

STORYTELLING PROMOTES SOCIAL WELL-BEING

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I attended Dr Nicola Grove's Introduction to Storysharing® workshop in March, in Melbourne this year. Storysharing® is a narrative intervention program to encourage and enable storytelling with people with severe communication difficulties. Using evidence-based communication techniques, Storysharing® practically applies the principles of good communication within a narrative framework.

Storysharing® provides a way that people can express their significant experiences.

Michael has a story:

One Saturday Dad was watering the front lawn and Maggie flew down onto the fence. Dad called 'Maggie, come and have a shower'. Maggie jumped onto the lawn and Dad lightly sprayed water into the air. Maggie hopped around, did a little dance with feathers all fluffed out while warbling. She flew away and back a few times to do the same little song and dance. The whole family came out to watch.

Michael can share his story with others.

Mum is narrator. His brothers use a cardboard cutout bird to swoop into the sprinkler, and shake to ruffle their feathers.

Michael calls "bye Maggie" as it flies away.

As well as learning from Dr Nicola Grove's own experience, video examples, books and websites were shared, as were articles on the narrative and socio-emotional evidence base of Storysharing®.

Most people take storytelling for granted. We all discuss our days with those closest to us and particular events and stories are told again and again. The desire to tell stories is innate and we do this without a second thought. Those with communication difficulties often miss out on the joy of storytelling.

Storytelling involves relating interesting events to others, such as rushing the laundry in from the rain or going on a thrilling hot air balloon ride.



FIVE REASONS FOR STORYTELLING

Friendship

Friendships reduce isolation yet for people with severe communication difficulties, challenges to forming friendships are common. Too often we hear that people with severe disabilities predominantly engage with others on a needs basis and much of the engagement involves requests and directives. The use of story sharing can allow people to share themselves with others and tell stories together. Storytelling is a way we can relate our experiences and discover commonalities with others, which builds connections.

Self-expression and self-advocacy

Storytelling is an important part of social development. It involves connecting with others forming our own personal identities. Sharing personal stories allows people to express themselves, what matters to them and how they feel about events in their lives. We often talk about significant things again and again. Going over these stories and sharing them with others enables everyone to reflect and grow.

Storysharing can be used to support self-advocacy. Telling a story could be a powerful way to tell an NDIS planner, a new teacher or a friend about what is important to you.

Mattie was scratched by a cat and he loved to tell the story to visitors. He needed his mum to do most of the telling but he participated and it was very important to him that people were aware he didn't respond well to cats.

Sharing experiences

The shared experience is the basis of any storytelling. Listeners empathise. For example, if something affects the storyteller, others will join in by gasping when there is a surprise or covering their ears when a loud noise is described. This might even help a person process a negative experience or share laughs over a positive experience long after the event.

Telling a story helps us see others in a new light. It can also change our perspective of a person.

Fun

Storysharing® is fun! Telling stories together is fun and it can reinforce personal relationships. In this busy world, it may seem counterintuitive for support workers or family members to stop and share a moment and act out a story, yet these are such important moments to enjoy. Carers should be able to nurture a person's cognitive and emotional wellbeing as well as their physical wellbeing. Telling a story together builds social closeness and promotes healthy relationships.

Participate

The smoke alarm went off during cooking!

This example is a great story for sharing with others as lots of dramatic movements and facial expressions can be incorporated into the re-telling. People can participate in different ways. For example, a narrator may tell the story, one contributor might trigger the Big Mac switch to say "Fire!" others might stamp their feet to indicate running away, or sound the fire engine's siren. Props can be used to make the story come to life. Each person can be supported differently to tell their story.

It may even be that with time, fun and repetition a person becomes increasingly engaged in telling their story and sharing others.

What makes a good story?

- Choose a meaningful moment.
- Decide who will tell which part of the story. You could involve several people in the retelling.
- Script everyone's parts.
- Make the story engaging:
 - Use a prop
 - Have a repeated sound or word for a critical element
 - Be dramatic and overplay emotions - imagine you're in a play!
 - Go over it together. Practice it lots!
 - Tell the story together, in front of someone else
 - Once you get it right, tell the story again – and again.
- Use good communication techniques. Remember to allow time, use repetition, make comments rather than ask questions, use communication aids and visual supports where appropriate, and have fun!

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE:

- Visit www.openstorytellers.org.uk
- Attend the Introductory Storysharing® workshop or Practitioner Level training
- Join a community of practice

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