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Parents as Storytellers

by Judith Costello

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“Children live in the land of Story,” explains Kevin Cordi, a professional storyteller, author and the first, full-time high school storytelling coach in the country. “In order to reach them we need to understand that landscape.”

And so Cordi tells a story for parents to awaken them to the importance of creativity. Gestures and repeated phrases make the story come alive.

This is the story:

A boy asks, “Daddy, when did polar bears learn to dance?” Dad responds with ever-rising frustration as the question is repeated over and over, “There is no such thing as a dancing polar bear.” Finally, the boy stops the questions and wanders outside to sit by the beach waiting for dancing polar bears to re-appear. Inside his father sighs in relief.

A few months later the rational-minded father has considered having the boy labeled as crazy. Desperate to prove what is real, the father agrees to go outside with his son. Sitting there by the ocean, the father suddenly begins to see through the eyes of his child. Waves of white foam come alive as polar bears. And the father begins to remember his own days of innocence and imagination.

“The polar bear story is meant to remind parents of their own creativity and its importance in the lives of children. Parents are called to be storytellers for their children,” says Cordi. “Whether your voice is raspy or soft, loud or stuttering—whether you have an active imagination or believe you have none at all—your child longs to hear the words which create images and offer guidance. Your voice is what children love. That is what motivates the child to talk and to learn. Your voice has a cadence just like a story has a cadence.”

Cordi reminds parents that stories teach, stories guide, and stories offer choices. As the creator of Voices Across America, a project encouraging young people to start their own storytelling groups, Cordi sees how responsive children are to both hearing and telling stories. He is also the executive director of the National Youth Storytelling Olympics held in April every year. “When kids tell stories they grow in confidence and in the ability to see options. Storytelling is the oldest form of education. It offers children ideas about change without being preachy. Children can read about a concept like citizenship until they are blue in the face and still not get it. But tell them a story about how wolves work together as a pack. Then kids get it.

Cordi says he has seen children whose lives have changed as a result of stories. “I met a young girl who was always in trouble,” Cordi recalls. “She carried herself as if she had

battle armor on. One day she came to me and told me her uncle had a wonderful life story that I should tell when I give storytelling concerts. I told her I would love to hear the story, but she needed to share it with the world. Telling the story seemed to give her a lot of confidence. All I had to do was listen and encourage her natural storytelling ability.”

Cordi speaks with the enthusiasm of the boy asking, “When did polar bears learn to dance?” He sees the story and its healing potential all around him. “Parents can tell stories to children. And they should also listen to the child’s stories.”

Cordi, along with other professional storytellers from the greater Cincinnati area, say parents have five ways to guide children through the use of stories.

1. Stories enhance all aspects of learning. “In pre-literate cultures, stories were the primary form of education,” says Tandra White-Jennings, a storyteller with the Kentucky Center for the Arts in Louisville. “Stories introduce children to the form and structure of a narrative. This activity prepares the brain for seeing stories in print form. The child becomes engaged with language when you, as a parent, are telling a story face-to-face with no book in between.”

2. Stories communicate about behavior. “Again, in early cultures, folktales and myths instructed people in the laws and mores of the community,” says White-Jennings. “For today’s parents you don’t have to say, ‘Do this. Don’t do that.’ Just tell the child a story. There is a story about Coyote who could never do as he was told. Another animal warns Coyote, ‘Don’t eat that plant or it will make you sick’. But Coyote can’t resist. The plant looks so good. And of course he ends up very sick. These kinds of stories can become shorthand within families and the communities where they are shared. A parent can say, ‘Don’t be like Coyote’ rather than continuing to repeat rules over and over.”

3. Children have their own stories to share, Cordi says. “Let children recount what their day has been like. Let them be imaginative with the telling. Don’t contradict them, and don’t rush them. And remember to learn to deal with silence. It is a reflective time, a gathering time for understanding. The child’s story can lead to your story. The sharing of stories is a gift.”

4. Co-creating stories teaches children about options. According to White-Jennings, “When children tell stories you see where they are. You can tell alternate endings. The child begins to see that the narrative can be manipulated. Similarly, they learn that there are options to take in life. You can let them start a story and you finish it. It’s a way to communicate about options and learn about your child.”

5. Families have story traditions. White-Jennings says, “If we don’t tell our stories, they are lost. Telling stories about your family helps build community and continuity. My children live far away from aunts, uncles and grandparents; but because they hear stories about those people, they feel comfortable around them when we do get together. When parents tell about their parents, about their growing up experiences, these are resources a child will carry with them for a lifetime.”

The most effective form of instruction is the narrative, says Cordi. “Parents who listen carefully will know the story their children need to hear. There is nothing like the power of a well-told story to transform lives.