

How to Make Story Time Educational

As parents, educators, and caregivers, I think we are always looking for teachable moments with our kids. I also think most would agree that one of the most important roles adults play in the lives of children is that of a teacher.

We talk to our children about safety before they ride their bikes or go swimming, teaching them the rules. We talk to our children about the importance of studying and doing their homework, teaching them responsibility. We have deliberate conversations with our kids about manners and kindness, teaching them respect. When children are a part of our lives, it is necessary to have these kinds of intentional, teachable moments.

The beauty about making stories a part of kids' lives is that teachable moments can happen in ways that are unplanned and natural. Unlike a classroom setting, during story times at home, we don't sit down and say, "Today we are going to read this story and learn all about character traits." Instead, we store a working knowledge of the things we CAN teach while reading and telling stories. Then, we train ourselves to become aware of natural openings during story times and use those moments as a time to teach.

Here are some of the things we can teach during story times with our children and how to look for "natural" openings:

1) **Comprehension.** To do this, we need to be aware of some elements that are a part of stories such as: characters, setting, plot, outcomes, predictions, conflicts, resolutions, etc. Here are some of the questions we can ask while reading or telling a story:

- Why do you think this character feels sad?
- Who is your favorite character and why?
- What do you think will happen next?
- What season is it? How can you tell?

I ask these types of questions if the story I am reading or telling has obvious answers to these questions (this is an example of how you look for natural openings for teaching moments). For instance, if the story has several characters in it, I would ask "what character is your favorite and why?" If the story is obviously set in the winter, for example, I would ask, "what season is it and how can you

tell?” If the story has a very strong plot, I would ask, “what do you think will happen next and why?”

Of course we have to keep in mind the age and grade level of children when asking these questions. If kids are very young, simplify the questions by eliminating “why.” If kids are older make the questions more complex by asking “why” or for some “proof” of their answer.

It’s also important to note not to make story time at home a “big” educational session. I usually just ask one of the above questions during the actual story. Then at the end, we usually talk a little more about it. It’s important to keep BALANCE in mind; we want children to always enjoy story time and not make them feel like they are being quizzed. So, **ask questions in a way that communicates we care what they think**...not in a way that sounds like we are quizzing them.

- 2) **Reading Skills.** Obviously this kind of teaching would occur when we are using books to tell stories. And again, we have to keep in mind the age and the grade level of kids. When children are very young, we can have them identify letters throughout the story. The next step would be to have them read a word every couple of pages; next, when they are ready, we can have them read a sentence, and finally, they could read a page when they are equipped to do so. Like any other component I have talked about in regard to stories with children, we have to be able to “read” children in order to maintain a positive story time atmosphere. We do not want them to become frustrated with story time. For example, if they are struggling (and frustrated) with reading an entire page, just have them read a sentence on each page.
- 3) **Life lessons.** Seems to me, most stories teach some sort of life lesson. They teach everything from easing fears about the dentist to the importance of taking turns and sharing. Do not ignore the lesson stories teach. Do not rush story time. Take the opportunity to talk a little bit about what the story taught and how it applies to kids’ lives—so important! Let me say it again, take the time to talk about the lesson taught and how it applies to kids’ lives! Our conversations may only last a couple of minutes or they may last 20. Again, follow kids’ leads. They may ask all sorts of questions or they may just listen. And remember not to make the discussion a “quizzing” session; it’s a discussion. As the adults, we must take the lead and make it a positive one!

Do not forget about BALANCE. We absolutely do not have to teach reading skills, story elements, and a life lesson all for one story session. Actually, I would NOT recommend this—unless children are VERY engaged in all of these things during a session, only pick a couple of things to “educate” them about. This is why it’s important to be able to read children and pick up on their cues. We want them to enjoy story time. Therefore, for one session we may only ask them to read a sentence every couple of pages and then at the end ask them who their favorite character was. Or, another example could be that we may read the entire story out loud to our children and ask a couple of questions throughout the story and discuss the lesson it taught at the end.

Just remember...it’s most important to ensure story time with our children is a FUN experience!!