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**Mother-Child Interactions during Oral
Storytelling**

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of time, people have been telling stories, using them as a way to understand their world. Groups of people would sit around the campfire and listen to the storyteller sharing tales, some shrouded in mystery, some offering guidance, healing, and others, entertainment. The storyteller and listeners participated in an experience that connected them to family, tribe, and nation through the past and the present and going into the future (Gersie & King, 1990). Researchers believe that these stories and legends had many functions, among them, to transmit cultural and familial history, the expression of feelings, personal information and to communicate values and knowledge (Curenton, 2006; Hughes, 1995; Brems, 1993; Aurela, 1987; Pellowski, 1977). In this vein, Reissa (1989) proposed that oral storytelling, as a family activity, contributes to building family meaning and to understanding the social world.

A review of the literature to date indicates that research in the field of oral storytelling has focused on contexts that are cultural (Golomb, 2011; Glimps, Simon & Ashton, 1995) and psychological (Cook, Taylor & Silverman, 2004; Fiese, et al., 1995; Brems, 1993; Bettelheim, 1977). In the educational context, research in the area of literacy focused mainly on differences in socioeconomic status such that the oral story is found to compensate for the absence of a literate environment among disadvantaged families (Malo & Bullard, 2000). Likewise, storytelling is used as a research tool for examining parent-child relations (Branski, 1999). Hence, to date, the storytelling interaction itself, in its natural context, has not yet been examined – this, with the intention of identifying various facets that emerge as a consequence of its very existence. This being the case, the main goal of the present study was to characterize the interactions of oral stories as told in the day-to-day context of the family. To this end, the interactions of eight mothers with their three-to-five year old children were video-taped during shared storytelling activity. Moreover, interviews with the mothers were conducted about their beliefs and perceptions of the use of stories of this type in their parenting context. The

interviews included a recalled portion during which the mothers viewed selected clips of their interactions.

The research data were reproduced and analyzed according to the grounded theory approach. In this framework, the researcher enters the field with general research questions and the theory is constructed inductively, through data gathering and analysis (Ben Yehoshua, 2001; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Hutchinson, 1988). During the data analysis process, a search for recurring central themes was conducted by describing and characterizing them (Gibton, 2001). Analysis of the observations and the interviews gave rise to seven themes that included sub-themes from which they were comprised: (1) the story as a tool with educational implications (sub-themes: abstract educational content, educational behavioral content); (2) the story as a communication tool (sub-themes: communication, partnership); (3) the story as a tool with emotional implications (sub themes: processing emotions, a secure foundation; conditional regard); (4) the story as connecting between different worlds (sub-themes: similarity and difference, seeing and being seen) (5) intimacy (sub-themes: intimacy in content and interaction, personal space for the child); (6) creativity (sub-themes: in content and in execution); and, (7) intergenerational transmission.

The stories, as documented and analyzed in this research study, drew a picture of a unique and reciprocal interaction with significant intrinsic socialization processes. The themes of “the story as an educational tool,” “a communication tool,” and “an emotional tool” demonstrated how mothers wove educational, behavioral, emotional, and communication lessons into the stories, which reflected beliefs, values and tradition, and as such, actually transformed the story into a parental strategy for socialization. During these processes, the children were active, expressed their desires, asked questions and occasionally even led the interaction. The “connecting between different worlds” theme demonstrated the complexity of the socialization process when an exceptional encounter occurs between the mother’s world and that of the child, pointing up the similarities and differences between them. The “intimacy” and “creativity” themes showed the special atmosphere that this interaction produces, which is characterized by a shared enjoyment attributable to the special time devoted to the mother-child relationship that brings its inherent creativity to the fore. Finally, the theme of “intergenerational

transmission,” which revealed mothers’ tendencies to tell stories, reinforced the idea of storytelling as an example of the way these socialization processes continue and are transferred from generation to generation.

The discussion describes the research results as applied to the various dimensions of Grusec & Davidov’s (2010) theoretical model of socialization. The model holds an inclusive perspective of socialization and incorporates different approaches (to socialization) within five distinct dimensions: protection, reciprocity, control, guided learning and group participation. Each dimension reflects a unique process of interaction between key socializing agents (generally, parents) and the child, during which skills and separate socio-emotional propensities are acquired. Integration between the dimensions reflects the different sides of the parent-child relationship with each dimension providing the child with a different opportunity to learn about his/her social world and to develop the competencies needed for his/her acclimation. The different dimensions are manifested in each of the themes found in the present study, while the theme of “creativity” runs through them all and reflects the way socialization processes take place during the interaction.

A significant variable revealed by the current study and which reinforces socialization processes and turns storytelling into a tool for parents is **parental awareness** of the possibilities inherent in interaction of this type. The mothers who participated in the study differed from one another in the level of awareness they exhibited as to the significance of the storytelling interaction – beyond its existence on the present day-to-day level. Since use of storytelling as a distinct tool with a defined purpose generally takes place within a therapeutic framework (Cook, Taylor & Silverman, 2004; Painter, Cook & Silverman, 1999), the novel application proposed in light of this study’s results is to make the idea of storytelling accessible to diverse populations of parents – as a tool designed to promote different socialization goals and to aid in the task of coping with routine parental tasks. This can be carried out through training adapted to the diverse needs of parents and children, in line with their own cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the component of parental awareness, found in the study, and its absence in the existing theoretical model of socialization attests to the necessity of expanding theoretical knowledge

on this score in order to understand its contribution to socialization processes that occur within the family framework.