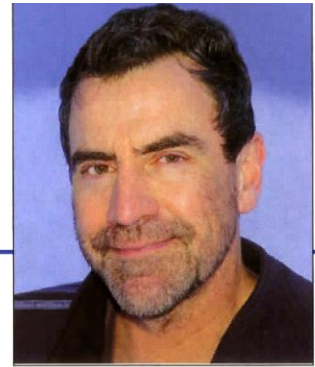


Down to Earth Dad

Patrick Mitchell



‘There’s a Story in There’— and it’s Up to You to Tell It

My aisle mate, Niigaanwewidam, paid me three successive compliments on our flight over the western United States 14 years ago. He listened intently after asking about my work (everyone has a story to tell), paraphrased what I’d said (*everyone* likes to be truly heard, right?), then cast my work in a noble light.

“So, *your* story is that *my* story is important?” He asked. “Yeah, my story is that you have a story to tell,” I replied. He paused, then said sincerely, “That’s a really beautiful thing.”

The last compliment was especially meaningful; Niigaanwewidam researches and writes about aboriginal cultures. My Family Storytelling Nights® crisscross Native America as I motivate parents and educators to tell their stories at programs and schools nationwide. The thousands of stories I’ve heard from parents, educators, grandparents, Tribal representatives, and community members have changed me. How could they not? I’ve laughed so hard at some stories that my sides ached, been too choked up to speak after hearing others, and have gained life perspective I couldn’t have obtained otherwise. People’s personal stories are, as my pal on the airplane put it, “a really beautiful thing.”

A participant at a storytelling event I facilitated on the island of Saipan told about the time sharks circled the small, wooden boat she drifted in just beyond the surf with a friend skipping school with her.

There was the Native American woman in her 90s who talked about riding a horse into a Montana river in springtime when she was six years old. The water was deep and the horse had to swim for it—with the girl on its back. She wasn’t afraid, she said, because her father had called out calmly from the river’s edge, “I’ll meet you downstream, just hang on!”—which she did for a mile’s worth of river until the horse found its footing and pulled them both out.

And I’ll never forget the story about the grandmother who horrified her American-born grandchildren by chasing down and butchering her best chicken unexpectedly on the first day of their visit to her home in Mexico. She wanted dinner to be extra special for her beloved grandchildren, her adult granddaughter explained with tears of laughter and love in her eyes.

The early literacy enhancement and school readiness benefits are huge when parents learn to tell stories to young children—but there’s great value for adolescents whose parents or guardians teach them how to story-share. Research suggests that adolescents who know how to tell the story of their day-to-day stressors—and about stressors brought on by disruptive life events such as a change of schools or moving to a new neighborhood—can reduce their overall stress by sharing, making it easier to navigate challenging experiences (Kelley & Lowe, 2012).

The development of stress-reducing, culturally competent interventions like story sharing can have particular benefits for children and adolescents who are high-risk; these exercises can allow them to focus inward, build their own self-narrative, and reach outward more easily.

The Child Welfare League of America is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, and you’d better believe it: There’s a story in there! Check out the pull-out section of this very issue of *Children’s Voice* and read about the stories that have built this organization—and celebrate the fact that you are an important part of that story! I’ve been thrilled to share my stories in these pages over the years and hope to share many more. ■

Reference

Kelley, M., & Lowe, J. (2012). The health challenge of stress experienced by Native American adolescents. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 26(1), 71-73.

A regular contributor to *Children’s Voice*, Patrick Mitchell publishes a monthly newsletter, *The Down to Earth Dad*, and facilitates the *Dads Matter!™ Project for early childhood programs, schools, and child- and family-serving organizations*. He conducts keynote addresses, workshops, and inservice and preservice trainings. To reserve Patrick Mitchell for speaking engagements, or to implement the *Dads Matter!™ Project for your families and community partners*, call him toll-free at 877/282-DADS, or e-mail him at patrick@downtoearthdad.org. Website: www.DownToEarthDad.org.