



Once upon a time

Do you remember reading your first ever storybook, or listening to your first fairy tale? Falling asleep reading or listening to stories from your grandparents or parents is possibly the fondest memory of your childhood. Those tales you read or heard during your childhood are the ones that still remain in your heart and mind.

Over the decades, children's fairy tales and stories have evolved significantly. From Hans Christian Anderson's classics to the Grimm's fairy tales, these stories have been passed down for generations through various forms of storytelling.

Children's stories have never been limited by the barriers of language and have been translated to spread globally. Popular tales, such as the Russian folklore "Masha and the Bear," Grimm's classics, Rapunzel, and Snow White, among numerous others, have even been turned into TV series and movies. However, several psychologists and social activists today have shown concerns about the message given by many of these well-known stories.

Traditionally, in such oral traditions that were later compiled, women and girls have been portrayed to be weak or the 'damsel in distress' that are popularly read by and to children even today. It tends to build a strong predisposition in their minds as they feel the need to be protected or rescued by a masculine figure. Furthermore, being heavily influenced by horrific tales of witches and ghouls, children often even develop a fear of people who look or act differently. But, these are in fact nothing more than examples of bad conditioning of

children's minds. Hence, to truly understand which books are the best to pick for our children, it is firstly crucial to understand how these stories affect their overall development.

HOW STORIES AFFECT THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S MINDS

According to Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed, Associate Professor of Child, Adolescent, and Family Psychiatry at the National Institute of Mental Health, reading storybooks allows children to imagine beyond their usual regular life as it augments their abstract thinking capacity.

"It not only helps them develop their knowledge and skills, but also plays a key role in enhancing their creativity," Dr Ahmed explained.

The books or stories that we choose to share with our children are incredibly important because from the very first ones that they read or listen to, their minds are learning, and subsequently developing ideas on morals, ethics, norms or simply, the status quo.

There are, in fact, three fundamental stages of development that every child goes through as they grow up — physical, cognitive and moral. Among these, cognitive development is more crucial in the sense that whatever foundations are

laid in the minds during childhood tends to remain mostly unaltered even when they become adults.

"For instance, if a child is taught to be afraid of witches or the police, it is likely that even when they become full grown adults, they might still possess a lingering fear for those subjects," Dr Ahmed clearly elaborated.

On the other hand, while children do take up the primitive notions of good and bad from the teachings of elders and parents, as they grow older, they start defining it by their own selves.

"We sometimes term this as the Robin Hood Morality," Dr Ahmed said.

The concept of Robin Hood is interpreted differently by different people. For instance, by some people, he is perceived as a hero who gives away to the poor. On the contrary, others view him as a notorious robber who steals from others!

This paradox interestingly helps children to build both their moral and cognitive development. Dr Ahmed agreed that the most important factor is the content of the stories and fairy tales that children read or are read to.

"If the content of the story is good, then the child will be affected positively and vice versa," he furthered.

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