

Judith Black -- Program 1

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Program 1—Kids Who Save the Day

This program contains three stories: two full length, and one reminiscence story: a brief remembrance from my own childhood, relating to the topic at hand. In each tale, a child or two children must confound and escape from a life-threatening situation. In the end, the children are able to escape the threat and create a resolution. Adults often find these tales too graphic or actions too extreme for children's ears, and they prefer stories that cloister them from the negativity found in life. However, the child's internal psychology demands this play with danger, their own fears, and life's circumstances, in order for them to grow and master them. When you think about it, what better place than story to invite them to embrace the fullness and depth of their feelings? Within the safe structure of the tale their needs and fears are acknowledged and they experience models for emerging from them with new coping mechanisms and strengths.*

Story 1 – Hansel and Gretel (European Folklore)

This ancient Brothers Grimm tale not only represents a motif found in stories all over the globe, it also addresses vital contemporary issues for young children. As a parent or teacher, you have most likely stood at the door of the preschool or day care center during the first few days of the year and witnessed this scene:

The 4-year-old is wrapped firmly around their parent or caretakers leg and screaming:

Child: I don't want to go in there. No! No! No!

Parent: Honey, it's a very nice place. Really, they have good toys and play dough and...

Child: (*screaming elevates*) No! No! No! Monsters! I'm not going!

Teacher: (*Crouching low to look lovingly into the child's face*) We are so happy you are here. Joey and Sally want you to join them in the block corner...

Child: **No! No!! No!!!** (*now gripping with nails*)

Mother: Honey, I'll be back to get you at noon, on the button. I promise. I'll be right back here...

The truth of the matter is that mommy will be back, but she's going to leave little Margaret here again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, and Margaret is scared. This place looks manageable enough to an adult's eye, but to a 3-, 4-, or 5-year old it looks large, unforgiving, chaotic, and frightening. On top of all that, the person who protects and loves them is leaving them there all alone! Of course they are frightened; some of them even fear being abandoned. (The more chaotic the home environment, the more weighted this possibility.)

Take a second and think about how it feels when you are afraid of something and someone makes light of it. Let's say you don't relish visiting the dentist in any way, shape, or form. On the day of your appointment you are whining about the coming experience, especially the filling you need, and your beloved blithely says: "Oh he's great. It'll be fine." Do you feel reassured, or not heard? What about the day you are going in for a job review with your supervisor and your best friend says "Don't sweat it. Just be yourself. You'll be fine." Does this gesture help you relax, or just notch up your anxiety? As adults, we dislike not being heard and acknowledged, and yet we often fail to listen deeply to our children.

"Oh honey, this is a great place. You'll love it." The child in question probably will love it, eventually, but at this moment they are fearful and anxious. What if something bad happens to them while they are in there? What if mommy forgets to come and pick them up? What if a child is cruel to them, or they get hungry, or they don't know how to ask

about the bathroom, etc...? There are a million worries that may be running through their heads and hearts on these first days of separation. What might best help them?

1. *“Oh sweetie, now stop that. You’re going to have a great time.”* Denying their fears, which for them are very real, will not help them

2. *“Oh honey, you’re just suffering from abandonment anxiety. Once you experience my reappearance 6 or 7 times and are reassured, you will feel better.”*

Literalizing the fear, which is amorphous in the child’s experience, will not help, and instead will often exacerbate the problem.

What you can give this child to successfully ease their anxiety is a story about a child just their age who is not enrolled in a tasteful childcare center or preschool, but left by a truly heartless parent in a witch-infested wood. Their every fear is acknowledged, taken seriously, blown up on the big screen of story, and played out in full, leaving them with a role model for survival.

How will your child adapt to this setting? The same way Hansel and Gretel survived and thrived throughout their ordeal. This brother and sister duo use their wits and their ability to create connection/relationship not only to survive and vanquish the witch, but also to find their way back to a safe and loving home. Far from denying the child their fears, you are acknowledging them and offering a canvas, upon which they can explore, embrace, and master those fears. Isn’t this a better message than “mommy will be back at noon.”? If you find yourself cringing at the thought of a witch that eats children, offer your child this tale along with a softer story about children who get lost coming home and a friendly police officer who helps them. The second tale teaches about citizenship and strategies in today’s world, and this is necessary for them to know. It does not, as Hansel and Gretel will, address the child’s deep fears and offer a path to safety, utilizing personal strengths for survival.

CURRICULUM EXTENSIONS:

Social/Emotional Development:

Invite children (Pre K- Grade 2) to draw a picture representing a time they were lost or thought they were lost. Have them draw a second picture representing how they were found, or found their way back. Have them share these stories in teams of 2 or 3.

Cognitive Development (Sequencing and Recall):

1. Invite the children to draw a storyboard of a time they were lost. Allow two squares to introduce the situation, two or three for the action of getting lost, and two squares to show how the situation was resolved. Then have them use their storyboard to retell the story.

2. Ask children to draw a picture of what they saw at any one point in the story of Hansel and Gretel. As a class, order the pictures on the board (use tape or tacks) in the order they need to appear to represent the story. Invite one or two children to retell the story from the pictures.

(Be sure to acknowledge each child’s individual vision. These pictures can give you a good sense of their listening skills, their imagination, and of any personal experiences or issues might have been reignited by this tale.)

Story 2 – Kennywood

A brief reminiscence of the time I lost my mother at Kennywood, the Pittsburgh Amusement Park, and how I found her again. As a child, losing your parent is frightening and this short tale could easily be used as a springboard for a discussion about strategies for situations that children can use if they ever become lost.

Story 3 – Baba Yaga and Sasha the Youth (Russian Folklore)

Baba Yaga, whose American pseudonym is Old Bony Legs, is the protagonist of many Russian tales. She is the region’s most famous witch, who travels in a mortar and propels herself with a pestle, has among her servants the dawn, the sun, and the moon, and lives

in a hut set atop chicken legs. Like her European counterpart she also eats small children – but only the bad ones – and uses her dark powers only on those who would injure the innocent or destroy the world we live in.

In this tale, young, loud mouthed Sasha, despite being warned against it, cannot resist calling out when Baba Yaga enters the house he shares with the bird and the cat. This act allows the witch to whisk him away to her hut where she plans the evening's menu with Sasha as the centerpiece. Sasha is able to trick the witch and her daughters using the same characteristic that got him into trouble! This wonderful tale serves as a reminder that behaviors deemed inappropriate or out of place in one environment might be the same ones that save your life in another. As a classroom teacher, this might seem like cold comfort when working with physically or verbally precocious children, but it is a message worth remembering nonetheless.

CURRICULUM EXTENSIONS:

Social Studies (grades 3-5):

1. Have students learn all they can about Baba Yaga and draw or paint renditions of her. Invite them to the school library and look for other Baba Yaga or old Bony Legs tales. Make a list of all the characteristics she shares from tale to tale.
2. Find a witch from an American folk tale and one from Africa. Have students learn about and draw these witches. Finally, compare and contrast them. What is similar and what is unique about each one? How do they represent their part of the world?

Cognitive Development (Grades K-2):

Same exercises as above

Social/Emotional Development (K-5th grade):

Ask your students if, like Sasha, there is some behavior that always gets them in trouble. (Play some music during this. The Sorcerer's Apprentice by Paul Dukas would be perfect.) Ask them if, like Sasha, they can imagine this same behavior being useful to them some day. Can they create a story getting them from the behavior causing trouble to the behavior being a great boon? Have them first come up with a situation in which the behavior cause them difficulty and another in which the behavior was quite valuable. You can engineer this in a number of ways:

- Have the children put their heads down on their desks, breathe and focus their energy on the how the behavior gets them in trouble, and then allow their imagination to work like a camera's eye as they make a movie in their mind about what might happen so that they use this same behavior to help themselves or others.
- Have children make a storyboard (A large piece of paper divided into 12 squares) and ask them to draw a scene of a story that takes them from a behavior causing trouble to the same behavior saving the day.
- Have your sensory motor learners do this process through movement; guide them to find a movement that represents the behavior as trouble and to move through a story that ends with that behavior saving the day.
- Have your language-based children do this same exercise with the written word.
- Have you socially interactive students do the activity verbally, working in teams so that there is always a speaker and an audience.

Character Development/Writing Grades 3-5)

Go to the curriculum guides on the web site.

http://www.storiesalive.com/Stories_in_Edu_main.html

Read through Human Sculture. Create a sculpture of Sasha and another of Baba Yaga. Once they are familiar with their many characteristics ask the students, from the vantage point of either Sasha or Baba Yaga, to change the ending of the story.

References:

*For a deeper exploration of this idea, go to:

http://www.storiesalive.com/Education/Edu_articles.html

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