PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Question: What are personal narratives and why are they important?

Answer: Dr Carol Westby (USA)

Personal narratives are the stories we tell ourselves about our own experiences. They depend on our autobiographical memories – memories of the who, where, when, and the emotions associated with the experiences (Westby & Culatta, 2016). Children develop autobiographical memory and the ability to tell personal narratives during their preschool years by reminiscing with caregivers about shared experiences (Reese, 2013). Adult reminiscing with children contributes not only to children's ability to tell coherent personal narratives, but also coherent fictional narratives – which are highly correlated with academic success. Coherent narratives require understanding of temporal and causal relationships. During elementary school years, children learn to tell coherent stories about themselves by sequencing activities occurring in single experiences. Adolescents begin to tell their life stories, sequencing a series of events over time and explaining the reasons for their actions.

It is through sharing our personal stories that we establish and maintain social relationships. Telling coherent stories about our experiences is a way of making sense of the experiences and coming to understand who we are (Fivush, 2019). Through telling personal narratives children and adolescents develop a sense of their identity over time; and a sense of identity contributes to psychological well-being, even if one has had some bad experiences. We use our personal narratives about past experiences to guide our future behavior. We think, "I won't do that again." or "The next time I'll plan ahead and give myself more time." If persons cannot tell coherent stories about their experiences, they are likely to have difficulty regulating their own behavior. They may think events just happen to them by chance; they are unaware that is some instances they can have a role in or responsibility for the outcomes of events. We can use personal narratives of our past experiences to plan strategies to achieve future goals. Assessment of children's narrative skills should consider their competency in telling both fictional and personal narratives. Coherence of their fictional narratives predicts their academic performance Griffin et al., 2004); coherence of their personal narratives predicts their psychological well-being (Fivush et al., 2010).

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Question: What abilities and skills does the child need in order to tell a coherent personal narrative?

Answer: Dr Khaloob Kawar (Israel)

Narration requires an integration of linguistic skills, cognitive skills, literacy, world knowledge and awareness of the listener's knowledge in order to produce a semantically coherent and a linguistically cohesive message with all narrative components. The narrator needs to focus on the events, making use of working memory to activate and retrieve knowledge related to the story in order to interpret the narrated events and organize these interpretations into a text (Trabasso & Stein, 1994). In addition, the narrator needs cognitive knowledge of temporal and cause-effect relationships as well as 'theory of mind' (Kawar, Walters & Fine, 2019; Stadler & Ward, 2005). Elementary school children should tell personal event narratives that are coherent in terms of a concept of biography (what should be put into a personal story) and temporal coherence (reporting a logical temporal sequence of events). Adolescents should tell life stories that are coherent not only in terms of a concept of biography and temporal coherence, but also in terms of causal coherence (making connections between events and one's needs, goals, or personality) and thematic coherence (seeing similarities in one's experiences) (Habermus & Bluck, 2000).

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Question: At what age do we expect children to tell a whole structured narrative about a personal experience?

Answer: Dr Khaloob Kawar (Israel)

Narrative is a discourse type that influences and is influenced by communication skills and written language, involving academic, cognitive, pragmatic, psycholinguistic abilities and social skills. Narratives develop from a description of individual events, to a chronological sequence of events, and then to a prototypical narrative structure, in other words "the classic pattern" of narrative. The acquisition of narrative abilities differs across languages, cultural background and ethnic groups (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Kawar, Walters & Fine, 2019).

The development of narratives has been shown to begin at about age two. At age two, children begin to talk about past events. Three and four year olds, children talk about one or more events and use structural narrative components of information setting, events, complications and endings or outcomes. However, their narratives are generally vague and the events are not linked across the narrative (Berman & Slobin, 1994). At age four, the most common narrative structures found were either 'leap-frog' narratives, in which children jump from one event to another and omit significant events, or 'chronological' narratives, in which they provide simple recounts of major events. Five to seven year olds pay more attention to general story organization. Their narratives include information about place, time and characters, and they show abilities to understand basic emotions and intentions. At age six, children mainly use the classic narrative pattern, which is built around a high point and after evaluating it, the narrator resolves it (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Eight and nine year old children use larger and more varied use of evaluation methods as well as appropriate cohesion devices (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Berman & Slobin, 1994). Around age ten to eleven, stories become more complex, more detailed and structurally coherent. Narrative continues to develop through adolescence and even into adulthood.

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