



Making Meaning With Young Children

by SARAH DOBKIN, L.C.S.W.

Children integrate their experiences through narrative. By supporting children to share their own stories, and by reading or telling stories (our own or those created by others), we help children to connect what they see, hear, and feel to their own subjective experiences. When we share stories with children, we help them make meaning of the world around them, of their experiences and their emotions, and of how they are connected.



LITERACY CHAMPION: SARAH DOBKIN

Sarah Dobkin is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Parent Consultant, currently working in private practice. She has worked with young children and their families and caregivers for over 10 years in a variety of health and education settings, previously managing the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program at StarVista in San Mateo County. She is endorsed by

the California Center for Infant-Family and Early Childhood Mental Health as an Infant-Family Early Childhood Mental Health Specialist, Reflective Practice Facilitator II. An English major through and through, in every part of her work, whether with children, adults, or her own family, Sarah incorporates stories, especially children's books.

One to Know: Make Connections Through Books

Young children are still learning tools and techniques to self-regulate or to understand and respond to their emotions. There are wonderful picture books to help children develop social-emotional skills. Some books may help children increase their emotional vocabulary, giving them words (beyond "mad" and "sad" and "happy") to share the hard-to-define sensations they are feeling inside their bodies (for example, *Tiger Days: A Book of Feelings*, by M.H. Clark). Other books enable children to understand the ways in which they can get a handle on the emotions they feel, by noticing and observing them and through actions to change the types of behaviors these feelings might drive them towards (for example, *Ruby Finds a Worry*, by Tom Percival and *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry*, by Molly Bang).

A less-discussed but equally important way in which reading supports young children’s social-emotional development is through the connection they form with the reader. When young children sit in a caregiver’s lap or in a teacher’s classroom circle to listen to a story, they are not just hearing about emotions, they are experiencing them because young children learn through relationships. They are learning the way that a grownup’s voice gets louder when the character gets angry, or gets faster when the character gets excited. They’re picking up on the way that a grownup’s voice gets slower as the character’s feelings change, and quieter as the character calms down. It doesn’t matter if “feelings words” are even used during these readings—children are learning feelings. And they’re co-regulating: they are speeding up and slowing down right alongside the person reading. When someone reads or tells a story to a young child, that child is experiencing how that storyteller adjusts their physical presentation (their breath, their posture, their animation); they can feel how these adjustments change the storyteller, the story—and themselves.

The best part is that the books don’t need to be specifically about feelings—often they’re even better when they’re not. Because what children learn through these stories, and through the shared history we create when we tell stories together, is that: 1) feelings are everywhere and; 2) feelings can change over time. When you built that tall tower out of blocks and your friend knocked it down and your body got really tense and your face got hot and your fists clenched, THAT was a feeling, just like Taylor had a feeling in *The Rabbit Listened* (written by Cori Doerrfeld). When you lost your favorite stuffy and searched everywhere, THAT was a feeling (maybe you wondered what that stuffy had gotten up to on its own (*Corduroy*, by Don Freeman) or maybe no one understood what you were trying to tell them— another feeling (*Knuffle Bunny*, by Mo Willems). When your mom had a new baby— or worse! Baby twins! And everyone was too busy to play with you, THAT was a feeling (*Double Trouble for Anna Hibiscus!*, by Atinuke). When you are SO hungry and then you eat SO much and then you get a tummy ache, THOSE are feelings, lots of them, and all different kinds (*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, by Eric Carle). And in each of these examples, the feelings were different in the beginning, middle, and end of the story—a narrative arc that reminds children no matter how big their feeling is right now (and it might be REALLY BIG), it will not last forever.

What to Do: Ask Questions About Feelings!

While reading or telling a story, observe places where emotions pop up. It can be easy to incorporate feelings into every book/story that you share with a child by asking or noticing things like:

- How does this character feel right now?
- How do you know that’s what the character is feeling?
- I’m noticing that funny face this bear is making! I wonder what that feeling is!
- Have you ever felt that way? When did you feel like that? What did you do?
- How do you think this character’s feelings will change?
- Even the youngest children can be included in this activity: “point to the happy baby” or “where is the sad baby?”

You can also add to these suggestions by practicing emotional regulation skills while reading the story: “Should we all try taking a deep breath together?”

More to Know and Do: Create Real Stories

Creating stories for young children about their own experiences can prepare them for transitions or new activities and can support them in moving through something that has already happened. One version of this is the “social story” which describes very clearly what a child will see, hear, and do during a new adventure, but there is no one right way to create a story and the one that you and your child make together will be the most valuable. Children can add their own photos or draw illustrations to go along with the words. The more specific you make it to them, the more meaningful it will be.

When working with children who have experienced trauma, an important part of the process is the creation of a “trauma narrative” which helps the child to retell what happened to them. While a trauma narrative should be worked on alongside a trained mental health provider, the more routine kinds of challenges that come up for every child can also be turned into narratives. Here’s an example: “You were running so fast and it was so exciting until you stumbled on a crack in the sidewalk. You were so disappointed! You scraped your knee and it bled and that felt a little scary. We came home and cleaned it, you picked a superhero bandage because you were feeling brave, and now that scrape is already starting to heal.” It sounds so simple, and yet so often we skip over retelling these stories to children and miss an opportunity to connect all those wild emotions with the real-life sensations.

One last reflection: consider what your favorite children’s book (or story) is. What do you love about that book? Do you remember reading it as a kid or is it one you found as an adult? What does that book make you feel? Has it ever popped into your head unexpectedly? How have you shared (or not shared) that book with the children in your life?

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