

Let kids choose their own adventures

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I love story-telling. That's why I wrote a novel.

But, as a speech-language pathologist, there are other reasons I love stories:



- there's a strong link between the ability to understand and tell stories and later literacy and academic success (Paris & Paris, 2003);
- young children with language delays have great difficulty making up stories;
- narrative skills are linked with reading comprehension; and
- once kids have learned how they work, stories provide an easy way for them to comprehend and recall facts (Hudson & Nelson, 1983).

We know that repeated story-telling and/or explicit teaching about how to make up stories improves children's narrative skills (Peterson, 2011). To develop story-telling skills, we often start by giving them a blueprint for making stories. Lots of blueprints exist but, in plain English, most of them boil down to the following parts:

1. Setting: when and where the story takes place.
2. The main character: who the story is about.
3. Something happens to start things off.
4. Problem: the kick-off event creates a problem for the main character, which the main character responds to in an effort to get what the main character wants (the goal).
5. Solution: the main character struggles over various obstacles to achieve (or not achieve) the goal.
6. Resolution: the main character reacts to the solution, and the consequences of the solution.

If you think about it, most stories – from Hansel and Gretel to Zac Power to Frozen follow this basic plan.

Now a very recent study tells us something important – and exciting – about how to teach children story-making:

If you give the child some choice about what happens when making up a story, they learn about story-making much better than children who are simply told the story.

As a parent, this makes intuitive sense to me. If I give my kids some choice about what they are doing – e.g. Mathletics or Spellodrome, for example – they tend to be more engaged and stick with it longer. This is exactly the observation that led Khan and colleagues down the path of teaching story blueprints to kids by letting them decide what happens.

They studied two groups of kids learning about stories. The first group had no choice about what happened in the story lesson – they were simply told the story, with the teacher labeling each of the story elements as they went. The second group were given a choice of two possibilities for each of the 6 story elements.

So what happened?

When asked to re-tell other stories, the kids in the “choice” group:

- included more elements in their stories when re-telling a story;
- answered more comprehension questions correctly; and
- included more information in their stories,

than the kids who weren't given a choice.

Bottom line

Speech pathologists, teachers and parents should get children engaged in story activities by giving them choices about what happens when teaching them the parts of stories.

As my clients know, I do this by giving them a blueprint, then co-creating a story where they get to decide what happens for each of the elements of the story. It can take a bit more preparation and creativity – but it's worth it if it helps language-delayed kids learn story-making and to improve their comprehension.

Parent resources

No time or energy to come up with ideas to help your child choose their own stories?

Here are some books recommended by Carol Westby:

Main source: Carol Westby (2014). Offering Choices in Narrative Intervention. *Word of Mouth*, 26:2 November/December; in turn summarising Khan, K., Nelson., K., & Whyte, E. (2014). Children choose their own stories: The impact on choice on children's learning of new narrative skills. *Journal of Child Language*, 41, 949-962.

Related resources:

Image: <http://tinyurl.com/mmhjrb4>