

3 ways to teach kids storytelling, a skill that matters during coronavirus isolation and always

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Parents can help build children's self-esteem by eliciting stories from them that position the child as the hero. Credit: Shutterstock

During this unprecedented era of separation and isolation due to coronavirus, all people, particularly children, urgently need to [build relationships](#), [connect with community](#) and foster a [sense of self](#).

Parents can help restore their children's sense of self and belonging through [storytelling activities](#). Storytelling is a human pursuit that crosses all cultures and generations and can help restore some of the missing elements in our children's lives today.

While teaching in the bachelor of education program at Wilfrid Laurier University, teacher candidate Sarah Freeman and I created two online storytelling units for parents to use with their children. One unit is for [children in kindergarten up to Grade 3](#) and the other is for [children in grades 4-6](#). Most of the activities were created to use at home but some can be used when you are out and about with your children.

Here are three examples of storytelling to explore:

1. Personal storytelling

Telling [personal stories](#) is a powerful way to begin because the story is their own. Stimulate story ideas by asking direct questions about [emotionally charged experiences that resolved well](#). For example, ask "What was the best present you ever got?" When they start telling, help them elaborate the story by gently asking for details. Tell them you want to [see the story in your imagination](#). Where were you? Who was there? What did you do? Even if you know the answers, let them be the teller. Don't interject or correct.

Other story prompts you can use are: When were you the most scared? Tell me the story of your scar. What was the funniest thing Grandpa ever did? These tellings often evoke laughter and prompt more telling.

To further build self-esteem, suggest specific stories that position [the child as the hero](#). Do you remember the time you found your aunt's keys? Tell me about the time you saved that bunny. Again, ask for details. Where were they? How did they feel? Personal telling fosters a sense of self and helps them find [meaning in their own experiences](#).

Once your child has some experience with this, you could suggest your child reach out to grandparents or close family members over Skype or Zoom. They could ask for old family stories that these family members remember from their childhoods, or stories of their parents growing up.

2. Creative storytelling games

Parents and teachers tend to rely on books to provide stories. To develop [creativity and a sense of belonging](#), develop your own imaginative stories

together. In this round-robin game the story starter sets the who, the where and the what.

For example, I might say, "Yesterday morning in the park I saw an enormous, purple dragon!" The next person gets to continue the story with the next line. Including all of you as characters in the story adds an element of excitement. Encourage all tellers to use lots of descriptive words so the listeners can visualize the story. This can be a great family activity if you are traveling in a car or stuck waiting for something. You could also incorporate people, objects or buildings around you into the stories.

If the children are older, you can [set a theme or genre](#). Or, you could challenge them as tellers using story cues.

Create three piles of cues: the first pile contains names or pictures of characters; the second pile contains names or pictures of settings; the last pile contains names or pictures of objects. As a group you can withdraw a card from each pile and create a story incorporating whatever is on the cards, or each individual can tell a short [story](#) incorporating all three cards.

There are also many [storytelling](#) resources available online that stimulate creative telling. You can download [fairytale bingo cards](#), download a [storytelling dice app](#) or order [storytelling board games](#). These games reinforce [sequencing skills](#), which enable a child to order events logically, [stimulate creativity, increase vocabulary and foster a sense of community](#).

3. Performance telling

You and your child can write any of these stories down, make cartoon strips of them or record them. Once they are familiar with them, suggest they retell them out loud.

Enhance the telling by using [gesture, vocal expression and facial expression](#). They can share the stories with other household members or video the telling and share it with friends or family living elsewhere.

Telling stories to a small audience or sharing publicly not only [builds confidence](#) in the teller, it promotes [community spirit](#).

As humans, we thrive on stories. Now, more than ever, we need to share stories that build relationships, community connections and self esteem, especially with our children.

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