

Family Stories: *What, Why, and How*

“Exploring the theme of family stories through trade books provides the catalyst for collecting, writing, and sharing narratives that are personally significant to children—their own life stories” (Buchoff).

Family stories honor the funds of knowledge that children bring with them from their homes and communities: the rich language, expressions, insights, ideas, and love they have absorbed from the people and places around them.

When we make space for children to tell family stories at the beginning of the year, and then periodically throughout the year, we affirm these home and community-based funds of knowledge and engage children in relationship building and literacy learning.

When children hear other children’s family stories, they get to know them better and see them as classmates and friends with whom they have a relationship. When children tell and write their own family stories, they use narrative to construct an identity and learn the power of literacy, speaking, and writing to shape and represent our lives.

Why we tell and write family stories at school. This experience:

- Connects children’s home and school lives in meaningful ways, which recognize the full range of children’s experiences and knowledge.
- Helps build classroom community in authentic, inclusive ways.
- Fosters language and literacy development for a wide range of learners, as children often find narrating their own lives highly motivating and healing, as long as we let them choose what and how to tell their stories and do not insist on children telling family stories if they do not wish to.

- Supports English language learners because the meaningfulness, the familiar vocabulary, and the immediacy of personal narratives often makes such stories “more tellable” than other kinds of stories in speakers’ first and second languages.

Suggestions for telling and writing family stories at school ...

Introduce the concept of family stories:

Use picture books, our own stories, and the stories of guest speakers to model how to tell a family story.

- Read aloud picture books focused on family stories, such as Faith Ringgold’s *Tar Beach* or Carmen Lomas Garza’s *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia*. Talk about the small details and incidents in the pictures and the stories that help us see and understand the story, so that children learn to use such details in their own stories
- Tell brief family stories from our own life, pointing out the phrases and details we used to keep our story going, and encourage children to ask questions about our stories. Invite other adults from the school or the community to tell a family story, so that children see the universality of family stories and the different ways of narrating them.
- Let families know through email or take-home notices that we are telling family stories and encourage them to share or tell family stories with their children at home. And, when possible, invite them into the class to share their stories.

Transition to children telling and writing stories: After we introduce family stories through read alouds and adult storytelling, we begin having children tell family stories to partners, with brief, open-ended prompts, such as, “Let’s tell about something we like doing with our families” or “Let’s tell about something we learned from our families.” Once children have had a chance to tell family stories to partners, we move to small group storytelling and/or the writing of family stories, with time for children to share their writing with the class, and possibly make a whole class book of family stories, which we can periodically read together throughout the year or share with another class.

Let children lead, as appropriate: Remain sensitive to the fact that children living in families experiencing trauma may not want to speak about their life at home or, alternatively, may very much want to do so. Follow the child’s lead, always respecting their needs for narrating or not narrating their lives and helping them to do so in ways that are inclusive and supportive to themselves, their families, and the community as a whole.

How work with family stories supports diversity, equity, and inclusion:

Telling and writing family stories strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion for three reasons:

- They allow children to represent themselves as they wish to be represented.
- They draw on and honor the funds of knowledge children bring with them from their families and communities.
- They let children recognize the diverse experiences and knowledge of their classmates.

Because telling and writing family stories allows us to get to know children in ways that are grounded in their own lives and points of view, they have the potential to foster the growth of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our classrooms. Ultimately, though, it will be the thoughtfulness with which we work with family stories that will determine how well this literacy practice actually support diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Do’s and Don’ts for telling and writing family stories:

Paying attention to a few do’s and don’ts when telling or writing family stories ensures that they are a worthwhile activity.

Do’s

- Encourage children to think of family and family stories broadly—not just about parents and siblings, but about any people who are important to them.
- Show children that there is not one kind of family or one kind of family story, that washing the dishes with an aunt or feeding a cat with a sister is as much a family story as a birthday party or a trip to the park.
- Offer alternative topics, such as writing about an interest, a pet, or times with friends, for children who for whatever reason do not want to write about their families.
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Don’ts

- Don’t make children tell, write, or share a family story if they do not want to for any reason.

Citations and Further Reading

Buchoff, Rita. "Family Stories." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 49, no. 3, 1995, pp. 230-233.

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Lomas Garza, Carmen. *Family Pictures/ Cuadros de Familia*. Children's Book Press, 2015.

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Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*. Dragonfly Books, 1996.

Stuczynski, Amy, et al. "Tapestry of Tales: Stories of Self, Family, and Community Provide Rich Fabric for Learning." *US Department of Education*, 2005.