



parents league  
of new york

# the review 2021

Essential Articles on  
Parenting & Education

# The Power of Family Stories

**Robyn Fivush** Professor and Director  
Institute for the Liberal Arts, Emory University

“Remember when?” We ask this of ourselves and others every day. We share yesterday’s experiences and those of last year and years ago. We delight in retelling joyous moments and weep about past woes. In telling stories, we share who we are.

Many of our most meaningful stories are family stories, stories of our parents and grandparents, our sisters and brothers, our children. We bring up our children steeped in the world of stories. Parents tell family stories to their newborns, informing them about who they are, the family they have joined, and who they will be. Preschool children begin to participate in telling these stories with their parents: what happened at day care, what fun we had in the park, what we did last summer at the beach. And soon the stories include worlds larger than the child’s own experiences. Children ask for, and parents tell, stories of their own childhoods, of great aunts and crazy uncles, of family escapades and disasters. Through these stories, children begin to understand who they are, anchoring their sense of self in a richly storied history of family.

## What Are Family Stories?

Family stories can be elaborated, rehearsed performances telling of singular events, but more often they are told in snippets around the dinner table, during car rides, in everyday moments. They may be as simple as a mother saying “Wasn’t that fun baking cookies with Grandma last weekend?” or “I had a doll just like this when I was a little girl like you.”

Early in development, parents help children understand their own experiences, helping them shape coherent accounts of what happened at the park, at school, at the supermarket. These small, everyday co-constructed stories of children’s own experiences

give voice and coherence to their developing sense of self. They help children begin to understand a temporally-extended sense of self, a self with a past, a present and an anticipated future.

In middle childhood, children begin to think about the world outside their own experience in more abstract ways, and begin to understand the world through stories of others, stories about what happened to parents at work, or to an older sister at school. Hearing these stories helps children to move beyond their own direct experience and begin to construct representations of larger worlds. At this age, they also become more interested in “intergenerational” stories: about their parents’ childhoods, their grandparents’ experiences, parent-grandparent disputes or discipline, family vacations, school and schoolmates ... stories of challenges and achievements. Through all of these stories, heard and told, children begin to develop their own sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they are going.

### **Why Family Stories Matter**

My colleagues, students and I have been studying family stories for 30 years in the Family Narratives Lab at Emory University. In addition to publication in academic journals, this research formed the basis of my recent book, *Family Narratives and the Development of an Autobiographical Self*. In this work, we have collected hundreds of family stories of various kinds. We visit families in their homes and ask parents and preschoolers to talk about happy times and sad times, or times the child had a conflict with a peer or a parent. We ask families with preteens to talk about experiences that were difficult for the family, as well as joyous times of celebration. And we ask adolescents and young adults to tell us stories they know about their parents as children.

With all of these stories, we look at how they are told: How coherent is the story, how detailed and elaborated? How much emotion is expressed? How are relationships and achievements communicated? That stories are told is important; how stories are told is even more important.

Preschoolers whose parents help them create more coherent, more detailed and more emotionally expressive stories come to

tell more coherent stories about themselves. For example, here is a mother and her 4-year-old daughter, whom we will call Rachel, talking about when Rachel's friend Sheila moved away:

Mother: Well, one thing that made you really sad is when your best friend Sheila moved away, right?

Rachel: (nods yes)

Mother: Yeah, and did we watch all her things go on the moving truck? Uh-huh, and do you remember why she had to move away?

Rachel: ... Because Sheila's father had to work.

Mother: Sheila's father was going to start working at a new job. ... And do you still miss Sheila when you think about it?

Rachel: (nods yes)

Mother: It makes you sad. Doesn't it? But is she still your friend even far away? Yes! What can you do even though she's far away?

Rachel: Give her a happy letter with a (drawing) on it.

Mother: Give her a happy letter, right, and we have a drawing, don't we?

Several things are happening even in this very brief excerpt. The mother first acknowledges that Rachel is sad and provides a reason for this emotion: her best friend moved away. The mother goes on to provide a more elaborated story about why Rachel moved, and what happened during the move to provide a context for the emotional experience. But then the mother comes back to the emotional reaction, the center of the experience for Rachel, and helps her to confirm this experience, understand it, and work to resolve it through assuring her that she can still be friends with Sheila. So, in this very short co-constructed narrative, the

mother helps Rachel build a coherent story of what happened and understand why she is sad—a story that both validates and helps provide a resolution for this difficult emotion.

## **Intergenerational Stories**

We have found that intergenerational stories, stories adolescents know about their parents' childhood, are especially impactful. In multiple studies we have asked adolescents to tell us stories they know about when their parents were growing up, stories that illustrate who their parents are as people, stories about a time their parent was proud, or ashamed, or times the parents had conflicts or problems, as well as times their parents were happy. Again, we examined these stories for coherence, for elaboration, and for emotional content.

We also discovered that some adolescents take their parents' perspectives in telling these stories; they explicitly narrate what their parent was thinking or feeling during the event. As in, “My mother was so upset at her mother for not letting her go to that party,” or “My dad just thought his brother was being annoying.” Taking the perspective of the parent in this way suggests that the adolescent is getting inside a parent's head, so to speak, really embodying how the parent understands the event. And many adolescents end their intergenerational story with a life lesson or a moral, something that connects the parent and the adolescent in terms of a world view. For example, after telling a particularly moving story about her mother's stormy relationship with a good friend in high school, one adolescent ended with, “I think my mother was trying to get me to open up with her about what was going on in my life because I didn't want to tell her things. I think she thought that if she showed me that she made mistakes and was vulnerable that I would open up to her more about my own life.”

Adolescents who tell more coherent and elaborated intergenerational stories show higher self-esteem, and higher levels of identity exploration—leading to meaning and purpose in life. To illustrate, here is one 14-year-old boy we will call Dave, telling a story he knows about his mother when she was about his age:

[W]ell, she was telling me that they were by the bus stop one day and this kid had been made fun of a lot and that she just didn't want ... like she was kinda tired of it and so she just said, "Why don't you just stop making fun of this kid ...?" and stuff. And it ended up that the bully ... punched her in the nose. It was just so weird because, first of all, like you don't usually hit a girl. I mean just ... I don't know; people just say that, but, when you think about it, I don't know ... . But he just ... he didn't even know her and he just punched her in the nose and she actually had to go to the hospital and stuff. And so it just seems like a pretty mean thing to do for the bully and just a really courageous thing to do for my mom, just to stand up for some kid and get her nose broken.

Notice how coherent and detailed this story is, including not just what happened, but what Dave's mother was thinking and feeling at the time, and how Dave uses this story both to understand who his mother is as a person, as well as to learn a lesson about compassion and courage (and maybe about gender roles as well). Adolescents who tell intergenerational stories that include their parents' perspectives on the event, through narrating the parent's thoughts and feelings, and who make these kinds of explicit connections to lessons learned, show higher levels of personal flourishing.

## **The 20 Questions**

During our work on family history, my colleague psychologist Marshall Duke and I developed the "Do You Know ...?" scale, sometimes called "the 20 questions," that ask whether or not adolescents and young adults know details of family history. These are those simple questions:

1. Do you know how your parents met?
2. Do you know where your mother grew up?
3. Do you know where your father grew up?
4. Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up?

5. Do you know where some of your grandparents met?
6. Do you know where your parents were married?
7. Do you know what went on when you were being born?
8. Do you know the source of your name?
9. Do you know some things about what happened when your brothers or sisters were being born?
10. Do you know which person in your family you look most like?
11. Do you know which person in the family you act most like?
12. Do you know some of the illnesses and injuries that your parents experienced when they were younger?
13. Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences?
14. Do you know some things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school?
15. Do you know the national background of your family (such as English, German, Russian, etc.)?
16. Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young?
17. Do you know some awards that your parents received when they were young?
18. Do you know the names of the schools that your mom went to?
19. Do you know the names of the schools that your dad went to?
20. Do you know about a relative whose face “froze” in a grumpy position because he or she did not smile enough?

Adolescents and young adults who know stories about their grandparents, where they were born, where they went to school, and what kind of work they did when they were young do better on virtually every measure we have examined: higher self-esteem, social competence and academic competence; lower depression, anxiety and aggressive behaviors; and a higher sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Surprisingly, knowing these various kinds of intergenerational stories is even more important for adolescents than telling their own stories in coherent and emotionally expressive ways.

Perhaps adolescents are still struggling with how to understand themselves and their worlds, but through stories of their parents and grandparents—stories that provide models, values, life lessons and a sense of being in this together—they find an anchor in a confusing world, a foundation for building their own life stories.

## **What Can Parents Do?**

Through sharing the stories of our lives, we share who we are and we open up avenues of communication. Stories provide models of how the world does and should work. They help us understand how and why emotions may be difficult and provide models for how to regulate and cope with anger and sadness. Stories also provide coherence to our lives, consolidating disparate events into a story of who we are, and connecting our lives to other lives in ways that create meaningful emotional connections. Stories bond us together and create networks of relationships that provide sustenance in hard times, build shared happiness through joyful events. Stories are, simply put, the way we understand ourselves, others and the world.

So, what do we as parents do? Share stories. There is no need to carve out time for this, no need to sit down and tell a fully-formed story, no need for a child or adolescent to be an avid listener. Stories come up naturally and spontaneously in everyday conversations—just be a bit more aware of these opportunities. And don't worry if the entire story doesn't get told all at once. Stories are told in multiple contexts and for many reasons. Small snippets may become elaborated stories over time.

Ask preschoolers open-ended questions (“Tell me more about what happened?” “How did that make you feel?”) and allow them to co-construct their part of the story, developing their own voice. Ask additional questions about what your children say; ask them to elaborate and explain and help them put their feelings into words.

With adolescents, there are more opportunities to tell intergenerational stories. Parents often tell us their adolescents roll their eyes when the parent starts to tell a story, but adolescents

are listening. They are hearing these stories and storing them away, using them to learn values and life lessons.

Most important, relax and have fun—laugh at yourself. Stories are the way we naturally share our selves with each other, all the time. Tell stories that come to you in the moment. And listen when others, including your children, tell their stories. Value their stories as well as your own. Telling and listening to stories is a gift we give others and ourselves.

Robyn Fivush is a professor of psychology and Director of the Institute for the Liberal Arts at Emory University. Dr. Fivush directs the Family Narratives Lab. She is the author of many articles and books, including her recent book *Family Narratives and the Development of an Autobiographical Self*. Visit [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com).