

Surrounded by stories

By HELEN MILROY*

Storytelling is an integral part of life and learning. It has been used in Aboriginal cultures for many thousands of years as a way of passing down knowledge and building healthy brains.

Storytelling is also more than child's play.

It is an effective form of lifelong learning including in our older years and helps protect us from the effects of aging on our memory systems.

Storytelling can also take on many forms from simple language or illustrated stories, to dramatic theatre or music. It promotes imagination and makes anything possible.

It can instil hope in a way that makes it real.

Storytelling can help us see things from a different perspective. Acting out stories helps us to see through the eyes of others while paying a part but best of all, it can be a lot of fun! This is the magic of stories.

Indigenous storytelling locates the reader in an ecological framework where everything is alive, has spirit and is interconnected. Past, present, and future are fluid and connected through the dreaming. It is a way to instil resilience, early autonomy, life lessons and insight. It can also teach culture, kinship, ancestry, navigation, problem solving and identity.

Opportunity

This is a much gentler form of learning as it creates the opportunity for the child or person to think for themselves about what they are learning rather than being instructed on what to do.

Being embedded in an ecological framework builds a greater sense of connection to the natural world which promotes wellbeing across the lifespan.

Stories using anthropomorphic approaches – in which an animal or inanimate object comes to life like a human – are often described as fables to teach morals and values. These types of stories can also transcend time and culture to speak to a diverse audience and provide emotional distancing to assist in telling powerful and traumatic stories. They can also assist the storyteller in developing fantastical characters and worlds full of possibility.

Storytelling can also provide a platform for basic developmental tasks in early childhood such as reading and vocabulary, learning about colours, numbers, and shapes, recall and memory when retelling a story, imagery and imagination, communication and listening skills to name a few. In addition, it can assist in creating empathy, understanding emotion, respecting cultural differences, and overcoming challenges.

Stories teach and explore values and life lessons. Best of all, it can help children to learn about themselves, strengthen



*Professor Helen Milroy AM is a Palyku woman whose homelands are in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. She is Australia's first Indigenous doctor and child psychiatrist. Currently Professor Milroy is the Stan Perron Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Perth Children's Hospital and University of Western Australia and Honorary Research at the Telethon Kids Institute. She is the Chair of Gayaa Dhuwi Proud Spirit Australia organisation and a board member of Beyond Blue. She is also an artist and published author and illustrator of children's books and has been shortlisted for several children's literature awards.

their identity and place in the world as well as how they connect to others around them.

Stories can assist children in building confidence and knowledge, being cooperative and collaborative. Therefore, it is important for children to be able to identify themselves within stories and why we need a diversity of stories to ensure all children are represented.

Relationships

Storytelling early in life helps with attachment and building strong family relationships. We feel better connected when we share stories. We also repeat stories to reinforce our personal and family narratives.

These early stages are then built upon through early education and schooling.

Over time, we develop

extensive memory systems which help us to make sense of ourselves and the world around us.

As we experience many different challenges throughout life, we also make sense of and develop meaning through stories. This builds our resilience and mastery and contributes to a sense of personal competence.

We develop our own narrative that can sit alongside those of our families, communities, and countries. We build our stories over time, we remember our lives, experiences, and relationships through stories; and we remember the past, and present and dream of the future through stories.

We also heal through stories.

We can share sadness and joy through stories that can assist us in our healing journey.

There are therapies based on storytelling and many group processes in healing are based on sharing stories, either personal or otherwise.

Therapeutic

Learning from others about their journey, stories of strength and survival from adversity and knowing we are not alone in our experiences are powerful therapeutic tools. Authenticity, honesty, and truthfulness can all be found in stories.

Indeed, bearing witness to others and having others bear witness to our lives are healing experiences in themselves.

This is why having creative elements such as storytelling in whatever form it takes, in mental health research is important. Life stories are complex and healing journeys can take different

directions in life. Stories are one of the ways we can develop a coherent narrative across the many paths we take, the many events we experience and the many opportunities for healing we have along the way.

We make sense of ourselves, others and the world through stories.

This article is part a series of *Koori Mail* columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP) and the Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing program at the University of Western Australia.