As children tell stories, they participate in a fundamental human activity which involves their need to control and understand the meanings of their experience. In this quest for identity, children must sort through the social-behavioral conventions of the adult world, choosing those themes that best seem to elaborate the person they are and wish to become. At an unconscious level they are asking, "Will I be strong and masterful, or weak and afraid?" Besides the norms of conduct that stories reveal, children are also being exposed to the stylistic conventions of language forms that narrators use to spin out tales about themselves and others. Included are how one gets a story going and how one finishes a story. In mastering these conventions children complete one of the initial stages in their developing sense of form and coherence.

A five-year-old boy, Tracy, tells us a story. There was a boy named Johnny Hong Kong and finally he grew up and went to school and after that all he ever did was sit all day and think. He hardly ever went to the bathroom. And he thought everyday and every thought he thought up his head got bigger and bigger. One day it got so big he had to go live up in the attic with trunks and winter clothes. So his mother bought some gold fish and let them live in his head — he swallowed them — and every time he thought, a fish would eat it up until he was even. So he never thought again, and he felt much better.

(From Children Tell Stories: An Analysis of Fantasy, p. 133)

Charming! Johnny Hong Kong inhabits a world we have only known through the imagination. Although this world begins to assume a shape of cause and effect when we listen to it from Tracy's point of view, it is clear that Tracy has yet to control the framework that dictates the beginning and ending of his story. Like the confused chain of events we often find ourselves immersed in, we suddenly appear in the world of Johnny Hong Kong and then just as suddenly the tale is no more. "He felt much better." What a relief, but what happened next? The story, like the events of our lives, has stopped, but not ended. And this is the problem we all face as we try to impose a coherent order on the seemingly endless stream of our experiences. Do our lives really begin when we enter the rose-colored salon and end...
when we exit? How do we start a conversation with that stranger and finish it off? Are activities only officially over when fatigue sets in?

In order to study the emerging use of linguistic conventions that mark the openings and closings of stories, I analyzed 360 stories that Evelyn Pitcher collected during 1935 to 1955 from nursery school wild teeth.

Additionally, I kept track of all variations of once-upon-a-time including "once," "one day," "now I'll tell," "this is about," and "there was."

For closings or how children exited from their narratives, I distinguished between random conclusions ("Dog fell in the fence. I got a big fence. Daddy broke my fence. I hurt my knee. I go bang on the big rock. I go back home again." age 2:9) and logical conclusions ("Boy. He fell in the lake. He got on the land. He got his boat, put it in the water and got in. He went fishing. Then he went home with one hundred fish. He ate them and blew open. They buried him." age 5:11). I also recorded all occurrences of conventional exits including those borrowed from other stories or fairy tales ("lived happily ever after," "died," "went away") and those that parallel focal events in the life of the young child ("going to bed," "night-night," "went home," "got it all fixed," "went to school," "eat it all up," "took a bath"). Finally, I noted whenever a child concluded with a formal tag ending such as "That's the end of the story" or "That's all."

Immediate action was the entrance strategy favored by 65% of the two-year-olds in the stories they told Dr. Pitcher, but with the five-year-olds this figure had declined to 12%. On the other hand, primitive setting as a strategy increased from 35% for the two-year-olds to 88% for the five-year-olds. This shift, which reflects both the child's greater awareness of audience and his or her sense that linguistic markers are needed to indicate that a story has begun, is paralleled by the increased use of the conventionalized once-upon-a-time form which the two-year-olds only use 20% of the time while 73% of the stories of the five-year-olds employ it.

How to begin?

"... as much of the story is occurring in the children's heads as actually appears in their spoken words."
From this perspective these young children have begun to gain the form of an ending without yet grasping its substance or essence.

The children's exit strategies followed a similar developmental pattern. First, the average length of a story more than tripled when the five-year-olds were compared with the two-year-olds, but there was not really a corresponding growth in narrative ability. Logically concluded stories only went from 37% to 57%. These figures are not that stable, however, because the "logic" of these narratives is difficult to categorize when we consider that these children for the most part still lack an adult sense of chronological and thematic coherence. Frequently these stories seem like little more than a random lumping together of associations and elements lifted from both real life activities and stories that they have been told. While the personal symbolism of these stories is obvious, as much of the story is occurring in the children's heads as actually appears in their spoken words. Thus in hearing the "fishing story" quoted above, we fill in gaps like "he caught 100 fish" and "he died." On the other hand, the search for specific exit strategies becomes increasingly noticeable with age as we see in the conclusion of one of the stories by a five-year-old girl: "... And really the girl was a bad man. (I don't know how this will end.) She putted that little girl into jail. That's just the end." Conventional exits are being learned as is evidenced in their appearance in 48% of the stories of the five-year-olds as opposed to only 13% of the two-year-olds. Tag endings also increased sharply from 0% to 28%.

In considering these results I have made a deliberate distinction between entrances and exits on the one hand and beginnings and endings on the other, the latter representing successful instances of the former. From this perspective these young children have begun to gain the form of an ending without yet grasping its substance or essence. Thus they have gotten out of or exited from their stories without really completing them, something which would have required a more complex series of expectations and relationships.

One's sense of an ending is directly related to how one deals with expectations which of course are what the successful beginning serves to set up within us. In living through a series of narratives we begin to discriminate and thus anticipate when an action is about to be completed. Knowing when the curtain is about to be brought down on ourselves and others is fundamental to our monitoring of when things are over. Things, of course, are over when we declare they are (and we can see the child trying to get the adult off his back with "That's all"), but pure fiat will not do when we are trying to exist in a meaning network shared with others. Here
we must operate on the basis of social conventions, and these conventions dictate what the essence of a story is to be.

One cannot gain the essence of a story unless the story is complete. If I am telling you a narrative sequence about an event that happened on the bus, you, as listener, will not be satisfied until I get to the punch line. Until that point you will keep bombarding me with, “What happened next?” Yet narratives can also fit into a pattern of concentric circles in which one ending leads to a still larger ending. “A person approaches me on the street, threatens my life and steals my wallet. Then I safely return home, badly shaken.” is only episode one. Our listener questions us immediately, “Well, did you call the police?” And depending upon our answer, other questions might follow regarding what the police did and was the mugger ever apprehended. Then shifting slightly into interpretation, “How do you feel going out on the streets alone at night now?” Stringing through these subevents will be a sense of felt rhythm, and our goal will be to put them together into a coherent pattern for both ourselves and others. For finding a pattern to one’s words is equivalent to finding a pattern to one’s life.

The child’s movement toward this sense of form with its beginning-ending frame seems to be characterized by three stages. First, the undifferentiated stage of global egocentricity which we see in most of the two-year-olds’ stories. Then there is the stage of ritualized, repetitive behavior which leans heavily on the clichéd, formal conventions of the outside world and characterizes many of the stories of the five-year-olds. Finally, we have the stage of identity in which conventions are internalized and exits transformed into true endings.

Encouraging children to tell stories is an important way of not only fostering their psychic-social development, but of allowing them to develop a rhythmical sense of order and relatedness to events. In telling stories children are learning the formal aspects of completing a gesture, and organizing an experience. They are learning these things in terms of an internalized body sense (“How does it feel or sound?”) rather than an externally imposed set of rules (“Avoid a succession of loose sentences”). If children learn to earn their endings from the inside, they will not have to spend their lives mired in graceless exits. And as this sense of expectation is fulfilled in the realm of the story, children will begin to relate this power to other areas of their experience. By reinforcing their ability to predict and anticipate, we help children to construct unique identities and eventually become masters of their own destinies.

References
Too much TV in your house?

One antidote is good books, especially for your children. Start reading to them again. It's fun to read together even if children are in the upper elementary grades.

What to read? First, read the book reviews in THE HORN BOOK MAGAZINE, a bimonthly periodical about children's and young people's books. Only the best of the more than 2000 such books published every year are reviewed. There are also lists of recommended paperbacks and articles about children's literature. Send for a sample copy of this helpful magazine.

THE HORN BOOK, INC.
Dept. 9, Park Square Building
Boston, MA 02116

Exercise Therapy
a completely new, comprehensive guide to helping the child (whether handicapped, learning disabled or uncoordinated) achieve BODY COORDINATION $1.50 ppd. from MONTESSORI FOR HEALTH Inc.
31 W. Main St.
Somerville, N.J. 08876


More than 1000 exciting (classroom tested) activities, lesson plans, games, learning stations to help you teach the basic skills of reading, writing, arithmetic, science, social studies with comprehension to today's children (K-8). A $3.95 value—yours for $3.00!

Science Fun—Every Day in Every Way
A total curriculum calendar that's NEVER out of date!
Edited by the National Science Teachers Assoc. Combines over 300 exciting science activities with all subjects. $9.95 spiral bound paper.

The "Now" Library Media Center—A Stations Approach and Teaching Kit by Mary Margrethe Not just for librarians—too—but for anyone interested in developing a child's media skills—reading, research, and writing. $6.65 paper.

303 Mini-Lessons for Social Studies by M. A. Williamson
An idea filled book of short lessons designed to teach the basics of analyzing, classifying, differentiating, interpreting and organizing. $6.95 paper.

SPECIALY SELECTED RECORDINGS

FROM FOLKWAYS RECORDS

SPEACIALY SELECTED RECORDINGS FOR CHILDREN

Headstart, Historical Ballads, Children's Songs and Games of America and Other Peoples, Literature, Science, Activities, Rhythms, Participation, Learning and Fun and Relaxation with:


WRITE FOR FREE CHILDREN'S CATALOG AND LISTING OF OVER 1600 RECORDINGS FROM FOLKWAYS RECORDS

43 West 61St Street
New York, NY 10023