

# Introduction to the Tell Me A Story Materials

**“Use your words!”** is a phrase that is used routinely in classrooms serving young children, and with good reason. Encouraging children to learn the power of verbal expression is accepted as an important strategy in helping children get their needs met and to grow in their ability to function socially in the world. And yet, when children do use their words, and tell the adults around them how they feel, do the adults always feel ready to hear those words? When a child wants to discuss something that is troubling or confusing with an adult he or she trusts, does that person always feel prepared to respond? The Tell Me a Story Materials were designed to help teachers be more prepared to respond. More specifically, Tell Me A Story is focused on supporting teachers in becoming skillful in conducting Circle Time and in using books to spark thoughtful discussion on social-emotional topics such as managing emotions, transition, or crisis in the lives of young children.



## Where did Tell Me A Story come from?

### The History of Tell Me A Story

Tell Me A Story developed as a part of Family Connections, an initiative based at Children's Hospital Boston that supports early childhood programs in their mental health outreach to families facing adversities, particularly parental depression. Tell Me A Story was developed in concert with Family Connections' broader goals of promoting self-reflection in early childhood professionals and providing developmentally appropriate tools in support of social-emotional growth in children under 6 years old.

What began as a simple search for developmentally appropriate picture books on social-emotional topics lead to the discovery of a gap in training for teachers about how to have discussions with children about difficult topics. While many fine picture books exist, none address the fact that often times, adults are very unclear about how to have a discussion about difficult topics, and may need support in getting such communication started. We also found that while several books dedicated to describing parental depression exist, none are designed to help very young children understand this experience.

As a result, Mary Watson Avery and Bill Beardslee wrote *When My Mom is Sad* to offer reflections on how children of depressed parents may feel. Several *Book Guides* were also developed for a series of books in order to provide teachers with a template for sharing books on social emotional topics effectively. The *Tell Me A Story Workshops* were developed to encourage and support teachers in their efforts to make their classrooms expressive environments, a place in which children feel safe talking about their feelings.

## Why do this?

### The theoretical background to Tell Me A Story

Tell Me A Story is a program designed to help children understand and describe their emotions through the use of literature and discussion. Studies have shown that children gain a better understanding of their own feelings and how to regulate them when they have the opportunity to talk about books on emotions where the characters know how to appropriately respond to their own feelings (Brewer, 2001). By reading books that raise emotional topics, and by supporting teachers to lead discussions on these books, Tell Me A Story offers children the opportunity to explore their

own feelings and the feelings of others in a safe and supportive environment. Learning to monitor one's own feelings, known as "self regulation," in addition to having positive interactions with teachers, knowledge of emotions, and strong social skills, are all predictors of academic success (Denham, et al., 2003). The three key components of emotional competence, emotional expressiveness; emotion knowledge; and emotion regulation (Denham, et al, 2003), serve as pillars to the Tell Me A Story approach.

Another important benefit to using literature and encouraging discussion with young children is the positive effect such activities can have on literacy development. Research in the field of early childhood education has shown that a good deal of literacy development can occur before children even receive formal reading instruction (Dickinson, 1994). For instance, reading together in preschool classrooms has been found to stimulate learning and promote discussion between teachers and children (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). In addition, children who experience engaging conversations with adults during their preschool years have been shown to achieve greater academic success in later years (Massey, 2004). While more and more books for preschoolers address emotional themes, few books raise difficult topics and negative emotions. As a result, teachers may feel unprepared when preschoolers want to talk about harder topics—like mommy being sad, or a friend refusing to play. With this in mind, the *Tell Me A Story Book Guides* have been designed to highlight stories addressing a range of emotions and topics, including emotionally difficult themes such as rejection, anger, and parental depression.

Tell Me A Story was originally piloted in Early Head Start and Head Start centers, programs that provide comprehensive education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to low-income children and their families. ([http://www.nhsa.org/about\\_nhsa](http://www.nhsa.org/about_nhsa)). Teachers report that children living in poverty who are experiencing multiple adversities regularly raise issues of loss, violence, and distress in the classroom. In response, the Tell Me A Story approach was developed to support teachers and children in expressing emotions such as anger, sadness, and loss – but also in understanding how to manage those feelings through discussion and other activities. Tell Me A Story focuses on learning to use and define emotion-related words and expressions, a skill that is missing in a critical way for many children but most importantly for children who have experienced trauma and adversity (Cicchetti & Beagley, 1987).

## What do we know about Tell Me A Story?

### The Evaluation of Tell Me A Story

The evaluation of Tell Me A Story used ongoing feedback from teachers and consultants as well as direct observations of the children's and teacher's participation in Circle Time for three purposes:

- to help develop the final reading process and the follow-up activities for the Book Guides,
- to assist us in making the final books selections, and
- to assess the effectiveness of the intervention.

Preliminary evaluation of Circle sessions showed increases in the child's use of emotional language and vocabulary and increases in the teacher's encouragement of discussion related to emotional issues when compared to Circle Time in classrooms in which Tell Me A Story was not being used. The book that was most effective in achieving these results was "When Sophie Gets Angry – Really, Really Angry..." Participating teachers were pleased with the intervention and indicated that they would continue to use books to support children's ability to talk about difficult topics.

## How do you do Tell Me A Story?

### The Tell Me A Story Materials:

The *Tell Me A Story Materials* include the *Tell Me Story Workshops*, a group of *Tell Me A Story Book Guides*, and an *Additional Resources* section.

The Tell Me A Story Workshops: This section includes an introduction that guides the Workshop Leader, as well as complete instructions for three workshops:

- Strategies for Talking with Children about Difficult Issues
- Getting the Most out of Circle Time
- Using the Tell Me A Story Book Guides

Because these workshops provide knowledge and skill that increase with each session, it is strongly encouraged that they be offered in the order presented. The exercises and content of the workshops have been designed to engage early childhood professionals with a range of experiences and abilities.

Both in Family Connections in general and in working on Tell Me A Story, careful selection of workshop leader, adequate time for that individual to prepare, and careful planning are key ingredients to success. As part of preparing to do Tell Me A Story, a review of the materials in Family

Connections Project series is recommended, in particular, the Readiness Guide and Lessons Learned. In Tell Me A Story, the first training is identical to a training in Family Connections, the second has been modified and the third is entirely new.

▶ **When selecting a Workshop Leader**, make sure the person in mind has the time and experience necessary to feel confident in the role. From our experience we have found that individuals with a variety of educational backgrounds can be effective as Workshop Leaders, including those trained as teachers, social workers or mental health counselors. We have found this approach to training is most beneficial when the Workshop Leader is someone the participants know and trust. It is essential that the individual selected as the Workshop Leader has the time to prepare and deliver the workshops. In addition the Workshop Leader must also have the time to observe in classrooms and meet with teaching teams in order to provide support for individual and classroom change.

▶ **When planning the workshop series** make sure that the early childhood program has the ability to devote time, energy, and focus to the goal of becoming a more expressive environment. More specifically, this means that the workshop series and the additional activities devoted to making Circle Time better (i.e. classroom observations, team meetings, supervision, Circle Time) will be given priority during this time period. We have also found that allowing for several weeks to pass between workshops allows participants to reflect on what they have learned and try new strategies in their work.

**The Tell Me A Story Book Guides:** This section includes an introduction that describes the preparation and use of the Book Guides. The section also includes Book Guides for the following children's books:

*When Sophie Gets Angry – Really, Really Angry...*

*Jamaica Tag-Along*

*When My Mom is Sad*

## Additional Resources

This section includes a series of short papers that supplement the information in the Tell Me A Story Workshops, and a list of readings and collection of short papers included in order to learn more about the subjects presented.

## References

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