

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH NARRATIVE IN THE EARLY YEARS

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What is a narrative?

We are probably all aware of the term 'narrative' in relation to stories, but the dictionary definition is a bit wider than that. According to the Oxford English dictionary, a narrative is "a spoken or written account of connected events". This doesn't have to be fictional, we are all using narrative every time we tell somebody about something that has happened to us whether that's retelling a dramatic event or simply reporting what we watched on TV last night.

Generally, a narrative should have a beginning, a middle and an end, one or more characters, a setting and some sort of incident. This could be as simple as - "I went shopping this morning and bought some yoghurt" or it could be as complex as War and Peace or The Lord of the Rings! As you can see, we all use narrative language all the time.



Why is it important?

Now we've drawn your attention to it, you will probably notice that you are using spoken narrative throughout the day. We need it to tell people about things that have happened to us. Every time we ask a child 'What did you do at nursery today?' or 'What did you do at the weekend?' We are asking them to use narrative language. This is a crucial language skill needed to talk about anything not in the here and now.

Sharing our news and experiences with others helps us process them. There is increasing evidence that supporting people with PTSD to retell their traumatic experience can be very beneficial. Sharing stories also helps us build social relationships and bonds with other people. As we get to know people we share more about our own lives using narrative language. If we are able to talk about things that have happened to us we can relate to other people's stories and build empathy.

In school, we read and listen to stories a lot, both traditional stories and more modern ones. Narrative language helps us to understand these stories. We know stories usually have a start, middle and the end (although as we get older writers might deliberately play around with this order) and characters and a setting. We can start to predict what might happen next and understand why characters might behave in certain ways. These are all higher level narrative skills essential for children as they progress through school and are met with more complex narratives. Narrative goes hand in hand with literacy as children who struggle to tell stories orally are likely to have difficulty with writing stories.

Narratives in school and the work place aren't just limited to fiction. If we write a report on a science experiment or an explanation of a historical event we are using our narrative skills to again 'tell what has happened'.



What skills do children need?

Children's narrative skills start developing as early as 2 years old and will continue developing into key stage 1. There are lots of early language skills involved which can be practised and developed during the early years. The EEF recommends using narratives to support children's language development in the early years, in their 'teaching and modelling language' thread. Stories are often scaffolding around the 'wh' question words. We usually need to know at least some of the following...

- Who is in the story?
- Where it happened?
- When it happened?
- What happened first?
- What happened next?
- What happened last?
- Why or How it happened?



So children need to have an understanding of these types of questions to support their narratives. Children will need to be able to recall events and sequence them and put them into order. Children who struggle with this or are just developing these skills may tell you snippets of their news out of order and this can make it difficult to follow. They may need modelling to use sequential language like 'first' 'then' 'next' etc.

As children's narratives get more complex (usually around 4 years old) they will need to understand and use 'linking words' like 'and', 'so' and 'because'. They also need to develop listener awareness - understanding what you already know e.g. if they are telling you a story about 'Kai' in preschool they won't need to explain who this is, if it's about 'Kai' their cousin who lives away they will have to explain that. These pragmatic and inferential skills are crucial for developing social and language skills.

How can we help children develop these skills?



Talk about everyday routines and activities.

Talk about everyday routines like having a snack or washing your hands. Use simple sentences to comment on what you are doing. For older children, model sequential language such as "first we'll..... then we'll....."

Play memory games.

Have a tray of 3-5 objects and take one away, can the children remember what's gone. Extend the time they have to remember for - do something silly at the start of circle time, who can remember what I did at the end. Extend children by asking who can remember what we did this morning/ yesterday/ last week. Again use photos to support children who have difficulty with memory.

Use photos to make stories.

Take 3 or 4 photos of activities in your setting and print them out. Look through them with the children and work together to put them in order. Again model words like 'first' and 'then'. Use the photographs to support your children to retell what happened.

Developing these skills continued...

Play games with 'wh' questions.

Make lotto or pair games with 'wh' questions words e.g. 'Who' goes really well with 'people who help us' topic - who looks after you when you're poorly etc. Use 'where' questions with the dolls house - 'where does the cooker go' or with an animal topic - 'where does the sheep live'.

Read books together.

When you're reading stories ask children 'wh' questions. Who is the story about? Where are they going?. Ask children what they think will happen next or what they would do. If you are reading with a younger child make comments and leave spaces for them to comment too. Talk about the pictures. Reread favourite stories as the repetition will help children understand the story structure.



Repeat and retell stories.

See if children can retell stories they know well. Give more able children the chance to be 'teacher' and tell other children the story from the pictures. Use puppets and props to retell familiar stories. Use story bags to keep all your bits together. Include stories from other cultures. Invite families in to share stories from their childhood.

Talk about beginning, middles and ends (also first, next and last).

Begin to model these concepts physically with real objects - e.g. the red car is first in the line. Then use them to talk about time still in the here and now e.g. Sally is first to finish her drink. You can go on to talk about things that have happened - at the beginning of preschool it was raining but now it's sunny. Use photographs to support this so children can see what you are talking about.



Model sharing news.

Model narrative language throughout the day. Have chances for children to share news and model it by sharing your own stories e.g. 'Yesterday I wasn't at preschool because I went to visit my friend's baby'. Encourage the children to ask questions - what's her name? Did she cry? How old is she? etc

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Resources

- Fun with Narrative - Early Years Black Sheep Press (www.blacksheeppress.co.uk)
- Nursery Narrative 5th Edition (www.blacksheeppress.co.uk)
- Narrative Activity Pack - Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Trust
(https://www.cht.nhs.uk/fileadmin/site_setup/contentUploads/Services/Clinical/Childrens_Therapy_services/Childrens_Therapy/Speech_Language_Therapy/Narrative_Activity_Pack_website.pdf).
- Storytelling & Narrative - Cambridge Community Services NHS Trust
(<https://cambspborochildrenshealth.nhs.uk/speech-language-and-communication/storytelling-and-narrative/>).

References and Further Reading

1. EEF Evidence store -
(https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/EY_Teaching_and_Modelling_Language_Technical_Summary.pdf).
2. Nicolopoulou, A., Schnabel Cortina, K., Ilgaz, H., Brockmeyer Cates, C., and de Sá, A. B. (2015) 'Using a narrative- and play-based activity to promote low-income pre- schoolers' oral language, emergent literacy, and social competence', Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 31, p147-162.
3. Pesco, D. and Gagné, A. (2017) 'Scaffolding Narrative Skills: A Meta-Analysis of Instruction in Early Childhood Settings', Early Education and Development, 28:7, p773-793.
4. Sloan DM, Sawyer AT, Lowmaster SE, Wernick J, Marx BP (2015). Efficacy of Narrative Writing as an Intervention for PTSD: Does the Evidence Support Its Use? J Contemp Psychother. 2015 Dec;
5. Speech and Language UK: <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals/resource-library-for-educators/support-childrens-story-telling-skills/>



THANK YOU FOR READING

Helen Harron qualified as a speech and language therapist in 1993. She has worked for 30 years predominantly with pre-school and primary school aged children with a wide range of speech, language and communication needs in the NHS, voluntary and independent sectors. She is the co-owner of Seaside SaLT (Speech and Language Therapy), a not-for-profit company based in Scarborough providing speech and language therapy services to children from 0-18 along the North Yorkshire Coast.

