

Fairy Stories

Fairy stories are another good source of characters and situations which are metaphors for many universal aspects of human experience. Children find it easy to empathise or identify with, or express negative feelings towards, polarised archetypal characters (e.g. hero/villain, fairy godmother/witch).

Remember that children from different backgrounds to you may not know exactly the same stories although the basic plots are familiar in many cultures. It will be important for you to learn about similar stories from their primary culture.

Example of a fairy story - Hansel and Gretel

Synopsis

Hansel and Gretel came from a very poor family. Their father and stepmother could no longer feed them so abandoned them in the woods. Starving and wandering, the children found a gingerbread house and were taken in by the old woman who lived there. However she was a witch and tried to eat Hansel. The children escaped by pushing her in her own oven. They found their way home and their father was overjoyed to see them – their step-mother had died in the meantime

In Practice

This is a rich story offering numerous feelings and themes which children might identify with. For example:

- poverty
- neglect
- rejection
- abandonment
- loss
- abuse
- fear
- victimhood
- survival
- fighting back
- reconciliation

Case example

Sanjeev read the story of Hansel and Gretel to twins Freya and Toby when visiting them in their foster placement. The twins had recently come into care following neglect and physical abuse by their father and his partner, Kiera. Sanjeev picked this story because he thought it had some parallels to their experience. They were girl/boy siblings like Hansel and Gretel and their mother had died when they were quite young. Their father had become very depressed and not looked after them well. Things got worse after Keira came on the scene 3 years ago. Their father and Keira were very wrapped up in each other and Keira seemed to resent their presence. She had taken to beating them with a stick when she thought they were being 'naughty'. Their father tolerated this so as not to upset Keira. The children's future was uncertain as their father was struggling to put their needs before Keira and care proceedings were underway.

After reading the story, Sanjeev asked the children what they thought of the story. They explored together what it might feel like for Hansel and Gretel in that situation, whether they might feel anger towards the stepmother, fear of the witch, disappointment in their father etc.

Next time Sanjeev visited the children asked him to read the story again. The foster carer said they had asked for it to be read several times in between. The twins drew some pictures of Hansel and Gretel with Sanjeev and wrote down words about their feelings: 'sad, crying, 'help', 'save me', scared'.

Another time Toby said to Sanjeev: 'That's good they pushed the witch in the oven. I think they should push the stepmother in the oven too'. Freya said wistfully: 'they're lucky they got to go home again. I hope we get to go home again too.'

Comment

As you can see, this fairy story offered some rich opportunities for opening up some difficult issues with the children. Freya and Toby were able to identify with the characters and symbolically work through some of their experiences. The stories also offered an opportunity to begin to discuss their own real experiences, their wishes and their feelings.