Narrative Coherence

Telling *stories that don’t make sense?*

Is your child:

- Telling stories that start, “Once upon a time” and end… “wait what?”
- Done reading a book but struggling to tell you about it?
- Telling odd stories that don’t make any sense?
- Forgetting to tell you who he is talking about?
- Starting in the middle of a conversation? For example, ‘Then he ran away.’ You are left asking, ‘Who? Where?’
- If you ask your child what happened at the birthday party, does she tell you a story that seems very unlikely? For example, “we jumped off a roller coaster!”
- Providing the details in a story but forgetting to tell the characters, plot, and main idea?

**LET’S TALK ABOUT IT**

Many children have difficulty telling stories that makes sense. This ability is what psychologists refer to as ‘narrative coherence.’ A child with good narrative coherence could tell you about a sleepover at a friend’s house, a movie she saw, or a book she read. A child with poor skills in this area tends to start stories in the middle. For example, “he was all alone, and someone was chasing him.” As a parent you might find yourself asking, “Wait, was this in a movie? Was this a video game?” Your child may
add dialogue to the story that seems like something your child wouldn’t typically say. For example, “And he was on the edge of his seat as the man walked away in haste.” As a parent you might be wondering, “did you take that from a movie, or did this really happen?” Children with poor narrative coherence tend to have a very hard time telling you the order in which things happened. The story may involve a lot of details, but nothing may seem to fit together.

**CLINICAL DESCRIPTION**

Clinically, narrative coherence is a skill needed for language development and social development. Children tell stories to each other all the time. In school, students are often asked to retell a story they have read. When writing a story in school, particularly with a creative writing assignment, narrative coherence is important. It is very difficult to write well when the child struggles to say stories aloud.

Generally, children who struggle with narrative coherence need to work on the following comprehension and expressive skills:

**Characters**: Identify and describe characters.

**Actions**: Explain what the important people in the story did, or what happened to them (the verbs).

**Sequence**: Put events of the story in a logical order. Problems with sequencing are generally the first sign a child is struggling with narrative coherence.

**Perspectives**: Identify what the characters are thinking or feeling.

**Main Idea**: Describe the most important events of the story, and make it clear that this idea is the main idea of the story.

**Integrative Statement**: Put it all together at the end, with either a moral of the story or a meaningful conclusion.

Children who struggle with storytelling are generally far behind their peers on many of these skills. Storytelling has both a receptive and an expressive component. Your child needs to understand (comprehend) as stories are read to him or her; this ability is the receptive part. Children also need to know how to retell or to make up their own stories that make sense; this ability is the expressive part. If either skill is lacking, it is very likely that academic concerns will be present. Perspective taking is another aspect of storytelling; a child with difficulty in perspective taking would not realize that the listener wouldn’t know who the child was talking about in his stories. He might say, “Mimi is the meanest person in the world.” The child fails to tell you who Mimi is. The child might say, “Do you know what a Lego is?” Well, of course you have no idea who Mimi is, but of course you have heard of Legos. This child is providing too much information or not enough. This tendency is a sign that your child does not have the perspective taking
skills necessary to tell a coherent story that the listener can relate to and can understand.

**WHAT TO DO**

If your child’s problems with storytelling are fairly significant, it may be that a disorder is present. Children with autism, even very high-functioning autism, tend to struggle with narrative coherence. Generally, they have a harder time comprehending stories and retelling stories. Children with autism often can provide some characters and the actions that the characters did. They tend to struggle with sequencing, perspectives, main idea, and integrative statements.

It also could be a receptive or expressive language disorder. Children with receptive language problems do not comprehend stories well. They may struggle to put together a logical sequence in their minds as they hear stories. Children who have stronger receptive language skills can ‘make movies in their heads’ as they read. However, children with weaker comprehension may hear the words without being able to make a picture in their minds, that is, a mental representation of the text. If your child is struggling significantly with storytelling, it may be worthwhile to have an evaluation in consideration of autism, expressive language or receptive language. Children with dyslexia tend to have much better comprehension relative to their difficulties with accurately reading words (decoding). Children with ‘hyperlexia’ tend to be able to decode words but cannot comprehend much of what they read. Hyperlexia is not an official diagnosis; it is a term often used when a child is able to read almost anything.

If problems are not as significant, some strategies can be helpful at home and at school. When reading something new, ask your child this question, “What are you picturing?” Require your child to be very clear in describing his or her mental picture. Your child should be able to tell you about what the characters look like, what the setting looks like, and any emotional tone of the story. As listed above, you would want your child to be able to describe the following to you: characters, actions, sequence, perspectives, main idea, and integrative statements. She may be able to draw a picture of the story or to write a ‘thought bubble’ for each character to describe what people in the story are thinking or doing.

**SIMILAR SYMPTOMS**

If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- **Auditory processing**: children with poor abilities to understand the sounds within words may struggle to comprehend and tell stories
• **Intelligence**: children with limited intellectual functioning may struggle with story telling

• **Social skills (Socializing)**: children who struggle with story-telling may have trouble in social communication

• **Expressive language**: children who struggle with story-telling may have challenges with the general ability to express their thoughts and ideas

• **Receptive language**: children with poor receptive skills may struggle with the ability to comprehend and retell stories

### POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

Children who have significant problems in this area may have any of the following potential disabilities.*Note, this information does not serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the ‘Where to Go for Help’ section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder**: deficits in social communication and restricted interests or behaviors. Often, there are problems with comprehension, even if high IQ
- **Intellectual Disability**: deficits in cognitive ability; individuals with low IQ scores often have difficulties with verbal comprehension, particularly for more abstract information
- **Expressive or Receptive Language Disorder**: deficits in language comprehension or expression

### WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- **CLEAR Child Psychology**: to obtain a customized profile of concerns for your child or to consult ‘live’ with the licensed psychologists and other professionals who authored these articles
- **Psychologist or Neuropsychologist**: to consider symptoms in mental health context and provide treatment for social or psychological problems
- **School Psychologist**: to test IQ and to consider academic impact

Psychologists may recommend or administer the following IQ tests for this symptom:

- **KABC-II**: test of intelligence for children
- **DAS-II**: test of intelligence for preschool age and older children
- **WISC-V**: test of intelligence for children
- **SB-5**: test of intelligence for children
Learning specialists, special education teachers, or psychologists may administer academic tests such as:

- **WIAT-III**: Wechsler test of achievement
- **Woodcock Johnson-IV**: test of achievement
- **GORT-5**: diagnostic reading test
- **TOWL**: test of written language

**LEARN MORE**


Link: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260117213_Narrative_Performance_of_Optimal_Outcome_Children_and_Adolescents_with_a_History_of_an_Autism_Spectrum_Disorder_ASD](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260117213_Narrative_Performance_of_Optimal_Outcome_Children_and_Adolescents_with_a_History_of_an_Autism_Spectrum_Disorder_ASD)


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