

Carol Westby (The University of Vermont and Brigham Young University):
“Telling Tales: The Interactive Roles of Fictional and Personal Stories in Life”

Typically developing three-year-old children begin to tell stories about themselves and others. In contrast, children with language impairments exhibit delays in developing narrative skills that compromise their social understanding and academic performance. Interest in narratives in children with and without language impairments began with publications on the development of the structure of fictional stories. Children’s comprehension and production of fictional narratives predict their academic performance.

Increasing attention has been given to the importance of personal narratives, particularly those triggered by autobiographical memories and integrated into life stories. From their emergence at the end of the preschool years through adulthood, autobiographical memories are gradually strung together into life stories of increasing coherence. Good autobiographical memories for the past are associated with greater social problem-solving and self-regulation skills. Life stories produced from elaborated autobiographical memories are instrumental in promoting a self-identity. Persons may not have equal skills with fictional and personal narratives. Those with autism and some types of language and behavioral difficulties exhibit greater difficulty with personal than fictional narratives.

Narrative intervention strategies have focused on teaching narrative structure, particularly the structure characteristic of fictional stories. Although recognizing narrative structure (reflected in plot) is an important narrative skill, it is not sufficient for comprehending characters’ motivations, the way characters drive the plot, and the story themes. Children who understand these concepts in fictional stories are better able to construct personal stories from their autobiographical narratives. Adults can help children draw upon and elaborate autobiographical memories; and then assist them in using what they have learned about plots, characters, and themes in fictional stories to organize their personal stories.

This presentation will explain role and development of autobiographical life story narratives and describe strategies using fictional narratives to develop the cognitive and linguistic foundations for personal narratives.