

Wellness - You Telling Tales!

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Should you open up the world of fantasy for your child early enough or wait until the young mind can tell the difference from real and make-believe?

By **Ruth Dsouza**

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How will today's children learn to live in their own world when all they read about are heroes who have magical powers to fight evil forces?" asked Sandipan Deb, ex-editor of Open, the magazine. "Do children read anything else anymore? No. Their heads are inhabited completely by worlds unlike the one they live in," he wrote. While some question: "Is it so wrong for a child to live in a fantasy world? Wouldn't that help them be more creative?" The debate rages on.



What makes the dispute remarkable is that now it is being argued by two schools of thought: The Montessori, which has always prided itself in sighting and nurturing the creative potential in children and the traditional educators who believe that there is nothing wrong in rote learning. While the former believe the children should not be introduced to fantasy stories the latter says there is nothing wrong with it.

Prathima

Directoress, Sprouts Montessori, House of Children

The belief: The Montessori style of teaching believes that children between two and nine years of age should not be introduced to fantasy stories because of the contradictions it can create when a child realises that fantasy is in fact not reality.

The reasoning: Children start getting aware of their surroundings when they are around two years old. Minds at such young ages are very impressionable and they tend to believe everything they are told to be reality. If you were to read a book that says a dog spoke to its owner, the next time your toddler sees a dog, she will want it to start talking and will be a confused as to why it is not happening. The same goes with concepts like Superman and other super heroes. Human beings cannot fly and super human acts don't happen. Once a child believes that such things are possible, getting that child to conform to reality can be a difficult task. The same goes for when child is viewing a cartoon like Tom & Jerry. Cats and mice don't act like that in real life, but children don't really understand that difference. The Montessori system of teaching does not ban fantasy completely, but rather says that it should be introduced around nine years of age when a child is able to distinguish between reality and fantasy. A child who has been brought up on a diet of fantasy will be faced with a lot of contradiction when he/she realises that you cannot be as strong as Superman even if you have all your milk.

Staying grounded: The best kind of stories, believes Prathima, as does the Montessori style of teaching, are the practical ones. Parents need to be a little more proactive for this and will need to have infinite patience. There is a story in every situation in life. For example, on an evening out in the park, you can create a story of bonding with friends related to all your child's companions.

You could take out an old album of a picnic or a wedding and show to your child people she recognises and create a story out of the event she sees. Children are better able to relate to people they know. Moral stories too can be created in much the same way.

A question that may arise at this point is what about mythological stories that we have grown up on and teach our children. What we can do is teach our children the relationships that are in these stories and perhaps the morals that come out of it. When they reach the age of nine and are able to comprehend the difference, then the mythological and magical concepts can be introduced.

Geetha Ramanujam

Director, Kathalaya, the only academy globally for storytelling

The belief: The Steiner-Waldorf method of teaching lays emphasis on the role of imagination when it comes to learning and children. And therefore fantasy stories are believed to be a must for young minds.

The reasoning: Fantasy is believed to be the main foundation on which the imagination grows. It involves a suspension of belief — where we tend to believe in fantasy despite knowing it not to be true. This is a trait that children are born with, believes Geetha. She believes that the imagination has to grow with a child as though on a parallel railway track. The Montessori style of teaching says that fantasy stories can affect a child, if the child begins to live constantly in its world. However, children do have the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. The stories of the Panchatantra have central characters revolving around animals that speak. In the Ramayana, Ravana is referred to as having 10 heads. Children do understand that this does not happen in real life and that these descriptions are merely representational. It's a convenient and fun way to interpret things. Children largely believe that ghosts don't exist, but there is a thrill in listening to stories about them.

Taking flight: Every child has an imagination that needs to evolve as a child grows. That should not be curbed in the growing years. There is something exciting about the fish who could talk, the birds who could swim and the boy who could fly. It helps the child relax and allows his imagination to grow.

Before you cast a spell

Children often confuse fact and fantasy, so it is important for adults to keep in mind certain points while telling stories. Child psychologist Dr Sulata Shenoy offers these:

- » Inform the child that you are going to tell a 'story'. Start the story with an opening that indicates that it is not a fact, such as 'Once upon a time...'
- » Keep storytelling sessions special, for example, at bedtime, to give it that flavour of fantasy.
- » If the child asks whether the story is true or not, be truthful and do not say it is a fact. If the child asks whether witches, fairies or ogres exist, say no, but that people generally like to believe it as it personifies good and evil forces in the world.
- » All children enjoy stories, and narrating it with as many embellishments as possible. All the details that children love should make storytelling a thoroughly enjoyable activity for both child and adult.
- » Having story books with lots of pictures to fire the child's imagination are useful.

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