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To learn, to speak, to grow

By Janane Venkatraman | ENS - CHENNAI | 18th April 2013 08:19 AM

Photos



It's not just storytelling. There are other activities involved too!

Nine-year-old Naresh (name changed) was always a quiet little boy. He loved stories and it didn't matter if he read them or heard them from someone. And he had a very active imagination. But one thing that always worried his mother was his inability to speak up or mingle. He was very shy and had a hard time making friends. "That's when I came upon a storytelling session organised by a bookstore," says his mother Padmaja (name changed). "He loved it, so I took him to more storytelling sessions. And he slowly changed.

Naresh no longer has difficulties making friends. He is still a shy boy, but he now speaks when he wants to and mingles with others confidently. And Padmaja is one among a growing list of parents who see storytelling as a means to get their children to open up and develop, rather than as a simple activity session.

"Quite a few years ago, we had a joint family set up where our grandmothers and grandfathers would tell the children stories. That is missing in today's nuclear families," says Eric Miller, director, World Storytelling Institute. "So these storytelling sessions that happen in kids' schools, day care centres, book clubs and book stores are taking over." Far from being seen as a simple activity to engage the kids and keep them out of the parents' hair, it is now being seen as something that actually helps the child, he says. "It not a time-wasting activity any more," says Eric.

And a storytelling session is no longer just a simple gathering of children who listen to stories. There is singing, there's dancing, there's a bit of interaction among the kids, and some painting and drawing. Some

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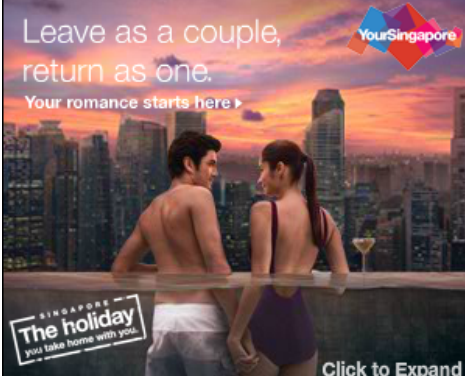
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sessions even have creative writing built into them as an activity that kids can undertake. In between all this, the children are encouraged to speak up and interact. Continued sessions like this slowly chip away at the kids’ reticence and bring their personality to the fore.

And parents understand the changed nature of such storytelling sessions and have come to appreciate it, says Kanupriya Keyal, a storyteller for the past five years and a mother of twins. “I don’t interact much with parents, but I can definitely see a marked change in their attitudes. They know how it can help and the sort of values it can instil in children,” she says.

Gayathri, a school teacher who regularly conducts such sessions in class agrees and adds that it is not only behavioural patterns and introvertism that can be improved upon or changed. “Very young children, like kindergarten kids, can improve their imagination and speaking abilities with storytelling while it is a great activity for children at primary school level to improve their vocabulary and language. It can be used to develop their public speaking abilities too,” she says.

What’s more, some counsellors use storytelling as a means of therapy for children and adults alike, helping them overcome aggressive behaviour or trauma through something as simple as this. “We find that it helps immensely. When you tell a child not to do something, he/she is obviously not going to pay attention. But when you present the idea to them through a story, they will judge for themselves and realise what is right and what isn’t,” says Magdalene Jeyarathnam, director for the Centre for Counselling.

Naresh’s story could be any child’s story. But it is heartening that parents are beginning to realise that something can be done to solve problems such as these which would otherwise be considered minor. Magdalene sums it up the best. “These stories help our kids form personalities. The stories we hear as kids shape us into what we are today. It helps kids heal and at the same time helps process conflicts and issues. And the fact that the parents are waking up to it is simply the best thing that can happen to any child,” she says.

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