

ONCE UPON A TIME

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

When you hear the words, 'Once upon a time', what comes into your mind? Immediately in my mind's eye I see myself at five years old, hunched down on the schoolroom mat, legs crossed, a smile on my face and eyes glued on the face of the story-teller, waiting with baited breath for some amazing story to unfold. I think every child in the world loves to hear those words, 'Once upon a time.' You know that following those four wonderful words will come a fabulous fairy tale with a happy ending.

So, why is it so important to read to our children? Perhaps we can understand the reasons why, when we think about what reading a novel or biography does for us? For me, there is nothing more exciting than jumping out of my world and living someone else's life for a change. When I read a novel, I am that heroine in the story. My imagination takes me through the whole story with all the emotion, the fear and excitement described in those pages. I see the colors, taste the food, smell the aromas, hear the sounds and feel the wind and rain on my face. It is all laid out in technicolor in my brain. It is a visual and auditory experience for me. So it can be for children.

Of course, someone else reading or hearing that same story would conjure up a completely different set of visuals and emotions because their imagination is drawing from different experiences than mine. The important thing is that telling a story to a child is encouraging them to learn to develop their own imagination.

It is through our imagination that we learn to visualize possibilities for the future, to work through problems and to make wise decisions. Our imagination expands our thought processes from what is here and now to what could be. It allows us to 'live' through situations before we actually do them. It allows us to dream.

Reading to children teaches them to listen. The more exciting the story, and the more compelling the way it is told, the more they concentrate. It teaches them to comprehend by giving them the opportunity to learn new words. You can either stop reading to explain a word they don't understand, or they can gather from the context of the story or sentence what that word means.

Christa Melnyk Hines, a freelance writer, discusses the importance of letting your children tell stories to one another. She says listening to their stories is an indication of how they think. It is a window into their minds. Talking out loud in front of others also helps them to express themselves clearly.

Telling stories is a learning experience. Stories do not have to be fiction. In New Zealand, as in many cultures, families learn about their entire family

history from the stories they are told by their elders. These stories help create a bond or identity for children as they learn where they fit in the greater scheme of things.

Unfortunately, the art of story telling and brain creativity is being challenged because of the media world we live in. When all the characters are provided, and all the scenery, sounds and emotions are laid out, there is nothing left but to passively stare at the screen.

We need to preserve and value our 'Once upon a time' moments with our children. Whether it be bed time stories, family history stories, imaginary or true stories, we need to continue to express ourselves by telling stories, writing stories and listening to them. We need to encourage our imagination, our sense of fun and excitement through the spoken word.

Jesus expressed most of what the Kingdom of God was like and how we should live through the stories He told. We call them parables. To Jesus it was the way to express truth that our minds otherwise probably could not understand. Tell the story of your life to someone (the shortened version of course) and see how powerful that is in helping others with their problems and their seeking meaning in this world. You owe it to others to tell stories that helped change you.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.