



# TELL ME A STORY

CREATING MOMENTS OF JOY WITH YOUR KIDS

BY JENNIFER HEALD KIDWELL



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# INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, my book club read a beautiful novel called *This is How it Always is*, by Laurie Frankel. It's a moving story about the fierce love of a complex family of seven. The writing is engaging and imaginative, the story is inspiring, and the characters are relatable and memorable. It's everything I look for in a good book. You should read it, if you haven't already.

One of my favorite storylines in *This is How it Always is* revolves around the father of the family, who tells an epic bedtime story to his five children that continues in installments for well over a decade. The protagonist of these stories grows up alongside the kids, and the stories help the family to explore complexity in moral decision-making and identity, igniting their imaginations and giving them a touchstone that belongs to their little family alone.

I love reading books with my children. My husband Jonathan and I are parents to Lucy, a precocious 4 year-old, and Simon, a jolly 1-year old. Our home is carpeted in a layer of well-worn children's books, and books routinely take up more than half of the real estate in Lucy's bed. I

treasure my memories of reading with my own mom, and I can't wait to tackle big-kid books with my littles as they grow up.

Despite loving *reading* stories with kids, I never knew what to do when Lucy would ask me to "tell her a story." I had never been interested in making up my own stories from scratch. I would usually just retell familiar stories off the top of my head. But as I finished *This is How it Always is*, I was captivated by the idea of giving my kids an experience similar to that of the children in the novel.

Sure, there are thousands of great books for kids out there (with illustrations to boot!), but I was suddenly excited to create some stories that were ours. I wanted to make up characters out of our imaginations and to run with epic plot lines that wove through the world in ways that challenged and delighted my kids. I wanted to learn to use stories to reinforce the values of kindness and bravery and vulnerability that Jonathan and I want to instill in them.

I wanted my family to create something together, something that we could all own and something that helped us build confidence together in imagining. I wanted characters that could help me reveal and reinforce truths about the world. I wanted to be the kind of parent that could make spontaneous storytelling *an event*.

I had no idea where to start. I didn't think I had the skillset to just dive in. I checked online for guides and blogs and other resources but couldn't find anything that offered the kind of advice I was looking for. On my own, I figured that even if I did conjure up something to start with, my daughter would think it was boring. Kids can be harsh critics.

I know you know.

So I sat with this little nugget of a dream, and figured it would pass by the wayside like so many of my well-intentioned plans.

Imagine my delight when, not six weeks later, Lucy asked for a “silly bedtime song” about a pig named Fruity who was smelly. We didn’t know it then, but this was the beginning of our epic tale, which has by now spanned many months, garnered an eclectic cast of characters, helped us reinforce some important values, and spawned joyful creative collaboration. We’ve learned a lot along the way already, and I hope both the stories and the learning continue for the duration.

This guide is for the wanna-be tellers of epic stories for kids who are looking for tips and tricks and reflections of another parent who is making this a habit and learning along the way. Together, we’ll explore:

- How to get comfortable with spontaneous storytelling
- Games to wake up your imagination
- How to get started
- What to do if your stories stall
- How to engage your children in collaborative storytelling
- How to use stories to explore areas of growth for your children
- Ways to bring your characters into fun daytime activities

I'll suggest exercises and games along every step of the way so that you can practice some of the skills that I've found useful in this endeavor. Plus, I'll share some of our favorite Fruity adventures with you. The Fruity-verse is a wacky place, and I hope examples of the silly things we've tried help to give you the confidence to experiment with this practice in your families. Cheers to raising resilient kiddos, modeling creative risk-taking, and sweet moments of silliness for us all.

## THE FRUITY-VERSE PALS

It's absolutely not essential to remember these specific names and relationships, but this is the main cast of characters in our family's stories. I'll refer to short examples involving many of them throughout this guide, so these are some very brief introductions. You can also visit my blog at [www.jenkidwell.com](http://www.jenkidwell.com) or my **Book: Tell me a Story** facebook page to get to know our characters and for more sample stories and story-starting ideas. For a sample of a multi-night Fruity installment, with annotations for how our collaborations unfolded and key parenting discussion points, visit the appendix.

**Fruity the pig:** the original, a rainbow-colored pig who loves adventure and is occasionally, like all of us, a bit smelly.

**The Froggy Princess:** Fruity met her on an early adventure, and they bonded over their shared love of playing in the mud near the moat of her castle. Her parents are King and Queen Grasshopper. Fun fact: I imagined her as a frog, but Lucy insists that she's a human girl. Girls love to play in mud as much as frogs do, obviously. As yet, this is unresolved.



**Megatron the bunny:** Fruity's best pal, and a kind soul, despite her intimidating name, which Lucy gave her.

**Rosie the duck:** A bit of an oddball, but very charming. Her favorite kind of toasted marshmallows are the really gooey kind because she likes how it feels when her bill sticks together. That's all you really need to know.

**Broccoli the wolf:** Once a solitary and grumpy creature marooned on an island, his heart was warmed by Fruity's sincerely enthusiastic offers of friendship. He is a vegetarian.

**Leafy the leaf bug:** I don't know whether leaf bugs live in the Amazon, but that's where the gang met up with this plucky little guy when he landed in their canoe. He gave them a tour of the rainforest but dreamed of seeing the world and now adventures with the group of friends.

