

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2024-2025 News & Notes



2024 December News and Notes

Sharing Our Stories

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Family Storytelling: A Rich Connection

How many family stories, told by your parents, grandparents or others, can you remember from years past? How many of these have you passed along, perhaps adding your own to the mix?

Family stories, seemingly so simple, can have significant value for young listeners and provide cohesion and identity for family members. In her article, “What Kids Learn from Hearing Family Stories,” Elaine Reese¹ writes of the many benefits researchers have identified for children familiar with family history and stories.

“In the preteen years, children whose families collaboratively discuss everyday events and family history more often have higher self-esteem and stronger self-concepts. And adolescents with a stronger knowledge of family history have more robust identities, better coping skills, and lower rates of depression and anxiety. Family storytelling can help a child grow into a teen who feels connected to the important people in her life.”

Heather Carter-Simmons, writing in *The Trauma and Mental Health Report*², cites similar findings in research by Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush. Their study “found that sharing family stories creates resilience in

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children. Their ‘Do You Know?’ questionnaire assesses how much children know about their family. . . . Children who knew a lot about their family history also scored high for levels of self-esteem and feelings of control and capability.”

“Stories pass on life lessons, instilling a sense of capability,” Carter-Simmons explains, “And the shared history and time taken to tell stories also fills the need to connect, providing, in Fivush’s view, a sense of belonging in our families, becoming a part of something larger than ourselves.”

The general themes that emerge from family stories was the focus of a study, “Telling a Family Culture: Storytelling, Family Identity, and Cultural Membership,” conducted by Dena Huismana³. She “found that families largely focused on positive stories that portrayed the family as pro-social and happy. Negative stories focused on how the family overcame their adversities as a group. Laughter was used to minimize face-threatening stories.”

Capture Your Own Stories

Story Circles: December, with its holiday get-togethers, offers special opportunities to engage in storytelling and memory sharing with family and friends. When invitations are issued or plans made, suggest that each person bring a story or memory to share, perhaps written down beforehand, or with a photo. Then set aside a portion of the time for sharing.

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Year-end Memory Books can be a fun and valuable family activity. Gather photos from the past year and have each member select one or more that they like and have them tell a bit about each: Where was the photo taken, what was happening, why is it a good choice for the memory book? The answers can be written down and attached to the photos. Even the youngest members can join in, and it's a good way to acknowledge accomplishments and milestones.

This activity will instill memories, develop language skills, and foster a sense of identity and belonging. Over the years, the number of books will grow, creating a lasting family chronicle.

Story Sharing Throughout the Year: There's no need to wait for the holidays. At the end of a vacation trip, the end of the school year, or the end of summer, take an hour or two to reflect on these recent experiences. This will make them more vivid and memorable, especially for children.

Create A Legacy: Everyone has a rich, unique lifestory. Take the time to preserve your own memories. Even details of daily life in a world without internet, for example, or the uses for carbon paper, or the rarity of a long-distance phone call "in the old days," can be of interest. Assemble your memories in a booklet or scrapbook, as a gift both for yourself and those with whom you share it.

1 <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/12/what-kids-learn-from-hearing-family-stories/282075/>

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2 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/201503/family-storytelling-good-for-children-and-parents>

3 <https://interpersona.psychopen.eu/index.php/interpersona/article/view/3417>