The Burned Tree
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Communicating
  • listening
Thinking
  • analyzing information

Once upon a time there was a tree in the forest that didn't look green and alive like other trees. It looked as if it had been struck by lightning and had stopped growing - like someone had come and cut its branches back to stubs. Most of the trees in that part of the forest thought that it was dead, but they were wrong, because deep down inside, this tree was alive. It just didn't know how to grow and develop into a healthy and beautiful tree with leaves as the other trees had done, because it had been hit by lightning and badly burned.

Sometimes after being burned a tree goes into shock and gives up the will to grow and to be like other trees. And sometimes the shock of the lightning and the storms makes a tree believe that it can't grow and that it has to stay the same, looking burned and ugly and dead.

One day a beaver came along and, thinking that this tree was dead, began to chew on it.

"Hey! Ow!" yelled the tree.

Startled, the beaver looked around and exclaimed, "Who's there? Who's talking to me?"

"It's ME!" said the tree. "You're hurting me! Quit biting me!"
"I can't believe it!" said the beaver. "You didn't look alive. You looked deader than a doornail. You looked burned and pitiful. Why, your branches are broken and you don't even have any leaves. Now, I'm a pretty responsible beaver and I don't cut down live trees, because I'd feel bad about that. I just figured you were dead."

"I'm NOT dead," said the tree. "I'm not even sick."

The beaver gave her a puzzled look. "Well, if you're not dead and you're not sick, what happened?"

Sadly the little tree replied, "I don't know how to grow. I don't know how to get leaves. I don't know how to look alive again, because the lightning hit me and there have been so many storms in my life that I lost the knowledge about how to grow."

The beaver, which had much experience with trees, decided to help, and explained that she must first remove the burned ends of the limbs. Climbing in and out of the branches, she chewed away at the ends until all the burned parts were gone and new life could start growing. The tree was surprised that it hardly hurt at all. Next, the beaver found some special fertilizer for trees and put it all around the trunk. She made sure that the tree got all the sunshine and water it needed.

In a very short time the little tree discovered that it DID know how to grow, and it DID know how to develop, and it DID know how to be healthy and look beautiful and full of green leaves. It began to sprout new leaves and to grow and to develop, and before long no one could tell that tree had ever been hit by lightning or burned. The tree and the beaver became very close after that.

Because the beaver had helped the tree grow to be so beautiful and healthy, the tree decided to do something special for the beaver. She asked the beaver to carve a sign about their friendship. It was placed in front of the tree so that everyone who passed would realize just how much difference a trusted friend can make in the way your life goes.

~adapted from Nancy Davis Ph.D. (1988)

Stories have been used throughout history to calm, heal, inspire and to transfer information and tradition from generation to generation. A story can be therapeutic when it challenges you the listener, to reflect on your experiences in new ways which may result in a shift in thinking, emotions, and/or behavior. Many cultures and families have traditional stories of wisdom, survival and resilience and these stories have the potential for healing. Through our work in home visiting, we often receive the “gift” of stories from the families and colleagues with whom we work.

When listening to these stories, we can remember to practice active listening skills, mindfulness and to remain curious. We can remember that an important skill is our
ability to really listen and hear the story and refrain from interrupting while the storyteller shares a story. We can use body language to indicate our interest by leaning forward and ignoring distractions. We can use these words, “Say more about______” as a way to encourage the storyteller to share more rather than ask a specific question. We can re-tell the narrative back to the storyteller as a way to check that we received the right information.

We use a variety of communication styles to make meaning (Brazelton and Nugent, 2011) from shared stories and interactions. Those who share stories with us may carefully observe our reactions to their stories. It is important to consider how our reactions to shared stories may be interpreted. Reinforcing and validating the storyteller comments are essential for establishing a supportive relationships with others.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection:

1. What themes did you think about as you read “The Burned Tree” story?
2. What kinds of stories did you hear as a young child?
3. What are some stories from your family or culture that teaches about life, wisdom, danger, personal power, self-acceptance, resilience and love?
4. When a family tells you their story, what do you notice about your listening skills and response? How do you show that you are paying attention?
5. World Storytelling Day is March 20, 2018. What story will you share?

References/Additional Resources