

Storytelling Supplement

Adapting Stories for Your Family

A member asked a really good question about the following story today. She asked:

"I printed out my August curriculum yesterday and was browsing through. I know the Belladonna Berries story would probably scare my sensitive 5 yo and I thought maybe it is supposed to scare him since we don't want our kids thinking they can eat anything- so a healthy fear may be necessary..."

This brings to light an important point I need to make with all the stories and verses in my curriculum as well as in other curriculum -

Above all you need to choose stories that are suitable to the style of your family and if they are not suitable you need to adapt them. I can think of many examples where this may be needed and many examples where the style of one family may not fit the style of another.

A second example is a math poem I wrote (one of the ten "Math Poems"). In one of the poems I talk about a brother teasing his brother and thinking he is annoying. The poem is meant to be humorous and because we often joke about such things my kids "get" the humor. We also often talk about the temperaments and how sometimes someone seems like they are "annoying" but they are really just a different temperament. Because of the entire mood we have and the other things we talk about this is suitable for us. However, someone else may need to go through the poem and change four or five words to make the poem less critical of the brother.

In a third example, the Grimm's fairy-tales that are very popular with Waldorf schools (and are included as choices among other fairy-tales in the Earthschooling curriculum) could be very traumatic for some children. I could not read them to my first child without changing the ending. I would change every "death" to a "sickness" and every trauma to a lesser trauma. However, my third child LOVED the Grimm's tales with enthusiasm. Her favorite one was about a Juniper Tree and how the child was chopped up and put under the tree and....well, you get the idea. I was pretty horrified reading it to her but she had discovered it one day and read most of it to herself and insisted she loved it and had me read it over and over. She has grown to be a wonderful, caring, sweet and compassionate child who does not like violence at all so I would have to say, along with choosing what is suitable to your family, it is also possible that what is suitable for one child may not be suitable for another.

It is you, as the parent, that needs to choose.

One reason I have provided so many choices (there are always more stories than you need each month) is so you can choose the stories most suitable to you.

Another important point to remember about Waldorf education is that the parent needs to TELL the story and not read it. A lot of people think this is only so it is more enjoyable, so it is more authentic, so it has more educational benefits and so on. However, one main reason the teacher TELLS the story is so she can adapt it to her class. If you are telling a fairy-tale from Germany and all the kids have names like "Hans" and "Gretel" but you live in a culture where everyone is named "Serjito" and "Maria" you might consider changing the names as well as the places in the story (unless the reason you are telling the story is to expose them to German culture).

I have provided stories from around the world for you to tell. Remember - Steiner's original curriculum was German because his students were from Germany. However, he specifically said that the teacher

must adapt the curriculum and stories to the culture of the child. This includes the ethnic, religious and spiritual culture of the child.

As you read through a story to tell it to your class feel free to cross out words, substitute names and change the places altogether. Create stories that fit the culture, location, language and mood of your own home.

If you never talk about death in your home then Grimm's tales, The German Struvvelpeter verses or the tale below are going to scare your child. You could change the story below to where the child is ill for a week and cannot play or see his friends. That would have been enough to make my older daughter say “wow! That is horrible!”

When you are choosing and telling a story remember to look at why you are telling it and feel free to change it to the language your child will best understand. It is the message and not the authentic story that is important and each family, as well as each child, has their own language.

In the following story I would make the following changes for my family (what you do for your family may be different):

1. I would tell the story as if “I heard this from a friend” or “I read this in the news” because we often tell stories like that and it would be a familiar way to relate the story to them. I would not tell the story as if it were in a village and happened to someone else. That would take the message too far for my children.
2. I would change the name Louis to Luke and Simon to Sam because the name would just cause too much distraction for my third child who loves to talk about different names. I would want her to focus on the story and not on the names in the story.
3. I would keep the death at the end the same for my third child. She tends to go out and harvest every herb she can and I worry about her. She is also the child that loves Grimm's fairy-tales. She needs to hear dramatic things to get it through to her because she is choleric and all about the drama. For my second child I would change the story to “the child who ate the berries was so ill he could not even read books for a week. He laid in bed and had to stare at the ceiling.” For my second child, this would be “worse than death” LOL ;)
4. I would do a nature walk after this story and show my children all the small round berries and talk about how those are not too eat. The only safe berries to eat are the “aggregate” berries – the ones that are all bumpy and bunchy like blackberries or raspberries.

Belladonna Berries

Bad news was circulating from house to house in the village. Here is what they were saying: That day they had put little Louis into his first trousers. They had pockets and shiny buttons. In his new costume Louis was a little awkward, but much pleased. He admired the buttons that shone in the sun; he kept turning his pockets inside out to see if there was room enough for all his playthings. What made him the happiest was a tin watch, always marking the same hour. His brother, Joseph, two years older, was also much pleased. Now that Louis was dressed like him, nothing prevented his taking him to the woods, where there were birds' nests and strawberries. They owned in common a lamb whiter than snow, with a pretty little bell at its neck. The two brothers were to take it to the meadow. Some lunch was packed in a basket. They kissed their mother, who advised them not to go far. "Take care of your brother," said she to Joseph; "hold him by the hand and come back soon." They started. Joseph carried

the basket, Louis led the lamb. From the door their mother watched them going off, herself happy in their joy. Every now and then the children turned to smile at her; then they disappeared at the turn of the path.

They reach the meadow. The lamb frolics on the grass; Joseph and Louis run after butterflies in the midst of a clump of tall trees.

"Oh, the beautiful cherries!" exclaimed Louis, suddenly; "see how big and black they are! Cherries, cherries! We are going to have a feast. Let us pick some to eat."

There were, in fact, some large berries of a dark violet hue on low plants.

"How small these cherry-trees are!" answered Joseph. "I have never seen any like them. We shan't have to climb the tree for them, and you won't tear your new trousers."

Louis picked one of the berries and put it into his mouth. It was insipid and sweetish.

"These cherries are not ripe," says little Louis, spitting it out.

"Take this one," answers Joseph, giving him one that felt very soft. "It is ripe."

Louis tastes it and spits it out.

"No, they are not at all good," repeats the little boy.

"Not good, not good?" says Joseph; "you will see." He eats one, then another, then another still, then a fourth, then a fifth. At the sixth he is obliged to stop. Decidedly they were not good.

"It is true, they are not very ripe. But let's pick some, all the same. We'll let them ripen in the basket."

They gathered a handful or two of these black berries, then began running after butterflies. The cherries were forgotten.

An hour later, Simon, who was returning from the mill with his donkey, found two little children seated at the foot of the hedge, crying aloud and clasping each other. At their feet a lamb was lying and bleating plaintively. And the younger was saying to the other: "Joseph, get up; we will go home." The elder tried to rise, but his legs, seized with a convulsive trembling, could not support him. "Joseph, Joseph, speak to me," said the poor little one; "speak to me." And Joseph, his teeth chattering, looked at his brother with eyes so big they frightened him. "There is one more apple in the basket; would you like it? I will give you all of it," went on the little fellow, his cheeks bathed in tears. And the elder trembled and then became rigid, by fits and starts, and stared fixedly with eyes growing ever larger and larger.

It was then that Simon passed. He put the two children on the donkey, took the basket, and, followed by the lamb, hastened to the village.

When the unhappy mother saw Joseph, her dear Joseph, so well a few hours before, so rejoiced at taking his brother for a walk, and now unconscious, dying, it was a scene to melt the heart. "My God, my God!" cried she, crazed with grief, "take me and leave my son! Oh, my Joseph! Oh, my poor Joseph!" And, covering him with kisses, she burst into cries of despair.

The doctor was summoned; the basket in which were still some of the black berries mistaken for cherries explained to him the cause of the sad event. "Deadly nightshade, great God!" he exclaimed under under his breath. "Alas! It is too late." Broken-hearted, he ordered a potion, the efficacy of which he could not count on, for the poison had made irreparable progress. And, in fact, an hour later, while the mother, on her knees at the foot of the bed, was praying and weeping, a little hand was stretched out from under the coverings and placed all cold in hers. It was the last good-by: Joseph was dead.

The next day they buried the poor little one. The whole village attended the funeral. Emile and Jules returned from the cemetery so sad that for several days they did not think of asking their uncle the cause of this lamentable accident.

Since then, in the house of mourning, little Louis stops playing every now and then and begins to cry, despite his beautiful tin watch. He has been told that Joseph has gone far away and that he will come back some day. "Mother," he says sometimes, "when will Joseph come back? I am tired of playing alone." His mother kisses him and, covering her face with a corner of her apron, sheds hot tears. "Don't you love Joseph any more, and is that why you cry when I speak of him?" asks the poor little innocent. And his mother, overwhelmed, tries in vain to stifle her sobs.