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Why ‘Once upon a time’ matters

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It’s a curious thing. Why is it that we strive so hard to protect our children from harm, yet encourage them to imagine frightening creatures and situations? Kristen stood in line for hours with her daughter waiting for the H1N1 vaccine. A clever and resourceful mom, Kristen told her daughter fairy tales to pass the time. She told her Little Red Riding Hood – a story about a little girl whose grandmother is impersonated by a wolf!

Fairy tales are full of gruesome characters, violence, and role models who have not kept up with the times. Some of us question whether our impressionable children should be exposed to such nasty characters. What does it do to a child to hear the story of Hansel and Gretel, for example, in which brother and sister are captured by an incredibly twisted witch - and their parents don’t even care?

Surprisingly, many experts tell us that fairy tales can play a helpful role in the development of children’s emotional well-being. How? Maria Tatar, professor at Harvard College, explains that fairy tales provide a place in which children can “work through many personal and cultural anxieties, yet they do it in a safe, ‘once upon a time’ way.” Imagination is a powerful tool. Fairy tales can help children explore emotions they are not yet ready or able to express.

We love our children. We do not want them to experience loneliness, fear, isolation or sorrow. And yet they do. Children do experience loneliness and fear for their military mother or father who has gone on tour to Afghanistan. There are children who do not feel safe at home. There are children who face the reality of a parent, sibling or friend who is fighting a life-threatening illness. There are children who experience bullying every day.

Writer and psychologist Bruno Bettelheim highlights that in fairy tales the main character always triumphs, regardless of the extreme adversity faced. The main characters, often children themselves, problem-solve. They create for themselves a “happily ever after” ending. It just may be that the sharing of fairy tales is one avenue for helping children develop resiliency.

Fairy tales have been around for centuries, though different versions have emerged over time. The oldest known version of Cinderella, a Chinese tale called Yeh-hsien, dates back to the ninth century. One of the newest versions, written by Robert Munsch is “The Paper Bag Princess”.

Parents know what stories best meet their child’s unique needs and personality. Many fairy tales have been revised to be more inclusive of non-traditional gender roles, or to be more humane. Like “The Paper Bag Princess” these newer versions explore difficult emotions too and the main character demonstrates stellar problem solving skills.

Whether fairy tales are traditional or modern, parents can take comfort in knowing that engaging children’s imagination through their telling may help children figure out how to cope when “happily ever after” is hard to find.