

Therapeutic Storytelling

by Susan Perrow (Hawthorn Press, 2012)

Children love stories. The nature stories and fairy tales we share in our early childhood classes provide daily soul nourishment. There are also the “pedagogical” stories we create spontaneously to picture to the children a more healthy behavior when something is out of kilter in the moment. In her new book, Susan Perrow takes us a step further to introduce therapeutic stories.

Susan is described as a “story doctor.” She has done her work as storyteller, early childhood educator, and teacher trainer in Australia, New Zealand, the British Isles, South Africa, Kenya, eastern Europe, Asia, and China. In her storytelling workshops with educators, therapists, and parents, she has shared many stories and the tools we need to create stories for our own children. She gave the introduction to this type of story in her first book, *Healing Stories for Difficult Behaviors*. Now this volume expands with examples of one hundred and one stories that have arisen out her own creative work and within workshops she has guided in different countries.

But first, what distinguishes a *therapeutic* story from others? To quote from the book: “All stories are potentially healing or therapeutic. If a story makes people laugh or cry—or both!—the laughter and tears can be healing. Folk- and fairytales, through their universal themes and resolutions, have healing possibilities. They can offer hope and courage for facing the trials of life, affirming our capacity to change and develop.” She goes on further to say that *therapeutic* stories are specific stories to help or heal behavior in a specific situation when wholeness has been lost. These are stories that “return balance...to a behavior or situation that is out of balance.” Her description of this resonates with our own experience of the power of stories as a way to address difficult topics and situations through the vehicle of “an imaginative journey” that guides toward resolution. The story can be a way to encourage a new behavior by picturing through the story how to do it without lecturing or moralizing. The child’s dignity is protected while his or her higher being is invited forward through the story imagination.

Each story will have three essential elements—metaphor, journey, and resolution. Metaphor is the imaginative picture. Journey is the series of events leading to a conclusion. And resolution is when balance is restored. One problem situation described in the book was of a three-year old child who bit others. The main story character chosen was a baby hippo who greeted every-

one with a bite. No friends stayed; the zebra, giraffe, and baboon all ran away. But when the baby hippo tried to bite tortoise, his shell was hard and hurt her teeth. He did not run away but invited her to eat good, sweet grass instead. Once she learned to enjoy eating grass, “When her friends would come to play/The friends would stay and play all day!” The book further discusses the “mystery and magic of metaphor” as it “speaks directly to the imagination, building its connections through feeling rather than theory or abstract thinking.” Further suggestions are given as to how to create our own stories and get our story juices flowing, of different ways of constructing the journey, of what kind of resolution is healthy and proper.

These considerations also raise the question of ethics and freedom. We need to make sure that the story is given to restore something within the child’s situation that it out of balance and needs healing, not something which we wish to encourage or even manipulate to satisfy our own adult convenience and desire. We also need to ask whether the story will encourage core values of true human morality and uprightness. If the answer to this is “yes,” then the story will guide development in a positive direction for all concerned. Susan Perrow points out that these stories do “not involve making ‘bad’ behavior ‘good’ or making ‘naughty’ children into ‘good’ ones. Instead it is about trying to recreate wholeness or balance in the child’s own experience...The story should definitely not have the aim of moralizing or inducing guilt—this cannot be stressed enough!... A healing tale should, as much as possible, leave the listener free to come to her or his own conclusion.”

The first fifty pages of the book give the storytelling “tutorial.” The remaining 200 pages are stories, stories, and more stories. The list of categories is exhaustive and runs the gamut from hitting/biting, anxiety/fearfulness, bullying/exclusion, social conflicts of all kinds, divorce, resilience, sexual abuse, bad language, to discrimination, and more. Some of the stories may be just what a teacher has been looking for to address a situation. Others may seem too direct, others too subtle to address the topic. Susan emphasizes that it is also important to understand that the children’s behavior is contextual and relational. A story in this book may not be “the” answer but give us inspiration and spark the imagination of what will speak to the children in our care.

Thanks to Susan Perrow and the students from her workshops, who have generously shared their stories to benefit the children of the world and the adults who care for them. ♦
—Nancy Blanning