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Using Storytelling to Promote Health Literacy in Children: Employing Self-Regulation as an Effective Coping Skill

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Introduction

Medupin [1] indicates storytelling is a robust pedagogical method for teaching children. The use of various teaching strategies to facilitate child engagement can significantly impact the learning experience. Schoppman et al. [2] revealed that storytelling is an enjoyable activity for young children which can be influenced by interaction style and use of illustrations. While a child may forget the intricate details, they remember the moral of the story. Evidence supports that storytelling is an effective method to promote the attainment of knowledge, to gain insight into situations, and can influence decision making in generation alpha children. A review of literature supports that storytelling assists in expression of emotions, enhances the connection of thoughts to emotions, and fosters children's ability to problem-solve.

Using stories fosters creativity and imagination, molds positive behaviors, and assist children in the regulation of their emotions. In addition, stories are used to garner attention and communicate the life lesson that needs to be learned. "Storytelling brings the teller and audience into a reciprocal process of listening and telling. This form of communication helps listeners to connect what they hear and practice in their own lives" [1,3]. Storytelling can assist children to obtain information from stories and relate the information to real world situations. Schoppmann et al. [2], indicates through storytelling, children can learn, recall information, and embrace positive coping skills and adaptive behaviors. Storytelling expands cognition, encourages social and emotional development, and can transform social behavior in children [2]. Storytelling can be used to enhance health literacy by conveying information in a clear and concise manner.

Keywords: Coping skills; Coping skills and children; Health literacy; Health literacy and children, Self-regulation; Storytelling; Storytelling and children; Self-regulation and children

Promoting Health Literacy

Health literacy is,exceedingly critical in optimizing wellness and mental health outcomes for the vulnerable population of children. "Health literacy can be described as a skill involving knowledge, motivation, and the ability to process information" [4,5]. Low health literacy can lead to mental health disparity and poor outcomes; whereas high health literacy influences healthy decision making, behaviors, and improves a child's ability to process emotions.

Nurse educators can use storytelling to promote health literacy which will contribute to a child's health attitudes and behaviors. A vital role for nurse educators is to strengthen health literacy. Health literacy education could be fostered through the use of storytelling, the teaching of effective coping skills, and integration of emotional self-regulation. For example, the use of study questions following the story, where children can engage in thoughtful dialogue and problem-solving. The promotion of mental health activities for children, is vital in order to reinforce their health literacy. The newly learned skill of health literacy facilitates improvement of well-being. [4]. According to Weir [6], "children who learn to manage their emotions well are more likely to do well in school and get along well with others" (para. 4).

Teaching Self-Regulation and Coping Skills

Evidence-based coping methods should be used in teaching children how to self-regulate their emotions. Rouse [7] defines self-regulation as, “the ability to manage ones emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of the situation” (para. 3). Children who learn self-regulation are able to resist emotional responses when upset, use coping skills to calm down in unexpected situations, and manage frustrating circumstances without a tantrum or emotional outburst. Self-regulation skills enable children to manage their emotions and behavior to achieve goals while still functioning in an unpredictable world [7].

Storytelling provides children an opportunity to learn about emotional self-regulation. Emotional self-regulation involves changing ones emotional state to promote purposeful positive behaviors and attitudes. Nurse educators have a responsibility to play an active role in health literacy for children. Therefore, two nurse educators developed a class as part of a university program, to teach self-regulation for children through the use of positive coping skills.

The Lived Experience of Teaching Children Aged Four to Ten

The program developed by the university was geared toward providing children in the community setting the opportunity to engage in a real-life college experience. The goal was to inspire children to value higher education. University faculty were offered the opportunity to engage with children in providing a unique perspective into various academic disciplines. Following participation, children are awarded with a graduation ceremony and celebration.

The two nurse educators participated in the unique university program. Emotional self-regulation was introduced to children via storytelling. Storytelling was identified as the most effective teaching strategy for the target audience. A children’s book was chosen based upon the concept of worry. The educators read the story to the children, pointing out the illustrations. Interaction was promoted through the use of questions for thought by allowing children to share their feelings and self-reflect on their perceived “worries”. Varied coping skills were introduced and demonstrated. Some examples included: completion of a children’s mindfulness worksheet, rainbow and belly breathing, self-regulation and positive self-talk, progressive muscle relaxation, and a melting guided-meditation strategy. Children also participated in a drawing and coloring activity focused on the story character, while educators posed questions on the moral of the story and lessons learned. Additionally, the children were provided with a stress ball and instruction on the proper use of the stress ball for emotional regulation. The final activity included using bubbles where children envisioned their worries in a bubble and then blew their worries away.

In conclusion, active learning and engagement using storytelling is valuable in the community setting. Literature supports this form of engagement provides children increased control over their emotions and behavior in the environment, enhances well-being, and fosters effective problem-solving. Positive coping skills can facilitate change in children’s attitudes and actions, provide insight into emotions all while promoting healthy decision making [1].

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