

Some Guidelines for Therapeutic Story Writing

Stories can be used to prepare children for coming events, to bring healing to a difficult situation by offering another more helpful way of looking at it and to change difficult behaviour patterns by modelling what would help through the medium of the story. This article aims to help give a basic form for writing your own story for the child you know. For more help on story writing and more healing stories for many situations see the reference for Susan Perrow's books below.

Therapeutic stories

"Literal Stories"

Some therapeutic stories can literally put an individual child into their own personal story about a situation the child is going to encounter in the future and may have concerns about. (e.g. first day of school, a hospital stay, being left with someone they don't know, going on a plane for the first time, the parents' separation/divorce.)

Creating such stories is fairly straightforward in that one simply takes the child in the story through the events likely to happen. Children love to hear about themselves in a story form. It is helpful to have a familiar beginning and a reaffirming ending: "Once upon a time there was a little boy called... who lived with... in a ...house in a And at the end of the day

he was tucked up in his own little bed, kissed goodnight by Mummy/Daddy, who loved him very much, and he slept very well indeed"

A factual picture can be built for the child, his/her feelings acknowledged and ways of dealing with those feelings demonstrated. (e.g. "She felt a little bit scared inside, but she held her dolly tight for comfort and remembered that her angel was there helping her, so she climbed out of bed to go with the nurse.")

Part of the value in the story is in being able to bring positive, constructive attitudes or values to the situation (e.g. new courage, friendships, experiences, adventures, helpers, carers, healing.)

Therapeutic metaphors in stories

Some healing stories work with the child's unconscious, and may parallel a problem situation rather than actually depict it, or may even do a little of both. These stories find the underlying truth or theme involved and then try to find a parallel situation, an imaginative picture or metaphor for it. 'The Ugly Duckling' is one such metaphorical story for a child who is different from others. The writing of such stories

needs a creative approach. These guidelines are given to help the writer through one such approach.

Guidelines

Find clarity but express it subtly. A healing story, to be effective, builds a picture clearly enough so that the child can identify with it, yet indirectly enough so that s/he does not feel

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embarrassed, ashamed or resistant (e.g. "preaching" elicits resistance).

Stories should be age appropriate. Children under seven are not able to cope well with strong negative emotions like fear and anger. Children between ages seven and eleven can enjoy stronger emotions if they are presented within the safe structure of a happy/resolved ending. The nearer the story is to their own reality, the more threatening strong emotions, threats etc in the story can be for them. Sad hopeless endings can distress and overpower children under eleven, before they are mature enough to deal with it.

The story needs to be objective. If you are writing a story for a child with a challenging behaviour, you need to be careful to keep your personal agenda out of the story. For this reason it is wise to let some other perceptive person outside the situation read your story to check for 'loaded' content before you tell the story to

Creating the story

You may want to read a few stories (see list below) to get the feel of how the following ingredients can be put together for certain situations.

Ingredients

1. Clarify the theme or purpose. What is the underlying truth or theme involved? (e.g. death or divorce, parent illness, dealing with angry feelings, shyness, selfishness, or coping with loss.) Be clear in your purpose. What is the problem? What does the situation need? (e.g. courage? comfort? reassurance? acceptance of change?) Consider:

The child's thinking. Is the child distorting or misinterpreting the facts about the situation?

the child. Get them to check it for parts that might be too strong, too scary, too "preachy" etc. It is hard to get outside a situation when we are emotionally involved in it. Sometimes others can pick things up on a gut level that we miss. Reconsider anything others feel uncomfortable with. Also in the telling of the story, be sensitive to your child's reactions. Reluctance to listen may mean it is too strong or too direct. Be prepared to change details a little for them or to re-think it. A story which is healing, a child will warm to and may want again.

Look for positive images. Wherever possible try to find the most positive way to approach the problem to support the well being of the child (for example for separation and divorce, see it as a change in direction on the path of life for the parents coming out of what they see as being true to themselves, rather than presenting a picture of failure, breakdown, disappointment and disaster.)

Does s/he need help in seeing the situation more accurately?

The child's feelings. What feelings is the child experiencing in the situation? (e.g. sadness, fear, anger)

Empowerment/action. Is there something the child can do, ask for or learn to do, which would help?

Try to find an imaginative picture, a parallel situation or metaphor for the theme. (e.g. "death" can be seen as "transformation" as in the change of the caterpillar into a chrysalis and into the butterfly.)

2. The characters

Find suitable characters to fit this picture.

Choose characters, particularly a hero/heroine

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with whom the child can identify. Consider the child's own interests and preferences. You may want to use animal, nature, magical or fairy tale characters.

3. Other factors - imaginative "props" & "helpers"

It can be helpful to, create imaginative "props" for the hero/ heroine to use. (e.g. a blue cloak of love, a golden crown of protective light). Or you may want to use a "helper" figure who advises, supports and/or protects the hero/heroine. (e.g. a guardian angel, fairy godmother, "sister-in-the-bushes") These "props" and "helpers" can sometimes be used later by the child in his/her own life. (e.g. we can teach children to strengthen themselves against fear etc by visualising a "golden crown of protective light" around them, or to listen to their own "wise inner voice".)

4. Villains and obstructions

Identify the villains or obstructions which bring on the crisis/temptation/bad feeling etc.

5. Parallel learning situations

Consider some parallel learning situations in which the main character was/could be successful in his/her actions. Remember the situation does not need to be a literal retelling of

a situation the child has already experienced, but rather something with similar elements. For example, a character finding the courage to do a new task, not the exact task, like the image of the butterfly leaving the glass house to go into the big garden, as an image for a child going first to school.

6. The crisis

Consider the crisis or problem which the main character has to overcome/resolve with new learning, skills, and inner resources.

7. The lesson

Consider what the child needs to learn from the situation and structure this into the story. (e.g. courage in overcoming a fear, compassion in dealing with less able friends, the source of love is inexhaustible, one failure can lead to success next time)

8. The plot structure

Make sure your story has an introduction which sets the scene, the action of the story, and a well resolved ending. The equivalent of the fairy story's "Once upon a time.... They all lived happily ever after." Also choose an appropriate story line... A day in the life... Quests.... Voyage and return... and so on.

Writing the story

Consider all the above ingredients in building up a simple but interesting plot with a quick, satisfying, affirming ending.

Remember:

1. Clarify the situation through the character's perception of it. Thinking
2. Acknowledge the Feelings in the character and how s/he dealt with these.

3. Empower the character by exploring the possibilities for action in the crisis, with regard to temptations, obstructions, moral choices. Model the behaviour which the child needs to experience.

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4. Affirm the new behaviour by letting the character experience good feelings about his/her achievement.

5. Acknowledgement/Celebration. Make sure that the main character's special worth is also acknowledged by other characters in the story.

Telling the story

As we have said, try telling your story to another perceptive adult before you tell the story to the child, just to check your images are not too strong or too 'loaded' in content. Try to tell your story, gently but matter of factly, without too much investment in its effects. Be sensitive to the way the child receives it. Remember, in healing children with therapeutic stories: The first quarter of the healing takes place in acknowledgement of the problem. The second quarter of the healing takes place in the clarification and working through the nature of

the problem. The third quarter of the healing takes place in the creation of a story dealing with the problem. The last quarter of the healing takes place in the sharing of the story with the child.

In clarifying and working with the problem, we often understand our children better and change our own behaviour with them, which itself brings change. But there is also something which happens on an unconscious level, in sleep or in some other undefinable way – this is the magic of stories.

With acknowledgement to Jill Golden for ideas for this structure for story writing

Examples of therapeutic story telling can be found in the following stories:

A story for courage.

A story for hard work.

A story for generosity.

A story for the child of a sick parent.

A story for the selling of the family car.

A story for moving house.

Further reading on story writing and a source for therapeutic stories:

Susan Perrow *Healing Stories for Challenging Behaviour* (Hawthorn Press, Stroud, 2008)

Susan Perrow *Therapeutic Storytelling. 101 Healing Stories for Children* (Hawthorn Press, Stroud 2012)