

How family stories help children weather hard times

April 30 2020



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In times of great stress, stories sustain us, says Robyn Fivush, director of the Family Narratives Lab in Emory's Department of Psychology.

Family reminiscing is especially important, says Fivush, who is also director of Emory's Institute for the Liberal Arts. When [children](#) learn [family](#) stories it creates a shared history, strengthens emotional bonds and helps them make sense of their experiences when something senseless happens—like the current global pandemic.

"When we don't know what to do, we look for stories about how people have coped in the past," Fivush says. "You can see that happening in the media now, in articles comparing today to [historical events](#), like the 1918 flu pandemic and 9/11."

She sums up the 9/11 narrative in the United States: "A horrific event happened; we were attacked. But we came together as a nation, persevered and rose back up together."

Such narratives help build a shared capacity for resilience. "That's true for nations and it's true for families," Fivush says.

Over decades of research, Fivush and Emory psychologist Marshall Duke developed a scale to measure how much children know about their family histories. Using this scale, they conducted a study that began just before 9/11 and continued for two years. "We found that in families that talked in more coherent and emotionally open ways about challenging family events with 10- to 12-year-olds, the children coped better over the two-year period than in families telling less emotionally expressive and coherent stories about their challenges," Fivush says.

The families in the study were all comparable, middle-class, two-parent households.

Standardized measures showed that children in the families that told the more coherent family narratives had better self-esteem, higher levels of social competence, higher quality friendships, and less anxiety and

stress. They also had fewer behavioral problems, as reported by parents.

Tips for telling family stories

For families under quarantine together, opportunities abound to weave family stories into conversation, Fivush says. The stories need to be tailored to different ages, she adds, so that children are emotionally and cognitively able to understand them.

Elementary school children, for example, are not ready to digest complex family stories. "With younger kids, it's really more about helping them structure their own experiences into stories that help them process their feelings," Fivush says. "You want to start by asking them non-judgmental, open-ended questions like: 'Why do you think you were upset yesterday? What could you have done to make yourself feel better? What can we do about this?'"

She uses an example of a little girl who left her favorite storybook at her school and was worried that it wasn't going to be there when she went back. A mother could tell a story about how she left a favorite toy somewhere when she was little but later her father took her back and they found it.

"Tell them a story from your own life that provides a model for how everybody forgets things, but you can get them back," Fivush says. "Or, 'My brother used to tease me a lot, too. But now he's your Uncle Bill and we love each other.' Parents are identity figures. Little kids are fascinated by stories about their parents when they were little."

Ultimately, the goal is to help children construct a coherent story that validates their feelings while helping them think of resolutions.

"Particularly with very young kids, don't make assumptions about what

they may be upset or sad about," Fivush says. "You may be surprised. Stay open to what your children of all ages may be experiencing."

Middle school children are starting to have more of an ability to understand the bigger picture. "By the age of 10, children are thinking in the abstract and because of that, they are likely to be anxious about the future," Fivush says.

By this stage, children begin to understand stories on a deeper level. It's not that every story needs a happy ending or a silver lining, Fivush stresses. "You can explain to your child, 'We don't know yet how this story is going to end but let me tell you about some challenging times I got through, or your grandparents got through.'"

Examples of family members—who preserved by simply putting one foot in front of the other and by maintaining loving bonds—reassure children that their family will also find a way to get through a situation.

When they reach adolescence, children are especially vulnerable. "High school is a time when children start to really think about themselves as a person and what their life is going to be like," Fivush says. "They are mulling big questions, like 'Who am I? What are my passions?' And now the pandemic has pulled the rug out from under them."

By the age of 16, parents can start talking to a teen-ager about their own vulnerabilities as people and as parents. "Emphasize how you can build strength together, as a family," Fivush says. She suggests finding ways of giving teen-agers a role in supporting younger children in positive ways.

"Human beings are really altruistic and empathetic. We feel good when we help other people, particularly people that we love," Fivush says. "That's going to make every family member feel better about themselves and about each other."

Silly, funny family stories are also valuable, along with small touchpoints about the past that emerge spontaneously, Fivush says. "When you're cooking together with your children it's a perfect time to say, 'When I was a little girl, my mother taught me how to cook this dish. We used to have pot roast every Friday and I would peel the carrots.'"

Adolescents are especially hungry for these kinds of stories, she adds. "If they roll their eyes, so be it, they're still listening," Fivush says. "It's the really mundane, everyday stories that reassure them that life is stable. It provides a sense of continuity, of enduring relationships and values. They need to know that they come from a long line of people who are strong, who are resilient, who are brave. And who can cook. The definition of who they are is not just something independent and autonomous, spun from nowhere. It's embedded in a long, intergenerational family story."

Provided by Emory University

Citation: How family stories help children weather hard times (2020, April 30) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-04-family-stories-children-weather-hard.html>

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