



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Storytelling

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Chapter Title: "Storytelling"

Pub. Date: 2018

Access Date: April 21, 2018

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781506307657

Online ISBN: 9781506307633

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n798>

Print pages: 2156-2157

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We are not born storytellers. Instead, storytelling is learned—along with learning other communicative speech activities (genres), such as laying out an argument or describing visual scenarios. Nevertheless, the boundaries of what counts as storytelling are fuzzy. Although argument and description are speech genres relatively distinct from storytelling, recipes or route instructions share story features, inasmuch as a particular temporal sequence of events needs to be followed that is irreversible. Typically, none of these speech activities is explicitly taught because they are picked up relatively effortlessly in early childhood and subsequently become refined throughout the life course. As such, storytelling across the life span has no clear developmental beginnings and neither does it have a developmental end point. It is embedded in too many other developmental strands (e.g., language, cognition, social, emotion) to sort out and fit into a coherent developmental *story* of its own. Instead, it should be looked at and investigated as consisting of two sides of an emergent phenomenon: On the one hand, storytelling follows certain linguistic, social (interactional), and cultural storytelling conventions. As such, these conventions are acquired and continuously practiced and refined, so that they can become part of available repertoires. On the other hand, storytelling functions as a developmental mechanism that bootstraps the emerging person into becoming a (self)-reflective being with the ability to revise who we believe we are. As such, storytelling is developmentally conceptualized as an elementary practice ground for identity development that enables us as humans to give meaning to life. This entry briefly sketches out a few milestones of the larger processes of integration and differentiation that are at work in the emergence of storytelling skills.

Milestones of Emerging Storytelling Skills in Childhood

Although not born as storytellers, children universally grow up immersed in storytelling practices. Beginning in infancy, they hear stories and begin to assemble words and sentences as part of their communicative ability to hold the floor for an extended turn. As a first milestone, storytelling includes the introduction of characters in a spatial and temporal setting, referring to them cohesively thereafter, and signaling the sequence of events in which the story characters act or are acted upon along with communicatively signaling when and how the story begins and ends.

A second developmental milestone in the acquisition of storytelling is the ability to credit characters in the stories with a mind (i.e., with plans and goals, feelings, emotions, and values) that is constructed as having an internal existence and functioning as the force that motivates the characters' actions. Although some have argued that this competence of mindreading develops as a general (social) cognitive skill and from there finds its way into storytelling, others have tried to make the point that children's participation in storytelling practices (alongside pretend play—which itself can be viewed as a storytelling genre) is a fundamental developmental precursor and facilitator for the emergence of children's mindreading skills. Overall, this process of learning the formal properties of storytelling and making them work in communicative settings takes shape typically in the first 6 years of life, usually before literacy training.

A third milestone to becoming a more skilled storyteller consists of the ability to combine the use of words in grammatical constructions with the conversational ability to make a sequence of actions relevant to the here-and-now of a speaking context. An important aspect of this ability is to relate story characters to each other, as governed by their individual minds, and to coordinate their actions from an overall evaluative orientation that reflects the shared values in terms of what is good and desirable or bad and blameworthy. This ability to embed the formal

properties of stories in communicative settings and invest them with valued perspectives subsequently feeds into new skill sets and refinements in storytelling abilities, such as joint storytelling or sharing, contrasting, and even simultaneous competing moral versions of what is believed to have happened or should have happened. Although the first two milestones are believed in principle to have been accomplished before or around the age of 6, this third milestone typically emerges more fully at about age 9.

Later Storytelling Abilities and Their Functions for Identity Development

This skills of referring to others as being motivated by aspects of their interiority and serving as potential explanations (or rationalizations) for why (typically past) events occurred and how they took their shape emerge as part of the development of a larger skill set that is often viewed as the onset for being able to step back and reflect on a sequence of events that is believed *to-be-true*, leading up to the realization that this may only be one possible version among a set of alternative versions. This skill of viewing events from potentially alternative perspectives plays an important role in the emergence of stepping back, decentering one's own perspective, and including the perspectives of others, thereby giving storytelling a privileged role in the development of identity and the shaping of a cultural and individual sense of who we are.

Children begin to form autobiographical memories as early as they share memories of past events with others in conversations, they seem to be able to rework their own personal experiences in the form of self-narratives by the age of 10. However, they do not seem to be able to give comprehensive autobiographical accounts in the form of life stories until early adolescence. This ability of reflecting on one's own life, dividing segments of one's past into events that are made relevant for resulting in what is considered a present sense of self, is part of a highly reflective speech activity that relies on practices that typically are not trained in mundane and recurring everyday peer interactions or at home. Rather, the assumption that we ourselves are equipped with a psychological interiority, and the subsequent practices of reflecting on this interiority—as part of a larger therapeutic master discourse—is increasingly worked into literacy training in school and refined in literary fiction consumption of novels and contemporary film. As such, storytelling practices become developmentally relevant for identity development that enables us as humans to help reflect on the culturally shared values for meaningful lives and align with or adopt those that are taken to be personally worthy.

Following adolescence, storytelling practices increasingly become practice ground to navigate the meaning-making process that enables newly emerging identities such as becoming a professional nurse, teacher, or mine worker or becoming a marriage partner or parent. During adulthood, storytelling practices also serve as tools to cope with changes, even to the degree of reshaping one's regional, national, racial, or even gendered sense of self. Lending itself to redraft former versions of lived lives, the ability to draft a new version in the face of adverse or simply new experience is probably one of the most salient functions of storytelling. It may be precisely for this reason that storytelling has become a prime candidate for intervention purposes, especially in the therapeutic realm. In general, storytelling across adulthood, and increasingly with old age, continues to serve as the practice ground for the sorting of story characters into moral agents who can lead lives of integrity versus others who don't. As we age, storytelling is able to elevate itself into a powerful tool for the construction of life that has the potential to steer clear of despair and to prepare for death.

Conclusion

Storytelling across the life span is by no means a clearly defined developmental process that evolves in the form of clearly definable stages or phases. Perhaps the most productive way to view storytelling is as a developmental mechanism that bootstraps the emergent person into becoming a (self-)reflective being, thereby elevating storytelling into the realm of giving meaning to life and identity development on a larger scale and consequently making storytelling an indispensable prerequisite for the ability to revise who we believe we are across our life span.

See also [Autobiographical Memory](#); [Play](#); [Pretense](#); [Theory of Mind](#)

- storytelling
- identity development
- bootstrapping
- meaning of life
- skills development
- character
- the self

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n798>

10.4135/9781506307633.n798

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