

PSYCHIATRY

Tell Fairy Stories to Your Children

But Be Careful, Warns the Psychiatrist; Tale Should Not Be Frightening When Told at Bedtime

By JANE STAFFORD

REMEMBER Hansel and Gretel and the fearful witch, Sleeping Beauty, and all the other fairy tale characters which frightened and thrilled you as a child? Remember how real they seemed to you then, as much a part of your life as your parents and playmates?

The fairy stories you heard when you were five or six played a big part in your development, bigger than you probably realized. Psychiatrists have traced the effect of these tales and find that their influence extends into adult life.

Just as the good fairies helped the hero and the bad fairies injured him, so the stories themselves may have helped or harmed you. How they have affected your grown-up self depends somewhat on your temperament and nervous make-up as a child and somewhat on how the stories were told to you.

A case of a grown man who still lived in an imaginary fairy-tale world was recently described by Dr. Sandor Lorand, New York psychiatrist, as an example of the harm fairy stories can do under certain circumstances.

Unwanted Companions

The man was in his thirties and accomplished in his social and economic status, financially independent, married and the father of a child. But the city streets on which he moved, the house where he lived, the meadows and forests where he played golf, the lakes where he went fishing were all filled up for him with giants, ogres, witches and strange animals. He lived in constant dread of seeing the faces of his friends turn into bird-faces with beaks for noses. In his dreams strange prehistoric animals reached through the window, and big and baby elephants, snakes and the wolf of Little Red Riding Hood were all present.

These creatures of his imagination were, in the popular phrase, driving him nearly crazy. As the psychiatrists

would describe it, he was suffering from a neurosis and was obsessed with fears.

The fairy tales were not entirely responsible for this man's condition, Dr. Lorand explained. The underlying cause was an Oedipus complex from which the patient had suffered as a child and which he had never really outgrown. Psychiatrists use this term, named for the Greek hero who unwittingly killed his own father, to describe a boy's abnormal devotion to his mother and consequent jealous hatred of his father.

Happiest Moments

In the case Dr. Lorand described, the patient was left alone with his mother much of the time. In the evening, while waiting for the father to return home, his mother would tell him fairy stories and the patient remembered these moments as the happiest in his life. The fairy tales at that time eased and partially solved the Oedipus situation and the other childhood conflicts the patient faced. But the situation was never entirely cleared up and when it arose again in his adult life, the patient unconsciously turned back to the fairy tales which had given relief in his childhood. Only this time the stories failed him. Instead of easing the situation they aggravated it. As a child he had been the triumphant hero of the stories, but as an adult he was the unsuccessful hero, and lived in constant fear of the imaginary beasts and witches and ogres. At the same time he was in terror lest the world find out that he was being haunted by them, for he was not too "crazy" to know that however real these fearsome creatures were to him, they were not real to the rest of the world.

A few years ago, when psychiatrists first learned from cases like this the powerful and sometimes injurious influence that fairy tales might have, a movement was started to ban all fairy stories for children. This was wrong, in Dr. Lorand's opinion.

The child of two, three and four years old needs a fairy tale and a good

RULES FOR TELLING FAIRY STORIES TO CHILDREN

1. Select the story according to the age of the child.
 2. Do not tell very fearsome stories to very young children.
 3. Pleasant stories like *Sleeping Beauty* are better than ones filled with witches and ogres. *Pinocchio* can be made too frightening.
 4. Both parents should tell fairy stories to their children.
 5. Be careful of the tones of your voice: do not make the ogre too realistic; do not let the child know that you are bored and telling the story solely from a sense of duty.
 6. Do not let the story become an outlet for yourself but remember the child for whom you are telling it.
 7. Stories for children should have happy endings.
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one, Dr. Lorand holds. But it must be told him in the right way.

Fairy stories are important because they relieve a child of worries over mysteries which he cannot understand, Dr. Lorand explained. Every child wants to find out the great mystery of where children come from and what parents have to do with it. Every child also wants to know whether his parents love him. He is reassured on this last point by the fact of his parents telling him the stories and also somewhat by the content of the stories. For in the child's mind the characters of the stories have some relation to his parents. He likes to see himself as the hero and his parents as the kind fairies helping him and rewarding him for good conduct.

Sometimes, particularly if he is a nervous child, he may identify one or both of his parents with the bad fairies who are fighting the hero. This may create a frightening and confusing situation. There should not be too many witches and ogres in stories told to children, says Dr. Lorand, and parents

should be careful not to make the ogres too realistic. He himself recalls to this day the terror inspired in him as a small boy by his elder brother who playfully but too realistically impersonated an ogre with fearsome, deep voice and grotesque facial expression.

Besides reassuring the child of parental love, fairy stories provide a happy make-believe world to which he can turn for refuge from the confusion and unpleasantness of the real world in which he is growing up. You can appreciate this if you consider the way in which an exciting novel or a romantic movie lets you escape for a time from the worries and troubles of your own life. The bewildered little child must have some such way of escape from reality until he or she is old enough to understand life instead of being hopelessly confused by it.

Temporary Escape

When you pick up a detective story to take your mind off your troubles, it is only as a temporary expedient, and you expect to face and solve the problems later. With some children, there is danger that the escape from reality into a pleasant fairy story world may become a permanent reaction to diffi-

culties. In this way the fairy tale may confuse the mental life of the child so as to leave permanent injuries which may prevent his future adjustment to the world, Dr. Lorand pointed out. This was what happened to the patient whose case he reported.

In a case like this, however, it is not the fairy tale in itself that does the harm, Dr. Lorand emphasized. The child was already in a confused state and unable to adjust himself satisfactorily to the growing-up process. He wanted to remain a baby, in his mother's lap, the chief object of her interest and affection. Fairy tales help some children make the change from mother's baby to an independent personality, but they make the change harder for other children and may keep them from ever making it properly.

"The fact that stories may have both good and ill effects renders very important the circumstances under which they are related to the child, for it is on these circumstances that the effect in large measure depends," Dr. Lorand asserted.

Advice to Parents

If you have children of your own, you will want to know what the psy-

chiatrist advises about telling stories to children without doing them harm.

"The intuition of parents is better than any advice of a psychiatrist," Dr. Lorand says on this point.

"The story must obviously be suited to the child's age and condition. Care should be taken that the tale is told in the right physical and physiological setting. The time of the day when story telling takes place is of course important. No ogre story before bedtime," Dr. Lorand warns.

If the child is timid and nervous, the stories should be especially selected so as not to frighten him.

In general, stories like Cinderella and The Sleeping Beauty are better than ones filled with witches and ogres. Pinocchio, a great favorite with many children, can be made too frightening.

Story-telling should not be limited to one parent.

The chief point about telling stories to children is to remember that you are telling it for the child, Dr. Lorand emphasized. If the mother is in a hurry and resents having to tell the story, tells it quickly to get it over with, her child will detect the resentment or bored sense of duty in her voice. This will puzzle and worry him and add to his conflict instead of helping to ease it.

Likewise the parent should know whether telling the story becomes an outlet for herself and should check any tendency in this direction. Otherwise the story may become a story for an adult and not for a child and will fail in its purpose of helping the child.

Injected Her Mood

This happened in the case Dr. Lorand reported of the thirty-year-old man who never outgrew the fairy tale state of mind. His mother was herself a timid, apprehensive type. When she told him the stories she was more interested in her own situation as a lonely wife awaiting the return of her husband than in the child's problems. Telling the stories had a comforting effect on her and relieved her own tension, but the way in which she told them had a harmful effect on her son. It was only after much misery that he turned to the psychiatrist for aid. Fortunately in this case the treatment was successful and the patient recovered. For the last three years he has been entirely well and free from the bugaboos of fairyland.

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KEEP THE OGRES AWAY

Let the kind fairies and pleasant happenings fill the bedtime stories you tell your children.