our modern standards. But instead of just dropping it, we have two general approaches that would still reflect the original meaning. First, we could refrain from telling the story until the child is older (at least 8 years old), and better able to understand consequences. Second, we could take the punishment out, but leave the consequence. Storyteller Jim Weiss does just this when he modifies the story to begin with a Goldilocks who is selfish and never shares - that is, until she is frightened by the bears after ransacking their property. The scare teaches her a lesson, and she shares beautifully, evermore!

### **Consider the Child's Age**

As the above example shows, while looking below the surface of stories in order to ensure the message is appropriate, you'll want to pay close attention to age appropriateness.

For children ages 3 through 5 or 6, sense experience dominates the child's development. Imagination of sensory experiences should dominate the story listening experience. Children are developing 1) the skill of inner picturing and 2) the skill of using words to describe something that is not tangibly present. Stories should help the child practice these skills. In addition, they should be simple and allow for beautiful images to form in the child's imagination, and always have happy endings. Stories of ordinary life occurrences from a sensory perspective (a-day-in-the-life type stories) are great for this age. The stories on my CD *The Magic Spring* are good examples of the sweet, simple stories that younger children love.

As a child reaches ages 6 and 7, social and emotional experiences begin to dominate the child's development. Now children will be eager to imagine emotional experiences in addition to sensory experiences. Tell folk/fairy tales with challenges to be met and happy endings. These tales guide children through the emotional narratives of common life challenges. Stories should reward good and punish bad because children this age still cannot process moral gray areas (bad things happening to good people, etc). Stories without clear moral lines can scare young children. (I'll explain this further when I discuss ages 10 and up, the age at which these stories are good choices.) The stories on my CD *Tales For the Journey* provide a few examples of the types of stories that you'll want to start telling once your child reaches approximately age 6.

Children go through a big change in perspective at around age 9 (sometimes earlier these days). Studies show that by this age, peers have greater influence on a child's behavior and parents have less influence. Although a 9 year old still needs our guidance, he is starting to step out on his own and develop his own identity. For children ages 7 and 8, help to prepare them for this increased independence by using story to emphasize the dichotomy of their choices. One way to do this is to tell animal fables that show consequences for our lower, animalistic behavior. At this age, children are beginning to understand the nature of consequences in a more mature manner and can handle a tale with a cautionary ending. Pair fables with stories of holy and courageous humans that model the best of human nature. This helps a child to sort his impulses into

those to minimize and those to strive for. For examples of stories that model noble human ideals, see my CD *Quiet Heroes*.

At about third grade, when children do reach a new level of independence, they are ready to hear that life has consequences and that independence must be paired with responsibility. Children at this age enjoy more “real world” stories, and less of the fantasy and dreamy stories of long ago. They are ready to hear about survival, responsibility and consequences. The separation from parents can also be somewhat sad and many 9 year olds enjoy poignant stories about loss. I find that Jewish stories, most of which focus on identity and the boundaries of responsibility, capture these themes very nicely. Stories of survival on the American frontier are also some of my favorites for this age. My CD *When the Last Leaf Falls* contains other examples.

By about age 10, after a child has stepped into the new independence of middle childhood and tried it out, a child is ready to explore the morally gray areas. With a solid grounding in simple consequences (good is rewarded, bad is punished), a 10-plus year old is ready to recognize that life does not always work this way.

A good example of this gray area comes from the fourth Harry Potter book. At the risk of spoiling the ending for those who have not yet read it, lets just say that Harry reaches a point in which he and his colleague reach the finish line of an important contest at the same time. They argue over who should “win”. Harry could stake claim to the trophy, but instead he suggests sharing the prize. What a good guy Harry is! He does the right thing for the right reason. Unfortunately, less than a minute later, his innocent colleague lays dead as a direct result of his doing the right thing for the right reason. Clearly, we are working on Advanced Topics in Consequences here.

This type of scenario is very scary for a younger child. How is a child to know what to do when there is not a clear line between behavior and consequence? But a fourth grader is emotionally ready to ponder these more complicated, more real situations. Stories of the old Norse gods are filled with just this type of good behavior/bad outcome and bad behavior/good outcome pairing that so intrigues a 10-plus year old. Charles Dicken’s stories, many of which feature horrific and somewhat unfair consequences, are also better saved for fourth grade and up.

As a child grows even older, he becomes better able to express his own interests in his choice of literature. Unfortunately, once past 9 years old, a child has grown past the wonder of folktales, at least at the innocent level. But as a child reaches adolescence (approximately grade 6 and up), she becomes able to process abstractions and symbolism. At this point, you can help your child to revisit all of the folktales, but with the understanding that the tale hides deeper messages. Try providing your teen with folktales accompanied by intellectual and symbolic explanations as a way of using literature to consciously explore our inner selves. The story and symbolic meaning pairings on my CD *Guiding the Journey* offer some examples.

### **The Pedagogical Story**

All stories help us to meet our inner selves. If you follow the age guidelines listed above, you will be using stories pedagogically to help children work through normal age-related developmental issues. But, often, other issues come up – world experiences that

require some care and understanding, behavior challenges, inner aches. Stories, like literature, can help us work through these issues by allowing us to immerse ourselves in the problem, while simultaneously remaining detached. After all, it is the character who is experiencing the problem, not me, right?

This is an advanced topic in storytelling and requires a well developed intuition regarding the way in which stories work at the deeper levels. It also requires a great deal more advice than I can provide here. Any advice here is general in nature and requires that you add a great deal of your own intuition!

When you feel you have the basics down, try choosing stories in which the main character is experiencing the same struggle or emotions as the child you are wishing to help. Pay attention to any shift in awareness or behavior that occurs after the story.

Work at the deeper levels and on deeper issues in order to avoid turning the story into a lecture. Be sure that the characters and issues do not bear too much surface level similarities to your child. For example, the character should not have the same name as the child. Most children are too smart to miss the point of "Once upon a time there was a boy named Harry – just like you! – who never cleaned his room." For behavioral issues, like room cleaning, routine and habit are typically better helpers. Save story for those times when the issue will be helped by deep self-reflection and an inner shift in perspective. Handling loss, building moral character, discovering your own destiny and finding a general sense of courage that will be used in many areas of life are but a few examples of issues for which story is useful.

The only tools at your disposal here are intuition and your own understanding of human nature. The good news is that stories are not like pharmaceuticals. If you tell one that isn't actually called for, there's usually no harm done, and maybe even some non-pedagogical enjoyment.

## Finding Stories

For stories for very young children (below age 6), use your own experiences. Make up some characters, maybe some cute animals or fantasy characters, and then create some adventures for them. Children love to hear a review of their own day, told as the adventure of their familiar characters. Truly, just repeat what the child did, but put it into the third person. This helps them to build memory as they inadvertently review their day. For my kids, I would also have our familiar characters do things that the kids would love to do, but never could. Their favorite story line, of which there were countless twists, was when their alter-egos ended up taking a shift driving the ice cream truck.

For older children, the plot line should be more rich than simple "day in the life" stories. While your own experiences can certainly add, knowledge of basic folktale plotlines helps to ensure that your messages explore deep human truths. Often, my kids ask me to "make up" a story. I frequently do this, but always think first about the message I want to convey, and then begin with the structure from a formal folktale that conveys the same message. It's sort of like using a soup starter!

Below are some resources for finding folktales. The truth about most of these books is that, even with all of the stories I tell, I will typically only choose one or two

stories from an entire book. Searching for the perfect story is a large part of the storytelling process, and part of the fun! If possible, borrow books from the library or buy them used.

Any children's book with the descriptions: "As Told By"; "Retold By"; "Collected By"; or where an editor is listed instead of an author will typically be an illustrated version of a folktale. Instead of reading these to your child, read them at the library and then tell to your child at bedtime.

There are countless folktale collections. Here are a few of my favorites, by region. There are thousands more, so don't be afraid to search the Net for collections that meet your interest.

### Global:

- The Color Fairy Books (The Red Fairy Book, The Blue Fairy Book, etc), edited by Andrew Lang. There are a great many of these books which contain folktales from all over the world, collected by Andrew Lang. They are written in a complete enough manner that they can be told directly from the books, or even read directly to children (although stories are always better when told!)
- Ashliman, D. L., ed., *Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts* website, <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html#1>
- Cole, Johanna, ed., *Best Loved Folktales of the World*, Anchor Books, 1982.
- Phelps, Ethel Johnston, *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales From Around the World*, Henry Holt & Co, 1981.
- Ragan, Kathleen, ed., *Fearless Girls, Wise Women and Beloved Sisters: Heroines in Folktales From Around the World*, W.W. Norton and Company, NY, 1998.
- Tchana, Katrin, *The Serpent Slayer and Other Stories of Strong Women*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 2000.
- Yolen, Jane, ed., *Favorite Folktales From Around the World*, Pantheon Books, 1986.
- Yolen, Jane, ed., *Mightier Than the Sword: World Folktales For Strong Boys*, Harcourt Books, 2003.

### America:

- Barlow, Genevieve, *Latin American Tales*, Rand-McNally, 1966.
- Edmonds, Margot and Ella E. Clark, ed., *Voices of the Winds: Native American Legends*, Castle Books, 2003.

### Asia:

- Johari, Harish, *The Monkeys and the Mango Tree: Teaching Stories of the Saints and Sadhus of India*, Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vermont, 1998.
- Martin, Rafe, *The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Myths, Legends and Jataka Tales, Completely Revised and Expanded Edition*, Yellow Moon Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999.
- Minford, John, translator, *Favorite Folktales of China*, New World Press, Beijing, China, 1983.

**Europe:**

- Grimm, *Fairytales of the Brothers Grimm*.
- Sierra, Judy, ed., *Quests and Spells*, 1994.

**Jewish:**

- Ausubel, Nathan, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, Crown Publishers, 1948.
- Schwartz, Howard, ed., *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Fairy Tales*, Oxford University Press, 1983.

**Africa:**

- Mandela, Nelson, ed. *Favorite African Folktales*, WW Norton and Company, 2002.