

# What fairy tales contribute to children's and adolescents' mental health

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**The article demonstrates what opportunities fairy tales offer and what role these play in the development of children's socio-cognitive abilities.**

Which are more effective: intentions or models? The concept of the role model may be somewhat out of fashion, but role models are still very powerful in each person's development. This is particularly true in the case of children and adolescents. In psychology, specialists refer to "social learning through imitation" (Bandura, 1962). The models may be actual people whose effects and actions are considered to be attractive, and whom others would wish to imitate; however, they may also be imagined people, protagonists from books or fairy tales.

When do we become interested in literary figures? Whenever they are similar to us; when we recognise parallels between our own situation and that of the protagonists; when the tasks and problems they are facing could also be our tasks and problems; when the needs of the hero or heroine are also our needs.

This is what makes fairy tales attractive to children. A little girl listening with fascination to the fairy tale of *Red Riding Hood* intuitively feels that the time will come when she must leave her home by herself, without the protection of her parents, and prove herself in the world. She learns from *Red Riding Hood's* encounters that this exciting experience is not without its risks (Ill. 1), that it is important to be aware of these risks and adapt to them, and that there is no reason to lose heart in the face of such challenges.

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## THE LANGUAGE OF FAIRY TALES: VIVID AND RICH IN IMAGERY

Fairy tales' greatest strength is their vitality and rich imagery. The language of folk tales is clear and concrete, never abstract or interpretative. They produce vivid images of impressive power and clarity in their listeners. On the other hand, fairy tales consciously refrain from making their protagonists too concrete;

they are characterised – if at all – by only a few details. If we were to present a fairy tale such as *Hansel and Gretel* to a publisher's reader today, the manuscript would perhaps be sent back to us with some critical comments. How old

are *Hansel and Gretel*? Are they blonde or dark-haired? How tall are they? What are their particular characteristics? What are their strengths and weaknesses? We learn none of this in the Grimms' version, and this is precisely one of the strengths of folk tales. The narratives consciously provide only a rough template which the listeners can then freely fill in with their own imagination. This makes it easier to identify with the heroes and heroines of the fairy tale and ensures that the fairy tale is not too challenging for the child. In many fairy tales, it is not only the characters that are merely roughly sketched, but also the environment. This allows children to develop their own inner images of the fairy tales, appropriate to their age and stage of development, highly individual, and adapted to their own needs. This individuality and diversity becomes clear when children are asked to draw a scene from a fairy tale. Each of these pictures is a unique specimen which shows the professional the particular psychological condition of the little artist.

A model can only be effective if it speaks to us. The fears and desires of the fairy tale characters are at the same time the fears and desires of the children. The fear of losing parents and of loneliness, as in *Hansel and Gretel*; the desire for strength and assertiveness, as in the fairy tale of *Hop-o'-My-Thumb*; the fear of missing out and not being loved as much as one's siblings, as in *Cinderella*.

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## FAIRY TALES HAVE A SUBSTITUTIVE FUNCTION

Fairy tales often fulfil desires vicariously, thereby functioning as substitutes.

However, they avoid easy solutions; instead, they often depict the hero or heroine going through a process of development that is not at all simple, one which demands courage, kindness and intelligence in order to achieve the objective. Tasks must be performed, adventures must be mastered. In the fairy tale *The Water of Life*, the youngest of 3 brothers is only successful because, in contrast to the 2 older brothers, he is still mindful of others even though he is in a rush. On the way to find water to save his terminally ill father, he encounters a dwarf. He is not arrogant or condescending towards him but polite and friendly, with the result that the way to the water of life is revealed to him. The children listening to the story learn that ultimately it is not harshness and strength – elbowing our way through life – which bring us rewards, but rather values such as humanity, solidarity with those who are weaker, modesty and patience. Fairy tales are moral without moralising. They replace pedagogical finger-pointing – which usually has little effect – with the “cinema of the mind”. This is how fairy tales help to convey moral concepts, shape children’s conscience, and reinforce their inherent pro-social characteristics. The concept of the favourite fairy tale, as advanced by Hans Dieckmann, suggests that a child’s favourite fairy tale expresses a lot about his/her current psychological needs, in particular about developmental conflicts which still need to be resolved (Dieckmann, 1966). These stumbling blocks on the way to a mature personality can be overcome if role models are internalised, e.g. by adopting successful models as one’s own. The developmental aspect is important. Many fairy tales illustrate the necessity of inner development. They show children that they should not, on any account, be fearful, but rather that they must proceed with courage. In this regard, many folk tales offer solution models that children can understand.

## ANIMISTIC WORLD VIEW

The child’s intuitive understanding of fairy tales is based on the fact that fairy tales and children avail themselves of the same hypotheses. Both have an animistic, i.e. animate, world view: animals, plants, and even inanimate objects such as the bread in *Mother Holle* which begs to be finally taken out of the oven, can have a sentient soul and can become agents of action themselves. The imagination of preschool children is populated by dwarfs, giants, fairies and monsters, personifications of forces to which every person – young or old – is subject. They express children’s preoccupations in a symbolic and pictorial way.

There are even many adults whose favourite fairy tales tell us something about their character and life situation, including their career choice. When the Allensbach Institute (2003) carried out a survey across Germany to find out how many people could still recall details from the Grimms’ fairy tale *Hans in Luck* – which, in its presentation of bartering, deals with mercantile issues more than any other fairy tale – the result was 5% of the population, but 17% of executive employees and senior officials.

Fairy tales are one of the oldest forms of literature and, at the same time, one of the earliest for any child. We should not underestimate the effect that telling fairy tales to children has on their feel for language. As well as the wealth of images, it is the techniques of repetition and rhythmatization which help to impress the stories on the children’s memories as they listen. This is how they expand children’s verbal repertoire. It is not by chance that phrases such as “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of us all?” or “Riddles and magic are my game. Rumpelstiltskin is my name” still resonate in our ears.

## PROMOTING A FEEL FOR LANGUAGE AND MEMORY CAPACITY

Neither is it down to chance that many children ask to hear the same fairy tales over and over again, and indeed that they want – seemingly compulsively – to always hear them in the same wording. They are very attentive in their listening, and they immediately criticise any accidental or intentional variation in the telling. If we start to tell a familiar fairy tale and then grind to a halt, many children are astonishingly quick to continue to tell the fairy tale independently. This is how, in addition, fairy tales promote children’s feeling for language and capacity for verbal memory, and – last but not least – awaken their own pleasure in telling and inventing stories. Children who find they enjoy fairy tales will ask for further stories. Along with their growing linguistic competence, their thinking and therefore their world view become more complex and diverse, and they become increasingly capable of understanding themselves and their actions. Telling and listening to fairy tales from an early age also promotes children’s later literacy and how they engage with texts.

Two examples from well-known German poets highlight the positive effect fairy tales have on a child’s creativity. Several autobiographical accounts by Goethe have been passed down in which he describes the influence of fairy tales on his childish imagination. As an old woman his mother could still recall: “There I sat, and there he soon devoured me, with his great black eyes; and when the fate of any favourite did not turn out exactly according to his notion, I saw how the passionate veins swelled upon his forehead and how he choked his tears. – He often caught me up, and said, before I had taken the turn in my tale: ‘Mother, the princess won’t marry the nasty tailor, even if he does slay the giant, will she?’” (von

Arnim, 1837). Sometimes Goethe's mother deliberately only told him half the fairy tale, whereupon little Johann Wolfgang would imagine the rest of the story in bed, a story on his own terms, of course.

Heinrich Heine was well into adulthood when he described how his childish soul was inspired by fairy tales told to him by his old nurse. In his satirical epic poem *Germany. A Winter's Tale* – a biting satire on the existing political conditions in Germany, which was dominated by Prussia at the time – his recollections of listening to fairy tales are a heart-warming exception:

When I think of that tale, I also think  
Of my nurse, so dear and so old.  
I see once more her brown face,  
With many a wrinkle and a fold.

She was born in Münsterland,  
And knew many stories in detail:  
Ghost stories to raise your hair,  
Many a folksong and fairy-tale.<sup>1</sup>

In his autobiographical works too, Heinrich Heine expressly mentions how much he owes to these fairy tales (Wilkes, 1997).

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### MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH COPING

Stimulating children's imaginations via fairy tales is by no means an end in itself but is very important to mental health, as we know from research into coping. The term "coping" refers in psychology to measures people take to help themselves, mechanisms for overcoming problems that are inherent in everyone (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). All of us – even the youngest children – have at our disposal, to a greater or lesser extent, reaction patterns which can be deployed in critical situations and conflicts. The more these reaction patterns are at a person's disposal, the more individually, rapidly and flexibly s/he can react to and cope with different challenges. What kind of reaction patterns we have at our disposal depends considerably on our previous experiences. Previous

experiences feed on situations experienced in reality but also on perceived problems for which we seek answers in our imagination. Stimulating children's imaginations through fairy tales and presenting different possible solutions and developments increases children's flexibility around how they deal with developmental challenges and conflict situations, and expands their range of possible courses of action. Children feel safer and more secure, which can help to reduce their agonising feelings of powerlessness and fear. In this, too, fairy tales support children's mental health. Fairy tales are stories which boost confidence: their message is that children should have faith in the powers of good and their own abilities, just as the heroes and heroines in the fairy tales do: the musicians of Bremen, the brave little tailor, or the tortoise who beats the bragging hare in the race.

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### ILLUSORY WORLD VERSUS REALITY

The fascination of fairy tales is created not least by the structure of the classical folk tale. Folk tales are extremely short, lasting no more than a few

minutes; they drive the plot forwards dynamically, divide the characters very clearly into good and evil, have a clear arc of suspense, and – very importantly for children – a positive ending. In the 1960s fairy tales were discredited in many pedagogical circles precisely for this reason (Lange, 2012). The argument was that this sharp black-and-white thinking and the consistently positive outcome were fooling children into believing in an illusory world and distorting their view of reality. This criticism overlooked the fact that the initial priority is to strengthen children's basic sense of trust and their faith in the possibility of mastering crisis situations and surviving dangers. Neither is the criticism that fairy tales propose an idyllic world valid. On the contrary, fairy tales are by no means easily digestible. If we consider not only the content of the most familiar Grimms' fairy tales, we find intended cannibalism (*Hansel and Gretel*), multiple attempted murders (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), physical mutilation (Cinderella's stepsisters cut their feet to fit into the golden slipper, and their eyes are pecked out by the birds), deprivation of liberty (*Rapunzel*), severe jealousy, rivalries and intrigues.

Therefore, others came to the conclusion that no child should be expected to consume such violent material. Neurological research has shown us, however, that only truly exciting stories activate the emotional centres that are necessary for learning processes. The title of a well-known book by Bruno Bettelheim, first published in 1976, is *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Bettelheim was a psychoanalyst who did a lot of work with children. His interpretations of folk tales are certainly – like any work of scholarship – influenced by the era in which they were written, and today’s readers do not always find them plausible. Nonetheless, the essence of Bettelheim’s theories is still applicable (vom Orde, 2012). His interpretations of fairy tales are essentially based on the fact that each fairy tale character represents part of the child’s psyche. For Bettelheim, fairy tales are nothing other than inner psychological processes externalised as vivid stories. The witch’s gingerbread house in *Hansel and Gretel* therefore also stands for the danger of greed (Ill. 2), which is intrinsic in human beings (Bettelheim, 1976). Those who give in to this greed unreservedly, those who do not learn to control and curtail the satisfaction of their needs, may be putting themselves in great danger. This message is symbolically conveyed to the children listening to the fairy tale.

## COLLECTIVE MEMORY: VALUES AND NORMS

One general aspect of the significance of fairy tales for children’s psychological development is connected with the concept of collective memory. All societies subsist on cultivating particular cultural rites which reinforce the feeling of belonging together and create an awareness of common values and norms. We must not underestimate the role of folk tales in this. Their broad dissemination within a cultural circle

gives rise to a common foundation of images and stories which enables intuitive communication beyond the narrow family circle, thereby creating a high degree of connection and understanding. Even in today’s world, which is characterised by increasing individualisation and diversification, there are still astonishingly high levels of awareness of prevalent folk tales. An Allensbach study from 2003 showed that 81 % of adults in Germany can still remember at least 3 fairy tales that they were told as children.

Fairy tales seem to be particularly effective if they are read or, even better, told to children in an intimate situation. This means the reader or storyteller – unlike the audiobook narrator – can be responsive to the child’s reaction. The adult’s familiar voice creates a particularly emotional atmosphere, which makes it easier to comprehend the fairy tale. Within this atmosphere, exciting, and sometimes also unsettling, adventures are embedded in feelings of closeness and protection, and on a neuro-biological level this stabilises and organises the patterns of cerebral excitation which promote the forming and connection of synapses. There are developmental windows that can open and close again for the different forms of literature. That is why it is important to tell suitable fairy tales at the right time. Johann Gottfried Herder, Goethe’s friend, put it like this: “A child who is never told any fairy tales will retain in his mind a plot of field that can never be cultivated in later years.”<sup>2</sup> There is no one better than a child’s closest attachment figures, in most cases parents or grandparents, to find out which fairy tales fascinate which child at what point in time. And it is not uncommon for an adult to pick up a book of fairy tales again years later and to be captivated once again by the peculiar old magic the fairy tale once exercised over him/her. How can we describe the role played by fairy tales in children’s and adolescents’ mental health in comparison to other significant influences?

Fairy tales cannot replace parents.  
Fairy tales cannot replace time and affection.  
Fairy tales cannot replace play and playmates.  
Fairy tales cannot replace nature experiences and adventures.  
On the other hand, fairy tales are also irreplaceable. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Text by Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), translated into English by Joseph Massaad. <http://www.heinrich-heine.net/winter/winteregoodb.htm> [22.01.2018]

<sup>2</sup> Translated from German.

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