

Making Connections Through Story: More Than Just Buttons

BY BARBARA VOLPE, M.ED.

So many stories float around in my head. Stories from my past that make up my history, and define who I am today. My core values and beliefs arise from and are shaped by this history.

I have a jar of buttons sitting on my desk. I love to look at them, take them out, and marvel over their varying colors, shapes, and textures. They link me to my grandmother and remind me of storytelling, handiwork, saving, and connection. As a child, when I stayed with my grandmother, she would give me her button box to play with while she worked. Some buttons had stories connected to them, memories of her childhood and family. She would tell me about the blue fabric buttons from a coat that had been her mother's. She treasured those buttons because her mother passed away when she was eight. There were the metal military buttons from a brother who served in the armed forces. Old, yellowed pearl buttons from a fancy dress she wore to a dance. Tiny buttons from my father's baby clothes. Many buttons were simply utilitarian, carefully cut off old dresses or shirts to be used again. Some buttons were frivolous; made of silk fabric or with rhinestones and fancy shapes. They were a treasure box for a young child and an even greater treasure was the memories she shared from the stories she would tell. Today, as I think back on her stories about the buttons in her box, I understand how simple things, such as buttons, can hold a story. Grandma, through story, connected me to a piece of history and to my family's history.

We are all storytellers. We all live in a network of stories.
There is not a stronger connection between people than storytelling.
– Jimmy Neil Smith, Director of the International Storytelling Center

Our staff have histories and stories, too. Our stories share something personal about ourselves. When we tell our stories we are sharing a piece of ourselves and in doing so, we make a connection with those who hear our story. Storytelling can be a way of building community, through sharing something real about ourselves. Listening to one another's stories can help us to understand differing perspectives, find areas of commonality, and help us move from judgement to empathy.

Storytelling can help to build trust among staff and help foster empathy; however, while some people easily share their stories, others may be more reluctant. Some staff may think they do not have a story or that their story is not interesting. Others may feel no one cares to hear their story; they do not want to feel judged or they may prefer their privacy. One way to begin incorporating storytelling into your organization is to facilitate a themed visual collage activity at a staff meeting with a general topic. The general topic is a nonthreatening way of sharing a story. Some examples of more general topics are: "Envision a perfect learning environment for children. What would it reflect?" or "Reflect on places in nature where you have found peace and share an experience." Through these shared stories, your staff will hopefully develop as a community. Then you can add themes that explore deeper, more personal topics; for example, "Tell about a time you felt: courageous, challenged, proud, loved, or inspired." Or "What brings you joy?" "What motivates you?" "What was a life changing moment for you?"

Stories create community,
enable us to see through the eyes of other people,
and open us to the claims of others.
– Peter Forbes

The following is a list of materials that might be used to create visual collage story:

- Cardstock
- Small poster board or matte board
- Glue
- Scissors
- Pictures out of magazines
- Photos
- Scrapbook paper

Below are several other resources to encourage storytelling.

Apps, Online Programs, and Software for Creating Digital Visual Story Boards

- <https://www.picmonkey.com/blog/how-to-make-a-digital-vision-board>
- <https://www.developgoodhabits.com/online-vision-board/>
- <https://makeavisionboard.com/vision-board-apps/>
- <https://www.adobe.com/express/>
- <https://www.inpixio.com/>
- <https://photo-collage.net/photo-collage-maker/>

Resources for Creating Vision Boards or Visual Collages

- <https://www.louisebartlett.com/new-blog/2018/2/1/a-beginners-guide-to-creating-the-perfect-vision-board>
- <https://christinekane.com/how-to-make-a-vision-board/>
- <https://www.jackcanfield.com/blog/how-to-create-an-empowering-vision-book/>
- <https://www.oprahmag.com/life/a29959841/how-to-make-a-vision-board/>

Storytelling is just one idea for connecting with staff. Join a McCormick Center leadership academy to learn more about building relationships, improving organizational climate, and developing effective leadership practices. Check out our [upcoming academies](#) on the McCormick Center website.

Barbara Volpe, M.Ed. is Leadership Academy Manager for the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University. In this role she coordinates and facilitates leadership and quality improvement training for early childhood administrators, teachers, and technical assistance providers. Barb has over 20 years of leadership and management experience. Barb enjoys developing trainings and has made many local, statewide, and national presentations. Barb obtained her master's degree from National Louis University in early childhood administration and her baccalaureate degree in child and family development from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.