



# Family Stories Are a Treasure



Many of us don't realize that family stories are emotional treasure troves. I know I didn't, even though storytelling was a gift of my mother's. I grew up steeped in them, but didn't know their power of bonding our children to us. I wish I had known earlier the power family stories have to bolster my children's identities, at my own dinner table.

Let's include in our dinnertime storytelling stories about us, our children, our parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles. We can also talk about our own daily obstacles or successes. Since our children are attached to us emotionally, it makes them very interested in us and our lives. There is a time in their lives where we as their parents are their whole world. If we are aware of this, and available to them, we can have a great positive impact and influence them for good. Telling stories about family members has been shown to greatly impact our children's behavior. Just as having family dinner together at home is a leveraging activity, telling family stories also has great power. And when the two are combined, it is a dynamic shield against many negative influences.

## RESEARCH SHOWS THE MANY BENEFITS OF FAMILY STORIES

In *The Atlantic* magazine, Dr. Elaine Reese, a psychologist, writes about the connection and emotional impact family stories can give us. She tells us first, that twenty-five years of research on storytelling reveals to us parents how important it is to tell a story in a “detailed and responsive way” to benefit our children.<sup>1</sup> The more we enjoy the telling of the story, the more it will delight our children. In addition to these benefits, our children will become rich storytellers themselves.

The second part is encouraging our children’s interest and participation in the story. During or after the story, we need to be *responsive* to our children’s questions and interest instead of saying, “You are interrupting my story!” It is not about the story but our child’s involvement in the story. That means they are interested and learning—the lesson you are teaching them, through the story, will stick. You can say, “That’s a good question!” and answer their question. This encouragement from you is important as they get more invested in the story you are telling.

Even the highs and lows of an ordinary day can benefit our toddler children if we are willing to talk to them about it. Dr. Reese continues:

For instance, experimental studies show that when parents learn to reminisce about everyday events with their preschool children in more detailed ways, their children tell richer, more complete narratives to other adults one to two years later compared to children whose parents didn’t learn the new reminiscing techniques.

Children of the parents who learned new ways to reminisce also demonstrate better understanding of other people’s thoughts and emotions. These advanced narrative and emotional skills serve children well in the school years when reading complex material and learning to get along with others.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Reese is showing us that family stories are powerful ways to help our children learn new words and understand what others are thinking and feeling. With these boosted storytelling skills and emotional know how, our children can read more complex stories and get along better with their peers and others.

## RESILIENCE IS BUILT FROM FAMILY STORIES

I loved telling this story to my children. I was little and playing outside. I came into the house and my mother took one look at me and simply said, “Go look in the mirror.” My mother’s calmness led me to leisurely go to the mirror and make the horrifying discovery myself—a bird had made a white gooey deposit on my nose and I didn’t even know it!

My mother could see the set-up to a funny story. For me to finally make my way to the bathroom mirror myself and be startled at what was on my nose, having no idea the whole time—that was hilarious! Then I could come back and we could laugh and laugh at how she gave me no clue! How could she keep such a straight face? To my mother, these episodes made the rich tapestry that life is. These stories would be told and retold by us and it bonded us together. Who cared if a bird got me if we had each other to laugh about it together?

Can you see how family stories help our children be resilient? She turned a disaster into something to be laughed about, and her blank face became more important to the arc of the story than the bird poop. This disaster was over quickly, something funny to be told to my dad at the end of the day, and finally a bonding machine for the two of us every time the story was told, as we would look at each other and laugh about that long ago day when a bird got me.

## FAMILY STORIES BUILD ANTIFRAGILITY

I recently read *Antifragile* by Nissam Taleb.<sup>3</sup> He is a former stock options trader and analyst and wrote *Black Swan* in 2007 about catastrophic financial events, like the Recession of 2008, when no one

would listen to him when he warned that a financial house of cards was being built and it would eventually have to come down.

He teaches in *Antifragile* that our lives, communities, and governments need not only become strong but, to use his word, “*antifragile*.” Antifragile is “Learning to love volatility in a world that constantly throws big, unexpected events our way, we must learn to benefit from disorder”, writes Nassim Nicholas Taleb.<sup>4</sup> Family stories can show chaos and turmoil and show how people figured it out and lived through those hard times.

Antifragility can be applied in many ways. It can be a parenting mindset that we are committed to building our children on the inside, “benefiting and growing them” so they can withstand our complex world and its random events and disruptions in their lives. The idea of antifragile is that we are so strong on the inside that disasters make us even stronger. Other stressors like social media, TikTok, and what their peers are saying won’t have as much of an effect on them because they have been taught through the scriptures and told with character and family stories who they can aspire to be. Our confusing American culture does not have to define them.

As parents we work so hard to protect our children and keep them safe but we see anxiety and depression reaching 44 percent of American teenagers.<sup>5</sup> Listen to Dr. Reese’s research on pre-teen and teenage years:

In the preteen years, children whose families collaboratively discuss everyday events and family history more often have higher self-esteem and stronger self-concepts. And adolescents with a stronger knowledge of family history have more robust identities, better coping skills, and lower rates of depression and anxiety. Family storytelling can help a child grow into a teen who feels connected to the important people in her life.<sup>6</sup>

We have already learned that our family stories can teach our children how to tell a rich narrative with descriptive words, and learn about other’s thoughts and emotions. Dr. Reese is further telling us that teenagers who have heard family stories have “more robust identities, better coping skills, and lower rates of depression and anxiety.”

Family stories give our children a clue where they belong—like ropes anchoring our children to their past history and explaining why hard things happen and how Grandpa got through it. These stories are huge, emotional bread *loaves* not *crumbs*, for our children, if I can push a metaphor. They need our time and stories to nourish and lead them, like the story of Hansel and Gretel, so they can go out into the world and know how to navigate and find their way back home, to know who they really are.

## MASTER STORYTELLING

My mother was a master storyteller. My mother's storytelling could be likened to a farmer who is irrigating a field and uses his skill with a hoe to direct the water which way to go. We would lie on her bed, or sit around our dinner table, and my mother's stories flowed over us to show us how to live and be. Her stories taught me about the gospel, friendship, and what qualities to look for in a husband. She was dramatic, funny, and outrageous, more like her cowboy father than her lady-like mother. The important thing here though, is that we don't have to be widely talented, just very committed. The more we tell stories, the better we will get at telling them. The telling of the story is more important than the talent of the storyteller. Just get started to see the benefits.

Here is another example of a story my mother would tell me. Even without her dramatic telling it is still a powerful story. I was her fourth child. Us middle children have to fight for attention that the firsts and lasts take for granted.

My mother told how she felt the labor pains coming, and since it was during the day and my dad was at work, she called a cab and was driven to the hospital. Taking a cab was not a normal thing in our household and so that started the story off on a high note, like, "Pay, attention—this is not a normal day!" She added further drama to the story by saying she made a big show to the neighbors by clutching her bag and walking carefully with a hand to her back, which was aching with labor pains. She was "A Woman Ready To Deliver," a hero in her

own story, the spunky mother who could get herself to the hospital, according to her perfectly laid plans.

She then would drop her voice and tell the surprising end—she didn't come home with a baby because I wasn't ready to come! Can you believe it?

This is where I would giggle and feel so pleased!

She couldn't bear being dropped off in front of our house *and* the neighbors after her big show. She asked the cab driver to be let off nearby and snuck her

nine-months-pregnant self in the back way through the hedge of our St. Louis home. When she said this part I could picture her in her dress and high heels (this was the Sixties, you dressed up to go everywhere!) stepping through the hedge feeling bulky and off balance, carrying her suitcase. Because she laughed the whole way while she was telling this story, I loved it, because I was part of her silliness, of her embarrassment of making a big show in the first place only to have to sneak in the back later. Because she told it often and with good humor, it made me, a middle-child, feel special, like we were already having a big, fun adventure together before I was even born!

By telling this story, my mother let me know I was important to her. She was telling me that we were already having fun together before I was born, that she was excited about me coming and had made important plans that included a taxi, dressing up, and even sneaking back home to preserve her dignity as a "Woman Ready to Deliver." I loved hearing it over and over, letting me know I was a big deal to her.

## SOMEONE WHO I HARDLY KNEW

My mother told so many stories about her mother that I feel like I knew her very well even though she died when I was young. In my grandmother's history there are many good stories because she lived during the Great Depression. There is such a contrast there of poverty and doing without compared to the prosperous days I have grown up in.

My Grandma Adams was very frugal so that she could buy houses in Provo, Utah to rent to college students. Her goal for earning money was to ensure that each of her five daughters went to college. There

were no student loans in the 1930s and '40s for school. You either had the money or you didn't.

My mother captured the principle of enlightenment and prosperity that we can gain with God's help by telling me stories about Grandma as I would lie on her bed. My mother told me how her mother was *delighted* to be in partnership with God. Grandma spoke often to her daughters about this partnership and all the blessings that flowed to her because of it. My mother wrote in my Grandma Adam's history:

Also because of my mother's strength of going to church, and being good in the church, always paying her tithing and doing things she should do, made it so I have a testimony and I am grateful for that. When our mama found something wonderful for her apartments she would say, "Thank *goodness* I just paid my tithing!"<sup>7</sup>

My mother continues:

I felt all of the windows of heaven do open when tithing is paid so it has been easy for me to pay my tithing because so many wonderful things would follow and they always have, and *it's because mother made it sound so fun and necessary and wonderful.*

Mother helped so many people also. She helped missionaries [pay for their missions] no one ever knew she helped. She helped more people than anyone ever knew and she was always so helpful to us girls. Everything we needed to have for anything she'd help us get or do or fix.<sup>8</sup>

My mother would tell these stories about my grandmother to me, and they went straight to my heart. My mother was shaping my character with these family stories, highlighting my grandma's commitment to the gospel, education for her daughters, and her generosity with others. The more I heard, the more I wanted to see the same wonderful things happening in my life, and to know that "the windows of heaven" were opening abundantly for me, as well. I know her strong, enduring faith helped her family thrive during the Great Depression

that lasted ten long years. I wanted a deep testimony that would carry me through hardship like my grandmother had.

I wanted to be abundant like my grandmother was, and help people like she did. I love that she was generous with her family and with strangers, quietly, without many people knowing. My grandmother, who I hardly knew or spent much time with, has influenced me so strongly because of my mother's stories of how joyfully she loved living the gospel—*"It's because mother made it sound so fun and necessary and wonderful."*

## STORIES CAN BE PHYSICAL

My brother-in-law Chad is an excellent storyteller like my mother was. He loves to tell a good, dramatic story. He has mastered the art of the pause, telling whatever problem there was and just as we think there is no hope, the thrilling resolution. Recently I watched him tell a story I had heard before but what really caught my attention was watching his five children lean in and be with their dad in the telling of the tale. Their body language showed them moving towards their dad slightly, engaged with their shoulders leaning in. Their eyes were tracking him and they all started having little smiles on their mouths as he was getting to the funny end of the story. I was more entertained watching their engagement with this familiar story than the story itself. These family stories bind our children to us. Our stories get strongly embedded in them.

The best thing about family stories is they travel with us and don't cost anything to tell. We can speak in the dark at bedtime about an experience we had in our day, or our childhood, or Grandpa's childhood. Our family stories can be part of our daily interactions with our children throughout their lives and into their teenage years around the dinner table as often as we can.



## DIFFICULT STORIES

Every family has many stories to tell, good and bad. The bad stories are important to tell because children need to understand how people bounce back from difficulty. Or, that maybe there was no happy ending. With difficult stories, if they are told with a sensitivity to the child's age and also if something positive is taken from the negative story, then it's a valuable lesson. If Uncle Fred already learned that hard lesson, then we can learn from his experience and not do the same dangerous or foolish thing he did.

One of my negative-turned-positive stories of my extended family is about a beloved cabin in Provo Canyon. My parents bought it when I was five, and every summer of my life we came and spent magical times with cousins, outside and running free. From the Three Bears Trail up the mountain, to building dams in the creek behind our cabin, to a swing that went over across the creek that went high, high, high. This family heirloom caught fire in the 1980s because of faulty wiring. A wonderful neighbor turned his hose on it and minimized the damage but the cabin sat forlorn and unused for many years because of my parents' divorce.

In the last ten years it has come to life and been completely transformed. We finally came together as siblings and came up with a plan. It has been remodeled and enlarged to house wonderful family reunions. We tell this story a lot to my parents' grandchildren. How we came together as siblings to manage my mother's estate and redo the exterior of the cabin initially, and then, with skill and creativity, my brother Steve, rebuilt the cabin and tripled its size.

We moan over the difficulty of getting the permits, and the complex french drain in the basement. We love the swinging beds and "the wormhole" children can crawl through that Uncle Steve designed and put in. It goes from the first floor kitchen closet up through the interior of the new remodel to the third floor playroom. I still give a little start when a child "magically" appears out of that kitchen closet when I am in the cabin kitchen preparing food. I am not quite used to that yet!

This family story has taught all of us that families aren't perfect, that hard things happen—like a divorce and a fire—to good families

where parents are striving to be good parents. This story also shows us how creating good times and memories takes unity and work. One of my four siblings could not have maneuvered out of the mess that the cabin had become. We needed all of us to do it. We have learned in our family that we need each other more than ever. This story has been a great story of resilience for us.

## COMMIT TO TELLING STORIES OFTEN

Can we see the power of a dinner table in helping our children know where they came from? Only 30 percent of American families are eating dinner together.<sup>9</sup> Can we do better than three out of ten families sharing their thoughts together daily, with time to be with each other?

As we sit around our tables at dinner, we can emotionally entwine our children to us and our families by telling family stories of us, them, and their ancestors they may never know here on earth or know that well, because so often we are so young when our grandparents or great-grandparents pass away. Their blood runs in our blood and so it means something. If they can succeed, so can we! Let us carve out the time, fix the food, gather our family, start sharing family stories, and reap these incredible benefits.

All these stories can shape our children's life just as mine has been so impacted by my beloved Grandma Adams. Her life has really meant something to me.

Of the many other benefits of children hearing family stories, Dr. Reese also mentions that children can develop a rich narrative voice themselves, and understand better the thoughts and emotions of others. The fact that our children are able to read more complicated stories because they have already listened to our many stories is amazing. Her research with family stories and teenagers is compelling. Having family stories create sturdier identities and reducing anxiety and depression in our pre-teens and teens is another reason to be committed to taking the time, and actually gathering and telling our children how we and all the generations behind us have navigated our lives—so their lives can be better.

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1. 1.Elaine Reese, “What Kids Learn From Hearing Family Stories,” *The Atlantic*, 9 Dec. 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/12/what-kids-learn-from-hearing-family-stories/282075/>
  2. Ibid.
  3. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (Random House Publishing, 2012).
  4. Ibid, 72.
  - 5.Derek Thompson, “Why American Teens Are So Sad,” *The Atlantic*, 11 Apr. 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/04/american-teens-sadness-depression-anxiety/629524/>.
  - 6.Elaine Reese, “What Kids Learn From Hearing Family Stories,” *The Atlantic*, 9 Dec. 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/12/what-kids-learn-from-hearing-family-stories/282075/>.
  7. Elsie Dee Adams Florence, *Our Goodly Parents: Delilah Mariah Booth Adams and Samuel Conrad Adams* (Orem, Utah: Remember When Histories and Journals, 1980) 288.
  8. Ibid, 289.
  - 9.Jill Anderson, “Harvard EdCast: The Benefit of Family Mealtime,” *Harvard: News & Events*, 1 Apr. 2020, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu>.