

The Power of Myth: The Benefits of Sharing Family Stories of Hard Times

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Before you drag out old family stories at holiday gatherings this season, researchers have some news for you. The tales you choose to tell, and the way you tell them, may play a bigger role than you think in shaping your children's self-esteem and their academic skills.

A growing number of researchers are putting family stories under the microscope, recording and dissecting the plots and adults' storytelling techniques to uncover links to children's development. What they're finding is that a sense of family history is linked to self-esteem and resiliency in kids. And contrary to what adults may assume, happily-ever-after tales aren't always best. Instead, stories of relatives grappling with sad or difficult events may give children the wisdom and perspective they need to thrive.

In a two-year study of 40 Atlanta families, researchers at Emory University's Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life taped and categorized the families' dinner conversations. They quizzed the families' preteen children on family history, such as how their parents met and where their grandparents grew up. The children and their parents also filled out questionnaires on the kids' emotional health and behavior.

Kids who knew their family history had higher self-esteem and fewer emotional problems, such as depression. The children seem to gain a sense of self in relation to other family members and to the past, building confidence. "Families who tell family stories have kids who are doing better," says Robyn Fivush, an Emory psychology professor.

Stories of relatives' suffering, leading eventually to growth or success, may be helpful, according to a study of 74 middle-aged people by Dan P. McAdams, a psychology professor at Northwestern University. He found that adults who were the most nurturing and supportive of younger generations, based on tests completed by each subject, were five times more likely to tell stories of suffering leading to expansion or growth, compared with adults who were less nurturing.

The nurturing adults' stories also tended to include more examples of people, often strangers, who were surprisingly kind, says Dr. McAdams, author of a new book on family narratives. For example, one woman in the study told a story of her grandmother's flight from persecution in Russia. She suffered hardships, hiding in an ox cart with her baby and riding in steerage on a freighter. But she also met kind strangers who offered food and comfort, and was finally reunited with her husband in the U.S. Such tales may foster trust and belief that suffering eventually pays off, Dr. McAdams says.

Karen Crimmins Herrera of Houston has seen that principle at work. When her two daughters were young, she told them about their great-grandfather, a mechanical engineer and a U.S. citizen, who was discriminated against and couldn't get a job during World War II because of his German surname, Kulp. The family got through it and later thrived. In the stories, Ms. Herrera stressed maintaining dignity in the face of bad treatment, telling them, "It's how you bounce back from the lowest point that makes you who you are," she says.

She believes she's seeing fruits of those lessons. Now 15 and 18, her daughters seem unruffled by peer pressure or the "cliquish and catty" teen culture in which they're immersed. And her older daughter showed resiliency after being rejected by her first choice in colleges. Instead of moping, she asserted, "I'll be happy wherever I am," Ms. Herrera says.

Indeed, rather than gloss over negative emotions, researchers recommend discussing how relatives deal with them. In the Atlanta study, families who dismissed harsh events in positive terms, skipping over negative feelings, had kids with poorer academic skills, compared with families who explored their sadness, anger or grief. "Explaining the emotion, not just wallowing in it," seems to help kids, Dr. Fivush of Emory says.

Carolann Wishall abided by that principle when telling her two daughters about their father's experience as a Vietnam War veteran. She told them the unvarnished truth, describing his anguish when antiwar protestors hurled the phrase "baby killer" at him upon his return. The Temple, Texas, mother, who is now divorced, says she believes the story gave the girls, now 27 and 29, empathy for their dad, as well as resiliency and a sense of history.

Finally, avoid slick plotlines. The research shows one-note stories that are clearly happy or sad are in some ways less valuable to kids' development than a warts-and-all tale -- "a zigzag, showing, 'We've been up and we've been down. This family has good times and bad times, and if we're down, we'll come back up again,'" says Marshall Duke, a psychology professor at Emory.

A study by Joan E. Norris, a professor at University of Guelph, Ontario, and others, one of 16 studies published last year in a book on family narratives, recommends looking for storytelling opportunities. A child's videogame may relate to actual wartime experiences. Homework may also offer a chance to tell family stories.

Taking your child along on activities that engage you, such as volunteer work, may also evoke stories. Because Catherine Schildknecht's family enjoys birdwatching, bird sightings spark stories in her family, including how relatives rebounded from the Civil War, World War I or the Depression, she says. She makes a point of keeping photo albums and books or clothing that belonged to relatives within reach in her Cincinnati home.

"We think it's important that our children know their past," says Ms. Schildknecht, a teacher. The test "will come when they have children of their own."