

The Mind is a Great Storyteller

By Dr Justin Coulson

The mind is a great storyteller. The difficulty with the stories we tell ourselves, however, is that we believe them - whether they're true or not.

We notice this easily in our kids. They're struggling with something and exclaim, "I can't. It's too hard." I've yet to meet a loving parent who hears their child say "I can't make friends" or "this maths is too hard" and they respond with, "Yep. You're right. You're not very bright and you're not very likeable. Fact is, you're a bit of a Nigel-no-friends." Cruel. And wrong.

We look at them, square our shoulders, and smile. We offer encouragement: "*You've got this. I believe in you. You've done it before.*"

Maybe we even jump in and help a little.

What we're doing in that moment is offering them a new script. In essence, we're saying "*the story you're telling yourself is unhelpful - and untrue.*" So we rewrite it for them.

Bad news time. We have a blind spot. And it's not about what the kids are saying. We're all over that.

The blind spot is that we do this for our kids, but rarely for ourselves.

When we're in the thick of a hard parenting moment, we start telling ourselves stories just like the kids. They come thick and fast.

"She's driving me crazy. He never listens. I'm doing everything wrong."

We'd never let our children marinate in that kind of self-talk - but we accept it in ourselves without question.

Limiting self-talk and negative self-talk hamper our effectiveness as parents. They interrupt our relationships. And they deplete us.

Why do we do it? Simple answer: it's a habit.

Changing it up is as simple as catching ourselves in the middle of an unhelpful story and shifting our focus. Consider a simple swap. Instead of "she's a good kid, but she's driving me crazy", keep the honesty but switch the focus: "She's driving me crazy *right now*, but she's such a good kid."

It's almost the same words (although I've added 'right now' to show that this is not a permanent feature of the child's personality). But now it's a different story. The first version ends on the problem. The second ends on the person... and she's a good person.

Or this one: "My child can't do school camp." Objectively, that's probably not true. But when we make it the story, we (and they) start to believe it and this changes attitudes and behaviours - for the worse. What *is* true

is that your child is probably struggling but with some care and consideration (and perhaps some gentle accommodations), your child *can* go to school camp. When we say he “can’t”, we tell a limiting, negative story that forecloses possibility. The story “struggling, but finding a way” opens the door to possibility.

My University of Michigan friend, research psychologist Professor Ethan Kross, has spent his career studying the voice inside our heads; what he calls our inner “chatter”. His research shows that the way we talk to ourselves doesn’t just reflect how we feel; it actively shapes *what we do, how we cope, and what we believe is possible*.

His studies confirm: negative self-talk narrows our thinking and keeps us stuck.

But with the right tools, we can change the channel.

One of Kross’s most practical findings is that if we create distance between the challenge we’re going through and our “self”, we do better, and the way to do that is... *tell ourselves a different story*.

When we’re caught inside a difficult moment, we lose perspective. We’re so close to it we can only see it one way, and so everything we say to ourselves feels fully factual. “This kid is out of control!” “I have too much to do!” “I can’t handle this any longer.”

Yet even a small shift in how we frame that story can interrupt the negative spiral. It’s called “cognitive reappraisal”. And it’s so simple. We deliberately step back and ask whether the story we’re telling is the only one available.

For parents, this is powerful. The stories we carry about our children (he’s a handful, she’s anxious, this ADHD is out of control) become the lens through which we see every interaction. And children, who are exquisitely tuned to the emotional world of their parents, absorb those stories too.

What does this look like in practice?

When you notice a limiting story about your child, about yourself, about your relationship, try pausing and asking one question: Is this the whole story, or just the loudest part of it right now?

You don’t have to manufacture false optimism. You just have to create enough distance to see that the story is a story - not a verdict.

From there, you rewrite. Not dramatically. Not with a motivational poster. Just a small shift in emphasis.

She’s driving me crazy but she’s such a good kid becomes a temporary, solvable problem. Conversely, a kid who’s driving me crazy starts to feel like a permanent condition.

The mind *is* a great storyteller. But you’re the author.



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