

The day I discovered that I'm strong

STORIES OF STRENGTH IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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The article summarises the results of a project for which over 700 biographical stories from 48 countries were analysed, rewritten and produced so that they have the potential to foster resilience in children.

"The waves swirled me around and I was sinking fast. 'Don't panic!' I told myself 'Don't panic!' The light of the sun was shining through the ocean surface – and the sun was getting smaller and smaller as I sank. Looking down I saw the ground coming closer and I told myself: 'Wait until your feet touch the ground. Look up to the sun and push yourself up as hard as you can.' When I surfaced again I looked into my friends' pale faces and shocked eyes."

Storytelling can do a lot: it involves emotionally, provides windows into other people's experiences, serves as a mirror to reflect our own lives, provides templates and patterns of social interaction (Kottler, 2015). It supplies strategic information, provokes emotional arousal and reflection and increases a person's ability to interpret social behaviour. Metaphors and meaningful stories can, among other things, alter behaviour, promote self-acceptance, reframe counterproductive attitudes, inspire greater empathy and compassion for others, encourage self-care, problem-solving skills and dealing with negative emotions etc. (Boyd, 2009). But can stories in children's TV foster resilience?

From a theoretical perspective, it has to be a meaningful story that inspires belief in oneself and renews hope (Simmons, 2006). Powerful metaphors can help to gain a deeper understanding of



Ill. 1: Alejandro from Cuba shared his story about how he almost drowned while surfing

an experience or facilitate the reframing of it (Kottler, 2015).

According to the results of the study "How to touch the soul with children's TV?" on stories that help to deal with difficult situations, a story needs to tackle the essence of an authentic challenging experience and follow a child hero or heroine dealing with the given challenge in a competent and self-efficient way (Götz, 2011). Therefore, the first research question was:

- What are the typical experiences of self-efficacy children encounter in their everyday lives – in different countries?

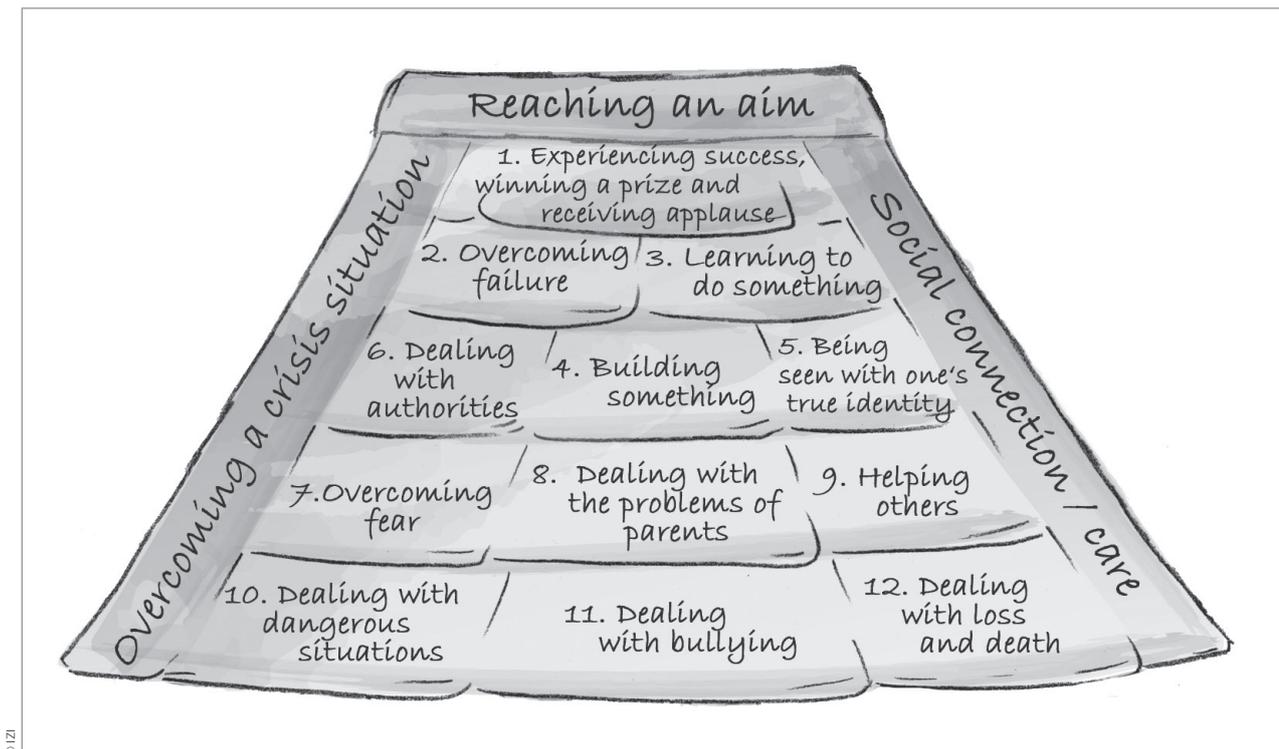
While a lot of knowledge and best practice examples of generally engaging storytelling for children in children's TV are available, only little is known so far on how to promote resilience through storytelling. Therefore, the next theoretical question was:

- How can a story in children's TV foster resilience?

Finally, the third challenge was to put these research results into practice and develop a TV format for children worldwide. This agenda framed the project "Strong Stories for Strong Children" which comprises workshops with adults and children, the collection and analysis of experiences of self-efficacy in 48 countries and the realization of those in a live-action format, a co-production in 15 countries.

WORKSHOPS "STRONG STORIES FOR STRONG CHILDREN", "STORYTELLING CLUB", AND "ART CONTEST"

"Do you remember the time when you were 8 or 9 years old? When did you discover that you are strong?" More than 600 TV producers and educators



Ill. 2: The 3 dimensions of self-experience and 12 main patterns of analysed stories

from over 50 countries were asked these questions over the last 5 years. After an introduction on how children use TV for their identity work and what they are generally looking for in TV, the participants made a short meditation, taking them back to the time when they were 8 or 9 years old, sometimes a little earlier or later. They were asked to remember the moment when they discovered that they are strong. They tried to think of details like people involved, smells, colours, the course of events and, most importantly, how they had felt. After they had slowly risen from meditation, they drew this moment with colourful crayons, described the situation and how they had felt. They shared this story with their neighbours, talked about the experience and, step by step, developed it further.

The excerpt at the beginning of this article is taken from the story by Alejandro from Cuba (Ill. 1) which is one of the 485 stories from 44 countries that were developed within the framework of the workshop "Strong Stories for

Strong Children". The participants of the workshop allowed me to collect and analyse their stories.

To learn more about the experience of self-efficacy in children and adolescents a pedagogical tool was developed, the Storytelling Club (see also Taher et al. in this issue). Seventy-three stories and pictures of Storytelling Clubs with Syrian refugee children in Lebanon and children from different regions in Taiwan were analysed. Additionally, 173 pictures and stories from the PRIX JEUNESSE Art Contest 2018 were analysed, all told and drawn in the context of the impulse question: "When did you discover that you are strong?"

EVALUATING THE STORIES

After reading the stories several times, coding them openly, and coding the essence of the experience and the setting where the experience had taken place, we looked for typical patterns through agglomerative clustering, fol-

lowed by categorising all stories and re-analysing the patterns 3 times. As a result, 3 dimensions of typical experiences of strength and 12 main types of stories were found (Ill. 2). Furthermore, the common focus of each story was described.

THE RESULTS

When do children experience themselves as strong?

The 485 stories show 3 typical dimensions of self-experience: 1. reaching an aim; 2. overcoming a crisis situation (experiencing growth); 3. social connection and helping others (giving care). Out of the various settings in which the stories had taken place 12 typical patterns which cover more or less all the biographical stories could be identified. Each of these patterns had a typical focus in the narration and a certain role assigned to the child.

RESEARCH

1. Reaching an aim (experiencing success and acknowledgement)

Winning a prize or getting applause

In many stories the moment of winning in a sport competition, succeeding in a sport test or reaching an ambitious goal are remembered as moments in which the participants of the project discovered that they are strong. In the case of Anjana from Sri Lanka, for example, it was reaching something that seemed impossible: being a highly trained dancer of Sri Lankan traditional dance and at the same time achieving outstanding academic results.

Overcoming failure

Sometimes the moments of not reaching an aim and getting over it are the situations later on remembered as very strong moments. Interestingly, these stories never only cover the moment of failure: in all cases, the child succeeded in reaching one thing, but failed in achieving another, like Daniel from Bahrain who succeeded in one swimming discipline, but failed another. His first emotion, the feeling of being a loser, vanished when he was called out – to the astonishment of the others – as the winner in another swimming discipline. At that moment he decided to never let anything crush him down again – just because he had failed one discipline.

Learning something

Another typical variation of the experience of strength is a successful learning process. Learning how to swim or how to ride a bike can be a memorable moment of building one's own identity, especially if the child is rewarded with an important event or with praise from a person important to him/her.



Ill. 3: Anna is not pleased with the new pink bike her father has bought for her because she does not see herself as a “pink bike girl”

Building something

In a few stories, the building of a treehouse, a hideaway in the bushes or making a beautiful bracelet etc. is the moment of discovering one's own strength. In these stories the memory of, for example, putting all one's energy into one particular project for a whole summer is the central point.

Being seen with one's true identity

In some stories, children find their strength when they discover and show who they are and get acknowledgement for it. For example, the moment the admired father understands that his daughter does not identify as a “pink bike girl” (Ill. 3) and the moment the classmates see how long and fluffy the hair of an African-Canadian girl are, stick in children's memories as moments in which they discovered their own identity and could show this to others.

Dealing with authorities

In some stories, children experience themselves as strong when they are confronted with or confront an authority. They have a concern, sometimes regarding themselves, sometimes

regarding others, and find a way to insist on their rights or on telling what they wanted to say. In the story from Thailand, for example, Issada's best friend got a heavy punishment from the teacher because she had played ball in the classroom. But Issada stood up and confessed her complicity, because her friend was not the only one breaking the rules.

2. Overcoming a crisis situation (experiencing growth)

Overcoming fear

Many stories focus on the moment when children overcame their fear of a dog or a spider, or jumping into dark water. Carolina from Argentina was deeply frightened of dogs. While staying on a farm for a weekend, her friends first helped her by shielding her from the dogs that lived there. But at one moment, she was alone and had to pass the 3 farm dogs. First she started to run – and so did the dogs. She forced herself to slow down – and so did the dogs. She forced herself to stop – and so did the dogs. She looked at them for a while and then, after a while, even dared to touch them.

Screenshot from *The day I became a star* © IZI/Prix Jeunesse

Ill. 4: 11-year-old Tan Tan has had enough of her parents' constant fights

Dealing with the problems of parents

An astonishing type of story deals with moments when children are confronted with the problems of or between their parents, often the moment when the parents split up or cheat on each other. In these stories, it is not the suffering which is the central moment. In many cases, the parents' separation, leaving the father or mother or talking about the parents' problems is a kind of relief. Tan Tan, an 11-year-old girl, told the story of when she finally yelled at her parents, telling them to stop arguing (Ill. 4).

Dealing with dangerous situations

Another typical setting where children discovered their own strength are moments in which they mastered a very critical or even life-endangering situation (cf. Alejandro's surfing story at the beginning of this article). The process and the coping mechanism are in the centre of these stories.

Dealing with bullying

In some of the stories, the topics of bullying, exclusion or being treated very badly by peers are in the centre of the story. Often, the meanness is inflicted on someone else and the child was an observer of the situation and

decided to help instead of taking part in the bullying. Christin from Canada, for example, refused to help the group bully a girl, despite knowing that she would be excluded from the class community from that day on, too. Only in a few stories do the victims themselves remember the situation of being bullied as an experience of strength. In these cases, they take action, hit the bully, throw a computer keypad or backpack at the bully.

3. Social connection and helping others

Helping others

In a few stories, children experienced themselves as strong when being in charge of others and helping them to overcome their problems. Often, being needed by others is an important impulse for becoming strong oneself. In a story from Malaysia, Stefanie and her friend missed the school bus home. That was the moment when Stefanie had to grow, take over responsibility and, for the first time, had to find the way home from school.

Dealing with loss and death

In some stories the moment when children discovered their own strength

is related to the death or loss of a beloved creature, like in the story from Mongolia in which a girl loses one of her 5 beloved chickens (Ill. 5).

These 3 dimensions of experiences and the 12 typical patterns of story setting could be found all over the world when adults looked back at their childhood when they were 8 to 9 years old.¹ This meaningful experience of self-efficacy could be the "story core" that promotes resilience in children, because it touches on something a lot of children go through. But it should be

told in a certain way, i.e. following the scientific findings in the field of fostering resilience in children.

WHAT KIND OF STORIES ARE TOLD MOST OFTEN?

"Experiencing success" through receiving applause, winning a prize or climbing a tree successfully is clearly the most common focus of the stories of strength. Nearly one fifth of the stories told by adults looking back at their childhood are centred around winning a prize and getting applause. These are obvious moments of acknowledgement, often representing the high peaks after a longer phase of insecurity, which are rewarded with applause or an object that signifies the success achieved. Often the acknowledgement depends on a third party assuring the child: "You are valuable."

"Overcoming fear" (55 stories) is the second most frequent focus of the stories. The story patterns "dealing with bullying" (46 stories), "learning something" (49 stories), "dealing with dangerous situations" (44 stories), "dealing with authorities" (40 stories), and "helping others" (37 stories) are also frequently told, as well as story



Screenshot from *The day I became strong* © IZI, Pixi Jeunesse

Ill. 5: Amraa from Mongolia gets 5 little chickens, but one of them is ill. She decides to give it a good life for as long as possible

terns “overcoming fear” and “being seen with one’s true identity” are more than three times as often mentioned by girls as by boys.

In contrast to the biographical stories told by adults, there are some smaller new categories. Some children talked about the “experience of relationship”, driven by being together and being connected. Having a boyfriend gives 16-year-old Dusica strength and security; 13-year-old Aleska told the story of feeling connected with a wild horse nobody

types revolving around experiences like “building something” (39 stories) and “showing one’s own identity” (34 stories). These are all story patterns featuring the decision to take action and change the unsatisfying outside reality.

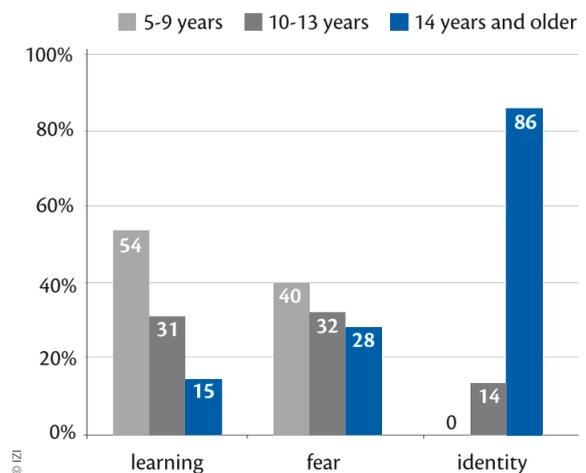
The patterns “overcoming failure”, “dealing with the problems of parents” (15 stories), or “dealing with loss and death” (9 stories) are only rarely told as stories of strength. They address moments in a child’s life when something very difficult happens and he or she finds a way to deal with it. Recollecting these kinds of experiences in your biography and seeing that you were able to cope with a situation despite bad things happening, are expressions of resilience and strength.

CHILDREN, PRETEENS AND ADOLESCENTS DRAW AND WRITE ABOUT THE MOMENTS THEY DISCOVERED THAT THEY ARE STRONG

When children and adolescents between the age of 5 and 17 are asked to remember and draw a moment in

their lives when they discovered that they are strong, most of them tell a story which fits into the story patterns also identified in the stories told by adults. Besides a lot of similarities, some differences emerge. We could, for example, not identify the story patterns “dealing with authorities”, “problems of parents” or “poverty”. The reason for this might be the limited sample of children interested in art who are engaged and appropriately equipped to be able to participate in the project and send in their artworks. The result might also hint at the fact that for children and adolescents, dealing with authorities or parents’ divorce is not a strength they are aware of (yet). Reaching an aim or winning a prize in a sport competition, however, are the moments most frequently mentioned in which children discover their own strength - mentioned twice as often by boys as by girls. The pat-

terns “overcoming fear” and “being seen with one’s true identity” are more than three times as often mentioned by girls as by boys. In some stories, the issue of self-regulating one’s feelings was in the centre. When 12-year-old Nicolas from Brazil “managed a way to overcome his pain through the power of thoughts”, this was his moment of discovering his own strength. For 5-year-old Lazor it was a moment of strength when he managed to get rid of the bad habit of using “ugly words”.



Ill. 6: Percentage of age groups in 3 story types (n = 173)

Among the $n = 173$ analysable stories, significant age tendencies could be found in the 3 categories “overcoming fear”, “learning”, and “building something”, which are definitely more important for children than for preteens or adolescents. The category “being seen with one’s identity”, on the other hand, was much more present among adolescents than children. Very clear age tendencies could be discerned regarding the type of experience and the type of story children and adolescents tell about a central moment of strength (Ill. 6). One pattern that could be found mainly in the stories told by adolescents is “philosophical understanding”. Anastasia from Montenegro, for example, draws “a girl” who is representing herself and describes how “she can see the whole picture of today’s world and feels like she can change the future for better and that is why she feels strong”. Her words are shaped by a typical adolescent’s world-view. From their developmental stage, adolescents can see deeper meanings and global connections which give them a different view of the world – which sometimes can be exactly the moment when they see their own intellectual strength.

HOW CAN RESILIENCE BE FOSTERED?

Following the work of Fröhlich-Gildhoff and Rönna-Böse, who developed 6 pillars of “personal resilience factors” which can be used as starting points for the sustained promotion of resilience in children (see also Fröhlich-Gildhoff & Rönna-Böse in this issue), these 6 pillars are used to provide ideas on how stories can become significant in this context.

For promoting **self-perception**, children have to learn to distinguish between their different feelings and their qualities. This includes encouraging children to name the quality of their feelings and for example finding

ways to express “I don’t feel good” through words such as sadness, anger, fear, jealousy etc. (Fröhlich-Gildhoff & Rönna-Böse, 2015, p. 45). Stories promoting resilience correspondingly display characters through which children can identify different qualities of feelings.

Self-efficacy, the fundamental trust in one’s own abilities and the conviction that one can achieve a goal by overcoming obstacles, is fostered by telling a typical story of self-efficacy as found in this project. To encourage especially those children with very little self-confidence who have internalised the critical attitude of their parents, it is important to tell stories on children’s achievements and value these.

To support **social competence**, the elements in the stories that are centred around communication processes could be told in a way that makes problematic situations and the reactions of others understandable. Stories promoting social skills show pro-social negotiation of difficult situations and allow space for mental processes within the scope of dramaturgy.

Self-regulation can be promoted by emotionally involving stories that point out strategies which children can apply to regulate their emotions. Ideally, this happens without being clearly flagged up as an educational programme.

Problem solving, the ability to proceed systematically, can be fostered by telling the story of a child who is confronted with problems, analyses them, considers different solutions, weighs up the possible consequences and finally comes up with a solution. Afterwards the children might even be inspired to analyse the extent to which this was the best solution.

Active coping competencies, the competencies to appropriately assess, evaluate and reflect critical and stressful situations, can be promoted by narrating potential crises

in such a way that children imagine themselves in the situation and thus mentally anticipate the best way to respond.

Telling real stories of self-efficacy, showing and naming feelings, making them understandable, and demonstrating self-regulation strategies is a good starting point to foster resilience. Resilience can also be promoted by presenting examples of proactively dealing with problems, appropriately communicating in situations of crisis or conflict, as well as acknowledging the pro-social strategies and actions children apply when dealing with a problem (see also Holler in this issue).

HOW TO WRITE STRONG STORIES FOR CHILDREN

Not all true “narrative cores” will suffice to involve a child emotionally, much depends on the way the story is told. For the target group of 5- to 8-year-olds and with the clear goal of fostering resilience we have developed a dramaturgic formula that has proven to be appealing for children:

1. **Offer a hook** that involves the child in front of the screen. This can be achieved through a first-person narrative that is clearly written from a child’s perspective. A child stops his/her current activity, turns to the camera and names the episode’s main challenge: “Have you ever been in a really dangerous situation?” or “Have you ever been unsure which decision to take?”, followed by “I have – and this is my story”.
2. **Take the viewer into the world of the protagonist** by sharing the main character’s experiences and inviting the viewer to immerse himself/herself into the character’s world.
3. In order to offer a hero or heroine whom children want to identify with, it is important to **focus on**

the protagonist's strengths rather than his/her shortcomings and weaknesses. It is crucial to show him or her doing an action or being involved in a relationship many children also would like to be involved in.

4. Right after the exposition in which the protagonist and his/her world are introduced the **actual problem** should arise.
5. At the climax of the story, i.e. when the main protagonist is confronted with a challenge, allow the children in front of the TV enough **time to understand, process and react** to the stories, pictures, and actions. Subjective camera perspectives, close-ups of the protagonist, and approximately 2 to 3 seconds longer than adult viewers would need to process what they have seen, help children a lot in terms of involvement.
6. To foster resilience, the child in front of the TV must be granted sufficient **time to think along**, like in a role play. Therefore, so-called "thinking pictures" of the protagonist, aesthetically interesting close-ups of the protagonist during the decision-making process, are integrated. Take your decision: allow the children enough time to feel and think along.
7. In order to **offer strategies which the children in front of the TV can adopt** and apply in similar situations it is necessary to present meaningful solutions which comprise transferable behaviour patterns and problem-solving strategies. The action should be successful and acknowledged by people who are important to the protagonist.
8. If a story was very involving, children should be granted **enough time to say goodbye**. Every story should release the children with positive emotions. In the epilogue, the protagonist can recap the events and the conclusions to round off the story.

A FORMAT TO FOSTER RESILIENCE

Based on over 700 stories from 48 countries and their analyses and building on the knowledge gained from our over 180 reception studies conducted over the last 19 years we developed a live-action format: *The Day I Became Strong*; a live-action series made of short films of 5 to 6 minutes' length. All episodes follow the same dramaturgy and each episode tells the story of a child (7 to 11 years old) from one of the 15 participating countries. The style of the episodes is visual storytelling that is basically understandable without words. The regional language can be heard but is not needed to understand the story. A voice-over, spoken by a child of the same sex and age as the protagonist, comments on the inner processes and feelings of the protagonist.

The basic concept of the format is a story pool, i.e. each partner produces at least one episode and receives the rights to broadcast the other episodes in their own language, too. During the process of script development as well as the production and editing process, experienced producers of the PRIX JEUNESSE network travelled to the different countries and supported the local teams to produce beautiful short films according to international standards. The basic ideas all stories were to follow are:

- Tell a story in which a child is fully aware of the situation, trusts him/herself (and/or others), gets active and succeeds.
- Show a child who is focused on the challenge and gets active by gaining access to his/her own resources.
- Allow mistakes and doubts, show efforts, connections and networking.
- Foster a deeper understanding of situations, the ways social systems work or individuals think and act.

- Touch upon acknowledgement and offer orientation, show autonomy, competencies and resonance whilst respecting the child's individuality. ■

NOTE

¹ Three additional typical story patterns were found in the stories of children and adolescents (Götz, 2018).

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