

Therapeutic and developmental benefits of fairy tales in early childhood: A mini-review

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Abstract

The role of fairy tales in preschool-aged children's emotional and cognitive development is discussed. Separating good from evil makes it easier for children to cope with conflicting emotions. This encourages creative thinking and personality growth as representations of conscious and unconscious motifs in stories guide children through their thoughts. Fairy tales even provide secure, comforting, and supporting feelings though they relate to conflicts or endangerment themes, fostering positive self-image and emotional intelligence in kids. It was found that a happy ending to a fairy tale lessens tension, alleviates anxiety arising from developmental fears, and meets the need for justice among kids. Representation of negative characters in these stories contributes positively to emotional development. In Australia, research has shown that talking about fairy tales helps a child meet emotional needs, especially when told in groups with accompanying acting out. In addition, the article examines how therapeutic fairy tales can decrease fearfulness while dealing with actual life problems throughout this period. Moreover, the paper explores how fairy tales might be used as therapy to address anxiety as well as real-life conflicts during emotional development. Essential for appreciating children's fantasies that can lead to internal conflicts because of their inability to express themselves in any other manner, it is pertinent for parents and their kids to have storytelling sessions where they can talk about anything. Lastly, fairy tales are sources of inspiration; they teach morals and values; tools necessary for mental growth, cognitive advancement, moral maturity, and creativity, making people think critically and interrogatively.

Keywords: pediatrics, psychology, occupational therapy, developmental

Benefícios terapêuticos e desenvolvimentais dos contos de fadas na primeira infância: Uma mini-revisão

Resumo

O papel dos contos de fadas no desenvolvimento emocional e cognitivo de crianças em idade pré-escolar é discutido. Separar o bem do mal, facilita para as crianças lidarem com emoções conflitantes. Isso incentiva o pensamento criativo e o crescimento da personalidade, à medida que as representações de motivos conscientes e inconscientes nas histórias guiam as crianças através de seus pensamentos. Os contos de fadas até fornecem sentimentos de segurança, conforto e apoio, mesmo que se relacionem a temas de conflitos ou perigo, promovendo assim uma imagem positiva de si mesmas e inteligência emocional nas crianças. Foi descoberto que um final feliz para um conto de fadas reduz a tensão, alivia a ansiedade decorrente dos medos do desenvolvimento e atende à necessidade de justiça entre as crianças. A representação de personagens negativos nessas histórias contribui positivamente para o desenvolvimento emocional. Na Austrália, pesquisas mostraram que falar sobre contos de fadas ajuda a atender às necessidades emocionais das crianças, especialmente quando contados em grupos com encenações. Além disso, o artigo examina como os contos de fadas terapêuticos podem ser usados para diminuir o medo ao lidar com problemas reais ao longo deste período. Além disso, o artigo explora como os contos de fadas podem ser usados como terapia para abordar a ansiedade e conflitos da vida real

durante o desenvolvimento emocional. Essencial para apreciar as fantasias das crianças que podem levar a conflitos internos devido à sua incapacidade de se expressarem de outra forma, é pertinente que os pais e seus filhos tenham sessões de contação de histórias onde possam falar sobre qualquer coisa. Por fim, os contos de fadas são fontes de inspiração; eles ensinam moral e valores; ferramentas necessárias para o crescimento mental, avanço cognitivo, maturidade moral e criatividade, que fazem as pessoas pensarem criticamente e interrogativamente.

Palavras-chave: pediatria, psicologia, terapia ocupacional, desenvolvimento

1. Introduction

Fairytales have long been regarded as essential tools in the development of children, specifically those between the ages of 2 and 5. Passed down through generations, these ageless stories serve a purpose that is beyond mere entertainment. They are instrumental in forming mental structures concerning cognition, emotional responses, and social behavior among young individuals. This way, fairy tales provide children with worlds where right and wrong can be easily distinguished hence they enable them to grapple with complex feelings and ethical conflicts.

Psychologically speaking, fairy tales represent an original means for children to interpret and understand the world around them. Fairy tales deal with universal existential problems introduced so that young audiences can comprehend them easily. The plotlines often involve archetypal characters and situations that are deeply linked to the human psyche, leading to the understanding of oneself and others (Bettelheim, 1976). Furthermore, fairytales greatly contribute to the nurturing of emotional intelligence. Through identification with characters who conquer hurdles against all odds they face, children acquire skills to combat their fears, thereby gaining resilience against adversities.

Fairy tales are made up of structured formats that often conclude in a resolution or happy ending, which is comforting for children. It is anxiety-reducing, justice, and hope-promoting, reinforcing the idea that good can defeat evil (Adamski, 2011). The cognitive advantages of fairy tales are similarly deep. These stories allow kids to engage their imagination by thinking outside the box. Youngsters who listen to or read these stories will be exposed to new words and complicated sentences, promoting language development and literacy skills. The repetitive nature of these stories also makes them easy to remember thus enhancing the recollection capacity and comprehension of story structures which constitute important ingredients for literacy (Shapiro; Katz, 1978).

Additionally, fairy tales contribute significantly to children's social growth. When told in groups or during storytelling sessions between parents and kids, such stories act as an avenue for social interaction and bonding. This collective experience may improve communicative abilities while making people feel like they belong in a community. In such situations, it becomes possible for empathy and social understanding to develop (Breen, 2004). What's more, such tales can act as a therapy tool. This makes them useful in therapy by enabling children to express and deal with their fears. As the content of fairy tales is highly symbolic, it helps transform the child's experience into characters and situations within the story, promoting a better understanding of its emotions and behaviors. Preschoolers have many developmental challenges that hinder their growth; emotional disturbances are also common (Strayer, 1995).

The purpose of this study is to explore the multifaceted role of fairy tales in the developmental stages of young children. By examining their cognitive, emotional, and social impacts, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these stories contribute to childhood development. This research will also investigate the therapeutic potential of fairy tales, offering insights into how they can be effectively used in educational and clinical settings to support children's growth and well-being.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Systematic review search

This systematic review delves into the role of fairy tales in the holistic development of preschool-aged children. By exploring existing literature, the study aims to illustrate the multifaceted impacts of fairy tales on contemporary childhood development. A comprehensive search strategy was employed, targeting databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO using keywords including "fairy tales," "child development," "emotional intelligence," "storytelling," "cognitive development," and "early childhood." Articles written in English and published between 1976 and 2024 were screened for relevance, focusing specifically on studies examining the psychological impacts of fairy tales on children aged 2-5 years. Exclusion criteria encompassed

literary analyses and studies involving adult participants. Full texts of selected articles were thoroughly reviewed, extracting details on research objectives, methodologies, major findings, and theoretical frameworks employed. The extracted data were synthesized qualitatively, identifying common themes and trends related to the cognitive and emotional processes influenced by fairy tales, the role of archetypes and symbols, and the dynamics of parent-child interaction during storytelling. This synthesis aims to provide a deeper understanding of the developmental benefits and potential applications of fairy tales in educational and therapeutic contexts for young children.

3. Literature review

Universal motifs in fairy tales contribute significantly to the psychological development and understanding of self and others (Lubetsky, 1989). The moral dichotomies presented in these stories aid children in navigating moral dilemmas and conflicting emotions, enhancing empathy and moral reasoning (Bettelheim, 1976). Furthermore, happy endings in fairy tales reduce anxiety and promote positive self-identity (Danilewitz, 1991). Complex storylines enhance problem-solving skills, creative thinking, and language development (Shapiro; Katz, 1978), while repetitive narratives improve memory recall and comprehension (Fleer et al., 2014).

Group storytelling and parent-child interactions during storytelling sessions have been shown to enhance communicative abilities and foster empathy (Mastrothanasis; Papakosta, 2017). These interactions contribute to socio-constructivist understanding and empathy development (Nicolopoulou & Malafantis, 2018). Fairy tales also hold therapeutic value, allowing children to relate their fears and anxieties to characters within the stories (Kulikovskaya; Andrienko, 2016). Therapeutic storytelling has been effectively used in clinical settings to help children externalize and manage their emotions (Stein, 1982; Breen, 2004).

Overall, an exhaustive examination of fairy tales highlights their profound impact on children aged three to five years, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Collins, 2010). Archetypes and symbols within these tales, deeply ingrained and rooted in Jungian psychology, play a crucial role in human psychological development, encouraging creativity, resourcefulness, and imaginative thinking (Adamski, 2011; Unnsteinsdottir, 2002).

The universality of fairy tales in child development has been demonstrated through cross-cultural studies conducted in Russia and Australia. These studies involved children who engaged with multimedia presentations adapted to their local contexts, aiming to enhance creativity, relationship-building skills, and cultural appreciation (Strayer, 1995). Such experiments underscore the potential of fairy tales to foster cognitive, emotional, and social development across diverse cultural backgrounds.

The findings highlight the critical role of integrating fairy tales into early childhood education and counseling practices globally. By incorporating these stories, educators and counselors can enrich children's minds and support their mental health by nurturing empathy and cultural sensitivity (Unnsteinsdottir, 2002).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the comprehensive search done in this review brings out the deep-rooted value of folktales to young children's overall development. They do not serve only as a source of amusement; rather, they are potent tools that encourage the growth of cognition, emotion, and socialization for a robust and whole individual. Folk tales are at their core packed with archetypes, symbols, and moral dilemmas that are universal across cultures and generations. These classic stories offer kids a window into the complexities of human life thus allowing them to grasp important themes like courage against adversity, good versus evil, and empathy plus kindness.

The benefits of fairy tales on cognitive health are numerous. The exposure to intricate storylines constructed within an imaginary world enhances thinking capabilities, problem-solving strategies as well as language mastery in children. Additionally, the repetitive stories contribute greatly in terms of memory recall and language acquisition forming a strong foundation for reading habits (Shapiro; Katz, 1978). Fairy tales help children emotionally navigate difficult emotional landscapes. This is possible because of the presence of characters within them who experience jealousy, fear, love, and hope which act as a grounding point for children to explore their feelings. Fairy tales end with conflict resolution that has an element of finality in it, which helps kids develop character durability and emotional quotient.

In addition, fairy tales are very good for therapy sessions. Therapeutic storytelling in clinical practice allows for emotional release, internalization, and fear confronting amongst the young people involved. The first step

towards healing therefore is one's identification with these struggles through externalization that makes someone feel like they have complete control over their life from then onwards. Fairy tales are great tools for promoting connections between people via storytelling. It can be done by anyone, whether in a family setup or educational institutions so that there is a collective understanding of different issues as people share their views about others' stories. It is through these interactions that individuals develop social intelligence or learn how to relate well with others around them.

As we look towards the future, it is crucial to acknowledge and take advantage of the transformational potential of fairy tales in early childhood development. This way, we can raise a generation of empathetic, resilient, and emotionally intelligent individuals by integrating such narratives into educational programs, treatment methods, and family customs. Through continuous surveying and collaboration, we shall keep unearthing the farthest limits that these invaluable resources can go in benefiting the wellness of children worldwide.

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6. Authors' Contributions

Myrto Patagia Bakaraki: conceptualized the study, coordinated the research efforts, and provided expertise in occupational therapy. She also played a significant role in data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. *Theofanis Dourbois*: contributed his expertise as a military psychologist, particularly in the areas of psychological impacts and therapeutic applications of fairy tales. He was actively involved in the design of the study, interpretation of findings, and reviewing the manuscript. *Alexandra Kosiva*: provided critical insights and analysis from a social work perspective. She was instrumental in the literature review, data synthesis, and in drafting and revising the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

7. Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest.

8. Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

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