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**What Did You Do at School Today?**

**Strategies for Teaching Story Retelling and Personal Narratives to Children with Complicated Language Problems**

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### **Narrative Development**

Sitting in an airport, I watched a young girl around the age of two walk with her mother to a large window overlooking the waiting airplanes. The toddler enthusiastically looked and pointed at a plane while she and her mother shared several verbal exchanges. Then the girl crossed the waiting area to where her father sat reading a newspaper and, when she caught his gaze, exclaimed “Daddy, big airplane!”

What I had just observed was the beginning of narrative skills, the ability to tell about the past or about something that is not present. The little girl told her father about something he had not seen and in doing so she shared her excitement about it with him. This observation is consistent with the research, which tells us that children begin to construct simple narratives at age two (Fivush, 1994). Although their language skills are still in the early stages of development, these young children already have the awareness that communication is more than just a means for getting their needs and wants met. Their motivation for social relatedness spurs them to use language for the purpose of sharing information with others. Children are thought to learn how to tell and respond to narratives as part of their initial socialization at home (Heath, 1986).

Narratives are what we use to understand, remember and recount experience. As children progress through the preschool years, narratives become central to learning about themselves and others. Between the ages of two and five, children’s narratives progress from simple phrases about past events to telling more elaborate personal stories (like what happened at school or at the dentist that day) to retelling of familiar children’s books, and on to creating stories of their own.

### **Problems with Narrative Development**

There are some children who do not develop narrative skills in the same manner and at the same rate as their peers. These are children with a variety of receptive and expressive language and communicative deficits that span diagnostic boundaries. Their diagnoses include deaf and hard of hearing, developmental apraxia, attention deficit disorder, and mental retardation among others. Students with autism spectrum disorders have particular problems learning to tell stories. The extent of their difficulties varies according to levels of cognitive and language skills with lower functioning, mentally retarded students demonstrating more narrative impairments than higher functioning students. Children with autism spectrum disorders may tell stories which contain unusual and irrelevant comments. They generally seem to be oblivious to the needs of their listeners. For example, they may provide information the listener already has or they might fail to relate enough critical or specific information for the listener to follow what is being said. They appear to lack the inclination to share experiences using narratives and do not spontaneously offer narratives to others (Capps, Kehres, &

Sigman, 1998). Problems learning to tell stories can also be related to difficulties with morphosyntax, low vocabulary, word-finding, language comprehension and/or organizing thoughts.

### **Importance of Narrative Skills**

In a discussion of the broad and important role of narrative skills in our lives, Dr. Carol Westby once wrote “We dream, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, love, hate, believe, doubt, plan, gossip and learn in narrative.” (Westby 1991)

The importance of narrative skills for school success has been reported in the research literature. Bishop and Edmundson (1987), in a prospective, longitudinal study of language impaired children, found that the best predictor of a positive outcome during the elementary school years was a preschooler’s ability to retell a simple story while viewing the pictures from the story. Others who have documented the importance of oral narrative skills for social and school success include McCabe and Rollins (1994) and Westby (1991).

For preschool children and early readers, understanding and retelling familiar stories are abilities which lead to later text comprehension. These abilities are among a group of skills that are referred to as emergent literacy. They are the skills that lay the foundation for school literacy, as text comprehension has been identified by the National Reading Panel in *Put Reading First* (2000) as one of the five building blocks of reading. Being able to tell a story allows us to share our experiences with others and make sense of the world around us.

### **Narrative Intervention Research**

The research on narrative skill intervention has demonstrated that directly teaching narrative skills results in improved comprehension and production of oral narratives and improved reading comprehension (Hayward & Schneider, 2000; Klecan-Aker, 1993; Swanson & Fey, 2003). To date, most narrative intervention research has focused on the acquisition of story grammar (Stein & Glenn, 1979) as it is widely believed that if children know the underlying framework for stories, they will demonstrate better comprehension and production of stories. Story grammar reflects a set of rules that describe the individual components of fictional stories in mainstream American culture. The basic components of story grammar include the setting, problem, and outcome.

While teaching story grammar has been shown to be effective with students with language impairment (Hayward & Schneider, 2000) and a youngster with the diagnosis of Pervasive Developmental Disorder (Klecan-Aker & Gill, 2005), there are some young children with a variety of language, social and cognitive problems who are not yet at a stage when they can benefit from narrative

instruction based on story grammar. The concepts of story grammar are often too complex for them to grasp. These students may also demonstrate little motivation to talk about personal experiences. They may not yet be producing the sentence patterns that are needed to tell stories or they might not have developed the ability to refer to past events using past tense language. Some children are very verbal but their language lacks organization and contains irrelevant information. We clearly need a broader range of narrative interventions to help these children. One such approach which has been used at the Scottish Rite Clinic in Long Beach, Narrative-Based Language Intervention, has been found to be effective with this population of children.

## **Narrative-Based Language Intervention**

Narrative Based Language Intervention (NBLI) is a hybrid language intervention approach that combines naturalistic activities (such as storytelling) with skill-based activities to address children's language and communication goals (Swanson, L. A., Fay, M. E., et al. 2005). The goal of NBLI is to help children develop skills for generating narratives while at the same time addressing their individual needs to develop crucial underlying language skills. At the Scottish Rite Clinic in Long Beach we are currently using NBLI with scaffolded stories to improve the story retelling skills, personal narratives, syntax and vocabulary skills of young children with autism and/or significant language problems.

### **Prerequisite Skills for NBLI with Scaffolded Stories**

A child who demonstrates the following skills is generally ready to participate in NBLI which incorporates use of scaffolded stories at his or her developmental level:

- Understands and uses a variety of nouns and verbs in simple sentences
- Follows simple directions
- Answers simple wh-question forms such as *who*, *what* and *what...doing*
- Identifies and names objects and actions when looking at pictures in books

### **Scaffolded Stories**

In our NBLI work with young children who present with various combinations of social, language and cognitive difficulties, we have found that use of developmentally appropriate stories and clear teaching strategies that use a skill-focused training format are needed. Developmentally appropriate stories for this group of children must be based on events or routines the children are familiar with, be easy to understand, and provide the context to learn new vocabulary. Since stories like this are difficult to find, we have written our own "scaffolded stories" for 2-, 3-, and 4-picture sequences which are similar to the model

presented in Teaching Tales (Blank, M., McKirdy, L., & Payne, P. 1997). To reduce cognitive complexity, the authors of this manual suggest that stories cover a short time span of a few minutes up to an hour or so. They also stress the importance of providing students with stories that are at the child's developmental level and contain very explicit information. Blank, McKirdy and Payne note that for a child experiencing language comprehension difficulties, "utterances containing new information are like a rushing river; by contrast, repetitive, redundant comments are like a meandering stream. They serve to slow down the input while exposing the children to a wide variety of formulations that can expand their repertoire." The primary goal of scaffolded stories is to make narratives available to and manageable for students with language problems.

Story scaffolds include:

- Clear pictures uncluttered with details that are irrelevant to the story
- Use of simple sentence patterns that increase in complexity as the child's understanding and expression improve
- Explicit information to connect ideas and reduce the need for inferencing

### Story Writing Guidelines

Following are guidelines for writing your own scaffolded stories:

- Compose developmentally appropriate stories that contain concepts the child understands or that can be taught using pictures, toys and other manipulatives
- Use explicit language that clearly provides the background information, reduces the need for inferencing and offers needed information to build understanding of events and vocabulary
- Use sentence patterns at slightly above the child's developmental level
- Write three to six sentences per picture
- Intermix these types of stories:
  - *Event stories* are stories that simply follow an event without referring to characters' mental states
  - "*Social thinking*" or *mental state stories* have references to characters' mental states such as their intentions and wishes.
  - *Personal stories* are about the child's own experiences
- Write easier or more advanced stories depending on the child's level

### Story Pictures

Pictures for stories can come from a variety of sources. Digital photos of the child participating in an activity can be the starting place for personal narratives. You may choose to draw your own pictures. An example of a parent's drawings for a child's personal story appear with sample stories below. There are also a variety of sequence picture sets available for purchase.

## Sample Stories

- Event Story



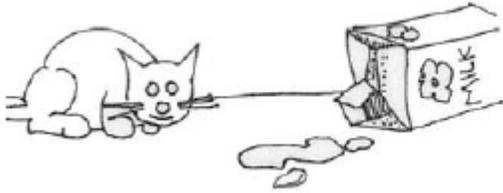
## Non-scaffolded Story

A dad and a boy are going to wash the car.	They are washing the car.	Now they are washing the windows.	The car is clean.
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## Scaffolded Story

A dad and a boy have a hose and a bucket. Their car is dirty. And they want to wash the car. They are going to do that.	The dad has the hose. Water is coming out of the hose. The boy has a sponge. The boy and his dad can clean the car with water and a sponge.	They finished cleaning the outside of the car. Now the boy and his dad can wash the inside. Soon the car will be all clean.	The boy and his dad were cleaning the car. Now they are done. The car is all clean.
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## Mental State Story



<p><b>Easier Syntax:</b>          Here is a cat.          There is some milk.          The cat is looking at the milk.          The cat <b>wants</b> some milk.</p>	<p><b>Easier Syntax:</b>          The cat walked over to the milk.          It is drinking some milk.          The cat <b>likes</b> the milk.</p>
<p><b>More Advanced Syntax:</b>          Here is a cat and next to some milk on          The floor.          The cat is looking at the milk.          The cat <b>is thinking it wants</b> some milk.</p>	<p><b>More Advanced Syntax:</b>          The cat walked over to the milk.          Now the cat can drink some milk.          The cat <b>likes</b> the milk.          It will drink all of the milk.</p>

\*mental state verbs appear in bold print

## Personal Story



I went to the races  
with my family.

Number 3 won.

Then we had French fries.

## Steps for Conducting a Story Lesson and Prompt Hierarchy

Step 1 - The adult places one picture at a time on the table in front of the child and reads three to six sentences related to each picture. When the sentences for a picture are completed, the adult turns that picture face down and goes on to the next pictures. At this step the child just listens to the story.

Step 2 - The adult repeats Step 1, but this time the child imitates each sentence if he or she is working on expanding or strengthening syntactic patterns.

Step 3 - When all of the pictures have been completed, the adult asks the child to retell the story. The pictures are left face down in front of the child.

If the retelling meets criteria, the child is done with this story.

If the retelling does not meet criteria, then the following hierarchy of prompts is offered until the child tells the story on his/her own.

### Prompts

1. Fill-in-the-blank: Step 1 is repeated again; however, this time the adult omits selected key words from the sentences and the child fills them in. This procedure continues to the end of the story and the child is again asked to retell the story.

If the retelling meets criteria, the child is finished with the story. If the retelling does not meet criteria, move on to Prompt 2.

2. Modeling two summaries: The adult reads two slightly different, succinct summaries and again asks the child to tell the story. For students who can read, written summaries can be presented to them; alternatively, stick writing (Ukrainetz, 1998) can be used. Stick writing involves drawing quick sketches with simple stick figures as a means to provide the child with a visual reminder of the story content and sequence.

If the story retelling meets criteria the task is done. If not, move on to Prompt 3.

3. Model one summary: The adult gives one succinct summary and asks the child to retell the story. Again, written or stick writing summaries can be shown to the child.

#### **Visual Scaffolds**

Show the written story text or use stick writing to provide visual support as needed. The visual support is removed for the final retelling of the story.

#### **Mastery**

Practice continues until the child can give a summary without prompts or visual support!

### Criteria for Acceptable Story Retellings

An acceptable story retelling is told in an organized manner in the past tense without any verbal or visual prompts from the adult. It also includes mention of the story characters, event/problem, and outcome. Other necessary features of the story will depend on specific language goals being addressed at the time.

One five year old autistic boy named Bobby was read the scaffolded version of the car washing story from the *Sample Stories* section above. Since Bobby's syntax skills were weak, he was asked to repeat each story sentence in Step 2. When he had some difficulty imitating some of the longer sentences, a procedure called chunking was utilized. Chunking involves having the child first imitate sentence segments and then build toward imitation of the complete sentence. One sentence from the car washing story was chunked in this manner: "The boy and his dad – were washing – the car." Bobby first imitated each segment separately, then the first two segments together, and finally the full sentence. His first retell of the story was not acceptable however after given progressive prompts including viewing the story in stick writing format and practicing the story five times, Bobby produced the following acceptable, independent retelling of the car washing story:

"The dad and his son were washing the car.  
They used a sponge and a hose and they  
got the car clean."

Once a story is successfully retold by the child, it is recommended that the story not be repeated in the lesson but the child can certainly offer recounts of it to others in his or her life. In fact, this is encouraged!

### **Embedding other Goals**

Additional areas that can be addressed in the context of listening to and retelling stories include:

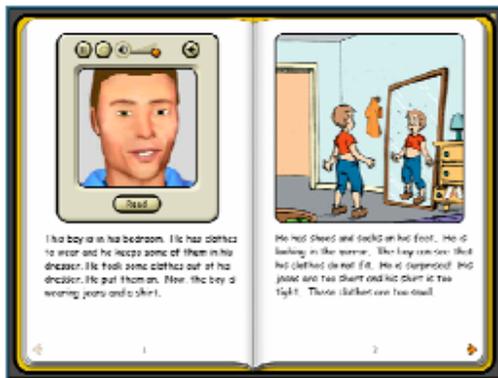
- Syntax - Model expansions of the child's utterances or facilitate use of specific grammatical forms (such as past tense or pronouns) in the context of sentences which are relevant to the story.
- Fluency – Have the child practice telling the story until it is told fluently.
- Vocabulary - Provide definitions of unfamiliar vocabulary and demonstrate use of the new words in sentences.
- Wh-Questions - Ask questions that guide the child to the summary of the story.
- Quality and organization of the story – Facilitate practice of the story until it contains only relevant information in a manner that is clear to the listener.

### **Progression in NBLI**

In NBLI we begin with 2-picture stories and as these are mastered we move on to using 3- and 4-picture stories. Then when children master retelling 4-picture stories independently, we transition them to slightly longer stories that are more

like children’s literature but are still “scaffolded.” One can revise the text from children’s books to include scaffolding or write one’s own longer stories which are scaffolded.

At the Scottish Rite Clinic, when children are ready for longer stories we use a computerized narrative intervention program called “Timo Stories - Launching Literacy” which I developed the content for. The program includes six scaffolded six-picture stories, comprehension questions, story picture sequencing activities, and six vocabulary tasks which center around ten vocabulary words from each story. The vocabulary activities range in level of cognitive difficulty and include object name recognition, comprehension of adjective-noun phrases, word associations, categorization, comprehension of negative statements and verbal reasoning. The stories in this program provide a bridge for moving on to even longer stories in children’s books and videos.



## Quality Indicators

Researchers have identified a set of therapy elements which have been found to be significant contributors to effective intervention. In her book Contextualized Language Intervention (2005), Theresa A. Ukrainetz uses the acronym RISE to highlight these intervention factors:

- **Repeated opportunities**
- **Intensity**
- **Systematic support**
- **Explicit skill focus**

An evaluation of NBLI reveals that these indicators of quality therapy are embedded throughout this intervention approach. For example, in working toward producing an acceptable story summary, a child is given **repeated opportunities** to retell the story in response to **systematic support** in the form of scaffolding and prompts. Interspersed throughout the naturalistic social activity of story sharing are numerous opportunities for practice of **explicit skills** from the child’s

therapy goals (such as correct pronoun usage, use of past tense verbs, production of an organized succinct story summary, etc). At the same time, the process of incorporating practice of these skills into natural interactions is modeled for parents and the child's parents are then encouraged to involve specific skill practice throughout the day during their usual activities. This most important element of repeated practice of skills in the child's daily life provides the **intensity** needed for the intervention to be effective.

## Summary

Narrative skills are crucial for social and academic success and some children need explicit instruction to learn to communicate in narrative forms. At the Scottish Rite Clinic, we have found NBLI to be an effective approach for helping children with complicated language problems gain access to the world of narratives. We have had the opportunity to watch children develop the ability to retell stories, report about personal events, and best of all, come home from school and answer the question, "What did you do at school today?"

To learn more about NBLI, attend a "Coaching Comprehension and Creating Conversation" seminar taught by Lauren Franke through the Orange County Department of Education. For information about this seminar, contact Andrea Walker at (714) 966-4198.

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