Telling Tales: Personal Event Narratives and Life Stories

Carol Westbya and Barbara Culattab

Purpose: Speech-language pathologists know much more about children’s development of fictional narratives than they do about children’s development of personal narratives and the role these personal narratives play in academic success, social–emotional development, and self-regulation. The purpose of this tutorial is to provide clinicians with strategies for assessing and developing children’s and adolescents’ personal narratives.

Method: This tutorial reviews the literature on (a) the development of autobiographical event narratives and life stories, (b) factors that contribute to development of these genres, (c) the importance of these genres for the development of sense of self-identity and self-regulation, (d) deficits in personal narrative genres, and (e) strategies for eliciting and assessing event narratives and life stories.

Implications: To promote development of personal event narratives and life stories, speech-language pathologists can help clients retrieve information about interesting events, provide experiences worthy of narrating, and draw upon published narratives to serve as model texts. Clinicians can also address four interrelated processes in intervention: reminiscing, reflecting, making coherent connections, and signaling the plot structure. Furthermore, they can activate metacognitive awareness of how evaluations of experiences, coherence, and plot structure are signaled in well-formed personal event narratives and life stories.

We tell ourselves stories and live by the stories we tell ourselves.

Narration is the act of telling a story, in some type of chronological order, of fictional or real events. Children’s ability to produce fictional narratives has been linked to literacy and academic skills (Catts, Hogan, & Fey, 2003; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001). Because of the need to read and comprehend fictional narratives in school, considerable attention has been given to developing children’s ability to comprehend and produce fictional narratives (S. L. Gillam, Gillam, & Reece, 2012). Less attention, however, has been given to developing children’s abilities to produce personal narratives—either event narratives or integrated life stories. In this tutorial, the term event narratives is used to refer to a reflection on or an account of a single experienced event or perhaps closely related events (e.g., several experiences on a camping trip or different camping trips). Integrated life stories are stories people tell about their entire lives or about a large span of events that occurred over some time. Both event narratives and life stories relate to social as well as academic success.

Competence in producing personal narratives—both event narratives and life stories—is important for social and psychological well-being because the sharing of personal events is a major component of all social interactions and thus relates to the ability to function in natural contexts (Schank, 1990). In addition, the ability to generate a coherent, integrated life story relates to an individual’s sense of self-identify and self-determination. The generation of a life story stems from reflecting on how one’s own characteristics have influenced past actions but also can lead to setting goals for how the future will unfold. A coherent life story can lead to making informed choices, learning to effectively solve problems, and taking control of and responsibility for one’s life.

In addition to supporting social and psychological well being, competence in producing personal narratives assists students in meeting academic demands. In school, students are required to make connections between their own life experiences and targeted fictional and informational curricular texts. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) address students’ need to access and produce personal narratives. The CCSS incorporate a listening and speaking standard in the elementary grades that relates to recounting experiences...
as well as a standard that crosses the grades that relates to writing personal narratives. In regard to standards and requirements that address comprehending texts, students need to draw on their coherent event narratives and life stories to make text-to-self connections (Raphael & Au, 2011). Activating background knowledge and bringing personal knowledge to what they read can help students comprehend. At the same time, by seeing relationships between the texts and their experiences, students can gain a better understanding of their own experiences that will allow them to reflect on and interpret their experiences in new and different ways. In so doing, they can develop more coherent event narratives and life stories.

The telling of personal narratives—both event narratives and integrated life stories—fits well with the Scope of Practice for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, 2007), which advocates the use of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) International Classification of Functioning (ICF; WHO, 2001). For the International Classification of Functioning, the ultimate goal of intervention for persons with disabilities is to enable them to participate in natural contexts with their family and community. This tutorial provides clinicians with an underlying framework and information necessary for addressing personal narratives in their practice. It provides information about developmental trajectories, deficit patterns, assessment approaches, and intervention strategies for both event narratives and life stories. In addition, the tutorial alerts clinicians to consider cultural influences on clients’ personal narrative productions. The ultimate goal of acquiring this content is to assist children and adolescents in producing well-structured personal event narratives and life stories.

Personal Event Narratives

Event narratives are stories a person constructs from memory about an experienced event. Such accounts of happenings should include relevant details and some evaluative statements that relate to what makes the story worth sharing. Clinicians’ approach to assessment and treatment of children and adolescents with language impairments can be informed by an understanding of the role of event narratives in development, the emergence of event narratives from reminiscing activities with caregivers, and the types of event narrative deficits certain children tend to display.

Developmental Process

Event narratives appear to have a somewhat different developmental trajectory than fictional narratives for children and adolescents. The different genres place different cognitive demands on the narrator (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991). For example, content knowledge may be more easily accessed for personal narratives than for fictional narratives because the narrator is familiar with the events and characters. Personal event narratives are the earliest acquired and the most prevalent type of narratives produced by young children (McCabe & Rollins, 1994; Preece, 1987). Although personal event narratives are the most frequently produced narratives in children in the preschool, kindergarten, and first grade years, by the middle elementary years children tend to produce better fictional than personal event narratives (Allen, Kertoy, Sherblom, & Pettit, 1994; Shiro, 2003). Shiro (2003) reported that 6- to 10-year-olds produced more evaluative language in fictional narratives than in personal narratives. Allen et al. (1994) found that children produced personal event stories with lower levels of macrostructure complexity but produced fictional narratives with higher levels of macrostructure. These studies suggest that among typically developing children there is a personal narrative advantage in preschool through third grade, but in later elementary years the advantage shifts to fictional narratives. The shift to more complex fictional than personal narratives by later elementary school may possibly be related to academic standards, such as the CCSS, that promote more direct instruction on fictional than personal narratives.

Although personal narratives may receive less attention in academic settings, they have been acknowledged to affect the acquisition of conversational skills. Personal narratives are critical in interactions that are characterized, in large part, by turn-taking exchanges (Fivush, 1991; Preece, 1987; Schank, 1990). Schank (1990) claimed that conversations are no more than responsive storytelling. One cannot engage in conversations unless one can comprehend and tell stories. Conversations and narratives within conversations emerge very early. Toddlers ages 2 to 3 years participate in conversations about past events, such as telling Daddy about what they saw at the zoo or telling Grandma about their broken toy. By preschool, children are participating in show and tell, sharing objects with their peers and telling where the objects came from and what they did with them. Typically developing children are capable of producing complete and complex personal event oral narratives by the time they enter first grade and incorporate intended goals and outcomes in personal stories before they can do so in fictional stories (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). In early elementary school, children are expected to tell about what they have done over the summer, and by later elementary school they are expected to write autobiographical stories (Fivush, 2014). The majority of conversations of children ages 5 to 11 years involve personal event narratives, whereas fictional narratives are seldom used in social interactions (Preece, 1987). The high frequency of personal narratives in daily conversations directed to children means that such narratives should be useful in developing social interaction skills.

Event narratives also have a unique and critical role in social–emotional development. The emerging capacity for autobiographical memory narratives during the preschool years contributes to the emerging concept of self. Nelson (2003) describes the emergence of self in the preschool and early elementary school years. By 18 to 24 months, children have a cognitive understanding of self. They recognize themselves in a mirror and begin to refer to the self as I, me, my, or their name. During the 2- to 3-year-old period, they engage in reminiscing with caregivers.
about past events and in this way develop a representational self—an awareness of the self as a present object and as a self that can be tracked over time. By the end of the preschool years, autobiographical memory emerges, which allows for a new awareness of self in past and future experiences and a contrast of that self to others’ narratives of their experiences. The relating of memories in narratives is an indicator of self-development. Elaborative remembering of the past is linked to more positive outcomes in terms of self-development, and more advanced self-development supports more elaborate autobiographic memory (Brown, Dorfman, Marmar, & Bryant, 2012; Fivush, 2011).

**Emergence From Reminiscing**

Children’s sense of self and early narratives emerge as they engage with their caregivers in reminiscing about shared experiences. This reminiscing both requires and promotes autobiographical memory. These autobiographical memories or thoughts through time are different from semantic memory and episodic memory. Semantic memory is memory for facts: your birthday, the definitions of words, names of the mountains near Denver, the first president of the United States. Episodic memories are specific memories or thoughts through time are different from semantic memory and episodic memory. Semantic memory promotes autobiographical memory. These autobiographical shared experiences. This reminiscing both requires and supports follow topics introduced by the child and encourage elaboration and low autonomy support. Her turns change the topic of conversation to be in line with her agenda, and she fails to provide helpful follow-up or elaborative information about the experience.

Child: I fed the lion.
Mother: But what animal did you play with first?
Child: Didn’t you take care of the giraffe? Did you do anything with the giraffe?
Mother: Mmm, we brushed him.
Child: Hmm? You brushed him.
Mother: We did?
Child: I’m asking you! Did you brush him?
Mother: What else did you do with the giraffe?
Child: I fed the lion.
Mother: Yeah, but what else did you do with the giraffe? Do you remember?

It is possible to be highly elaborate in reminiscing yet be controlling and provide little support for the child’s autonomy or to be low in elaboration yet provide high support for autonomy and not be controlling (Cleveland & Reese, 2005).

The quality of preschool reminiscing predicts aspects of adolescent narrating. Mothers’ references to their children’s emotions at age 3 years predict the child’s references to his or her own emotions at age 12 years (Reese, Yan, Jack, & Hayne, 2010). The reminiscing experiences children have with their parents influence not only development of their personal event narratives but also development of their fictional narratives. Wenner, Burch, Lynch, and Bauer (2008) found that children who could recount past experiences more accurately and with more details told more
complex fictional stories. They noted the content of statements that parents included in their reminiscing about personal events—*who, what, when, where, why, and how*. They had children tell a fictional story from picture stimuli and rated the children’s fictional narratives on a story grammar hierarchy (description, action sequence, reactive sequence, incomplete episode, or complete episode). The quality of preschool children’s fictional narratives correlated with parents’ use of *how* and *when* statements when reminiscing, and the quality of school-age children’s fictional narratives correlated with parents’ use of *when, where,* and *why* statements when reminiscing. What parents talked about was more important than how much they talked. Parents who used *when* to draw attention to the sequence of events and *how* to emphasize the manner in which they occurred (the subjective experience of the event) were better at facilitating preschool children’s narratives. For school-age children, the use of *why*, which brought additional references to causal connections, facilitated fictional narrative skills.

**Event Narrative Deficits**

Because autobiographical narratives include references to the teller’s thoughts and emotions about experienced events (an abstract language skill), one would suspect that children with language-related deficits would be at risk for deficits in relating personal events. In fact, individuals with language impairments, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and emotional behavior disorders do tend to have difficulty producing event narratives.

**Language Impairment**

Numerous studies have shown that students with a variety of language impairments have difficulty telling personal as well as fictional stories. Children with specific language impairment, as opposed to peers with typically developing language, tend to exhibit microstructure deficits (e.g., fewer different words, more ambiguous references, less complex syntax) as well as macrostructure deficits (e.g., less complex story structure, fewer character- and goal-directed behaviors) in fictional narratives (Fey, Catts, Proctor-William, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2004; Newman & McGregor, 2006; Ukrainetz & Gillam, 2009; Wetherell, Botting, & Conti-Ramsden, 2007). Studies that are available on the event narratives of children with specific language impairment also show microstructure and macrostructure deficits (McCabe, Bliss, Barra, & Bennett, 2008; Miranda, McCabe, & Bliss, 1998; Wetherell et al., 2007). At the macrostructure level, children with specific language impairment are less likely to produce classic high-point narratives that include a high point or climax, a resolution to that high point, and an evaluation that draws attention to the reason for telling the story (McCabe et al., 2008; Miranda et al., 1998; Wetherell et al., 2007). Instead, they are more likely to end at the high point or to produce leap-frogging narratives, jumping around in the story and leaving things out (McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

**ASD**

The majority of studies on individuals with ASD have analyzed children’s fictional narratives from storybooks. Results from high-functioning children with ASD found little difference compared with neurotypical children on microstructure elements such as length (Diehl, Bennett, & Young, 2006) and the amount and range of evaluation (Diehl et al., 2006; Losh & Capps, 2003; Norbury & Bishop, 2003) or on completeness of episodes and story grammar (Norbury & Bishop, 2003). Significant differences were, however, noted on coherence (Diehl et al., 2006) and referential expression (Norbury & Bishop, 2003). Several studies have reported a difference between the fictional and personal narratives of high-functioning persons with ASD. In general, their fictional narratives are more similar to those of neurotypical individuals, but the macrostructures of their personal narratives are less mature. Using a high-point analysis, Goldman (2008) found that only in the personal narratives did children with ASD lack the high point and a resolution. McCabe, Hillier, and Shapiro (2013) found that few adults with ASD resolved their personal narratives. Rollins (2014) compared high-functioning young adults with ASD on both a fictional narrative (elicited from wordless picture books) and a personal event narrative (elicited by modeled prompts such as telling about losing keys and then asking the adult to tell about a similar experience). Using the Narrative Scoring Scheme (Heilmann, Miller, Nockerts, & Dunaway, 2010), a holistic scoring method that provides an index of the ability to produce a coherent narrative, Rollins (2014) reported that scores for personal narratives were significantly lower than those for fictional narratives. Differences were greatest in use of a conclusion and mental state words. The young adults with ASD had minimal skill in describing how they felt about events in their lives and in reaching a conclusion about these events, even though they were proficient in these skills when retelling a fictional story.

Researchers explain the deficits in personal event narratives of persons with ASD in regard to deficits in autobiographical memory (Bowler, Gaigg, & Lind, 2011; Brezis, 2015). Telling a story using a picture book is a very different task from that of talking about an event that has been experienced personally. A personal event requires the narrator to remember and organize information. Previous research has suggested that such information is retrieved from episodic memory and that this is impaired in individuals with ASD (Boucher & Mayes, 2011; Bowler et al., 2011). Goldman and DeNigris (2015) noted that parents of school-age children with ASD engaged in more structured reminiscing than did parents of typically developing children. The reminiscing was not coconstructed. Instead, parents of children with ASD asked specific factual questions that might have triggered factual or semantic memories but not autobiographical memories. Compared with neurotypical children and adults, children and adults with ASD exhibit poorer autobiographical memories. Their autobiographical memories are less specific compared with those of neurotypical persons, marked by more errors of omission, and less integrated (Bruck, London, Landa, & Goodman, 2007;
Although a pictured sequence generally is not used to elicit pictured stimuli, story starters, or a specific story to retell, fictional and personal event narratives in regard to elicitation, structural analyses and elicitation strategies.

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**Procedures for Assessing Personal Event Narratives**

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**Elicitation Prompts**

Comparisons can be made between assessment of fictional and personal event narratives in regard to elicitation strategies. Fictional stories typically are elicited with pictured stimuli, story starters, or a specific story to retell. Although a pictured sequence generally is not used to elicit personal event stories, one measure is based on eliciting a retell. Petersen and Spencer (2012) developed the Narrative Language Measures, which assesses children’s abilities to comprehend a story and to generate a personal event narrative. (The assessment can be downloaded for free from http://languagedynamicsgroup.com/products.html.) Children listen to short complete-episode stories about real children and then retell the stories. They receive points for each story grammar element they include and points for connective words such as *then, because, when, and after.*

In addition to having children retell real personal stories of others, Petersen and Spencer (2012) elicited a personal event narrative by selecting a sample story, telling the story as though it was his or her own, and then asking the child if something like that ever happened to him or her. The personal event stories were scored on a 0- to 3-point rubric that rates the stories on setting, problem or initiating event, emotional state, action, consequence, and ending emotion. To receive full points, the emotional state must be a specific emotion in response to the initiating event, the action must be an action by the main character to solve the problem presented in the initiating event, the consequence has to follow from the attempts, and the ending emotion must be a specific emotion in response to the consequence.

In another study designed to elicit personal event stories, Noel and Westby (2014) asked adjudicated youths to generate personal narratives in response to the following prompts:

Tell me a story about a time with your family or friends that you wanted something and they wanted something else. Tell me what you were thinking and how you solved the problem.

Tell me a story about a time someone asked you to do something you knew you weren’t supposed to do. Tell me what you were thinking and how you solved the problem.

Studies using high-point analysis of personal event stories also used prompts such as the following.

Once I broke my arm. I had to go to the doctor’s office. She put it in a cast. Have you ever broken anything? Tell me about it. (McCabe & Bliss, 2003)

One time I was on a trip with my family, and we were driving along and all of a sudden our tire blew up and we went jerking off the road and we crashed into the guardrail. Have you ever seen a car wreck? What happened at the accident you saw? (McCabe et al., 2013)

**Structural Analysis Systems**

Both personal event and fictional narratives are assessed using some form of macrostructure analysis. Examining the macrostructure content and structure of stories, which is commonplace in fictional narrative assessment (e.g., Gagarina, 2012; R. Gillam & Pearson, 2004; Schneider, Hayward, & Dubé, 2006; Westby, 2012), has also been applied to assessing children’s personal event stories, with the most commonly used assessment for macrostructure being story grammar analysis (Stein & Glenn,
A story grammar framework considers stories in terms of goal-directed problem-solving units called episodes that describe characters’ motivations, goals, and efforts to achieve those goals and the outcome of those efforts. Episodic elements include setting elements, an initiating event (problem or complication), a motivating state or emotional internal response, a plan, an attempt or attempts to resolve the problem, the consequence, and an emotional reaction to that consequence. A story grammar analysis conflates the story structure and content—the structure of the story is determined by the content. The episodic elements are the content; the sequencing of these elements is the macrostructure. Children’s fictional stories can be analyzed in terms of the components of the grammar they include. Children are typically 8 or 9 years of age before they include all the story grammar elements. A complete narrative episode describes an initiating event or problem, a character’s response to that event, plans and attempts to deal with the initiating event or problem, and a consequence and resolution to the attempts. Younger children do not center their stories around the motivations of a character.

Development of fictional narratives beyond complete episodes involves stories with obstacles to goals, multiple episodes, and embedded episodes. Children’s fictional narratives, assessed by a story grammar approach, develop through these levels (Westby, 2012).

- Descriptive sequence (before 4 years): The child describes actions, scenes, or characters.
- Action sequence (before 4 years): The child describes a temporal sequence of actions or events.
- Reactive sequence (about 4–5 years): The child indicates causality between events through terms such as because and so.
- Abbreviated episode (about 6–7 years): The child refers to the goal of the main character but does not explain a plan or how the goal is achieved.
- Complete episode (about 8–9 years): The child refers to an initiating event and a goal, an attempt to achieve the goal, and a description of how the goal was or was not achieved.
- Elaborated episodes: stories with obstacles to attempts, multiple sequential episodes, or embedded episodes

Noel and Westby (2014) scored personal event narratives using a rubric that is based on story grammar developed by Swanson, Fey, Mills, and Hood (2005). Students received points for complexity of the setting (explicitness of time, location, and physical condition), characters (attributes, psychological traits, and relationships between character attributes and the problem or resolution), plot (problems and attempts to resolve the problem), and ending (statements that extend beyond the resolution or express a moral or lesson).

Although the story grammar system has been used to assess personal event narratives, there are some reasons why such an analysis should not be the only “go to” analysis for the structure of personal event narratives. Instead of requiring a problem and plan, as in an analysis of a fictional story, personal stories should include some indication of the purpose for telling the story or the point the teller is trying to make about an experience. Many personal stories do not describe a situation that is a problem or necessarily an initiating event, and there may not be plans. Hence, story grammar analysis does not always fit personal stories.

Persons do have some purpose for telling a personal story: They are trying to make a point about an experience. Thus, a number of studies on development of personal narrative structure have used what is termed high-point analysis to assess macrostructure development (McCabe & Bliss, 2003). In high-point analysis, the complexity of the narrative structure follows a developmental order: relating a single action; relating two actions; ordering several actions in a sequence; sequencing actions plus providing a high point to the story; and producing a classic narrative that includes a sequence of actions, a high point or climax, and a resolution to that high point. Typically developing children produce a high-point personal story by 5 to 6 years of age. High-point macrostructure analysis includes developmental stages of temporal sequences of actions and two content components: a climax, or high point, and a resolution. Clinicians may also want to note other constituent content components of the narratives such as openings, abstracts, orientation (who, what, when, where), complicating action (how something happened), an evaluation (why things happened, how the narrator felt about them), and a closing.

If a personal event narrative is to be coherent, it must contain referential and evaluative elements (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Referential elements give information about who the participants are, what happened, and when and where the events happened. Evaluative elements convey the significance of the event for the teller through verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotions, emphasis, perspective, and insight. Yet even if an event narrative has many referential and evaluative elements, it will not be coherent if these elements do not occur at the appropriate points in the story.

**Example Personal Event Narrative Assessment**

A speech-language pathologist (SLP) working with a 10.5-year-old child (DD) chose to address personal as well as fictional narratives to support social and academic functioning. Although very verbal at age 3.5 years, DD lost all language at age 4 years due to nighttime seizures and was diagnosed with Landau Kleffner syndrome. He gradually regained language and had age-level interests but exhibited characteristics of aphasia, struggling to retrieve and convey ideas in an organized way. One spontaneously produced personal event narrative about an encounter with some spiders follows.

DD: I actually saw two spiders in my house. I thought one was alive and one is alive but the other one isn’t and the other one was. I actually blew it. So I make sure it wasn’t alive. So it was. Once it was hiding from
me. And once I came back and brush my teeth. I was looking myself in the mirror and making sure like... and... well and finally a spider came on my face. And I actually get it off. It was creepy.

In terms of macrostructure, the sketchy telling of this event could be described as an unorganized leapfrog narrative because of the confusing order of events and the missing goals (e.g., blowing on the spiders to determine whether they were alive and trying to get rid of the spider). DD claimed the spider was alive before stating that he blew on it to make that determination, and he did not indicate where he was or what he was doing when he saw the spiders. Did he go to brush his teeth and then see two spiders in the bathroom? Did he go to the bathroom after blowing on two spiders and then encounter a third spider there? When and where was a spider hiding from him? Despite the limited and disorganized details, DD did end his telling with an evaluation (“It was creepy”).

In terms of microstructure elements, DD used the connective so but moved between present and past tense markers to convey a past event and did not include causal connections between blowing on the spiders and determining whether they were alive. Other indications of poor or confusing referencing include the following: (a) once was repeated without signaling the time or order of the events, (b) pronouns were not clearly connected to the referents of dead and alive spiders, (c) it was not clear when the tooth brushing took place, and (d) DD said he “came back” without stating where he was initially or what he was doing. Because of ambiguous references and limited detail, the clinician (C) was confused about how many spiders there were and how the spider that ran away could have landed on his face. Because she wanted to clarify the events and scaffold his reminiscing (or get a more coherent version of the story), she followed up with comments and questions.

C: How did the spider fall on your face?
DD: It was up on the ceiling.
C: It was a different spider?
DD: Yes. It wasn’t a black widow. ‘Cause if a black widow came on my face, it easily bite me. And I have to go to the hospital. Because sometimes...sometimes there are spiders like black widows or...yeah, yeah.
C: There were three spiders?
DD: There were two.
C: One you blew on and it didn’t move so it was dead. You figured out it was dead because it didn’t move. The other you blew on and it crawled away. Was the one that fell on you at a different time?
DD: Yes. Like one hour later. Actually my mom told me to brush my teeth. But the spider was too fast. I didn’t brush my teeth. It just barently came on my face.
C: So you had two spiders and you blew on one and it didn’t move and you blew on another and it ran away. And about an hour later Mom said, “Go brush your teeth.” So you went to brush your teeth and....

DD: No, I didn’t do that. I didn’t brush my teeth. When the spider...well, it came on first. I just got away. And I got it off. And one hour later. And I just ran away. I think I brush my teeth and take medicine. Or something. I have to wash my hands. Because I think I have to wash my hands. And the spider got on my face and I just barently got it off. And it barently.... I dropped it off the floor. I ran fast as I could to stay way from the spider. And I slept in my mom and dad’s room.

This telling also reflects leapfrogging, with a confusing sequence of events and topic that jumps back and forth. DD does provide what might be considered a high point (“And the spider got on my face and I just barently got it off”) and a resolution (“I ran fast as I could to stay way from the spider. And I slept in my mom and dad’s room”). However, it is not clear which events led up to the high point and resolution, and there is no obvious goal-directed behavior. DD’s attempt to clarify or retell seems to contradict an assumption a listener could make from the first telling—that he was in the bathroom when he discovered the spiders. It’s never clear where he encountered those first spiders, how the teeth brushing fits in, or which activities occurred when (washing hands, taking medicine, or brushing teeth). DD also misused because, and his evaluation was conveyed in intonation rather than in words.

Working within single event narratives, a primary intervention goal for DD could be to have him relate detailed, goal-directed autobiographical memories that are temporally and causally ordered and that include an evaluation. Because DD often used exclamations, facial expressions, and vocalizations to comment on the events in his personal narratives, the SLP can acknowledge and elaborate on these and support the signaling of evaluations with emotional and internal state words. Given the intriguing nature of some of DD’s autobiographical memories, such as the spider story, drawing on the personal value of these events can call DD’s attention to the process of clearly signaling reasons for telling his stories. Assisting DD in elaborating evaluative statements can also help the listener detect DD’s purpose for relating the event. In addition to supporting the telling of spontaneously produced event narratives, the clinician can use other sources to elicit personal event narratives: (a) telling her own interesting story and asking DD to talk about a similar happening, (b) arranging for interesting things for DD to convey, and (c) drawing on notable happenings contributed by his parents. The SLP can provide a script that permits DD to practice producing well-formed stories in the clinical setting to prepare him to convey more structured and detailed versions of the same experiences to others. Although DD will need fairly high levels of scaffolding (e.g., elaborating on his productions, asking open-ended questions, and providing a graphic representation for including plot structure elements), the ultimate goal would be to turn over responsibility for the narration to DD to permit him to have more autonomy in telling well-formed versions of his own stories to peers and family members.
Strategies for Promoting Personal Event Narratives

Narcissistic interventions in schools typically have focused on developing students’ comprehension and production of fictional narratives by explicitly teaching them the story grammar elements and the syntactic patterns to explain relationships in stories (S. L. Gillam et al., 2012; S. L. Gillam, Olszewski, Fargo, & Gillam, 2014; Petersen et al., 2014). Although studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach, few have focused on developing personal event narratives (Noel & Westby, 2014; Petersen et al., 2014). Two relevant strategies revolve around reminiscing and making parallels between clients’ personal experiences and other people’s stories.

Encourage Reminiscing

Because personal event narratives develop from reminiscing experiences, clinicians may want to reminisce with children about recent experiences. Parents can also be trained to provide more elaborative reminiscing with more autonomy support, which results in better autobiographical memory (Cleveland & Morris, 2014). If clinicians have contact with parents, they could model for parents how to provide high-quality reminiscing. Such reminiscing should not be a question-asking and question-answering task, however, but rather a collaboration in remembering.

In a clinical setting it is difficult for SLPs to reminisce with children when they have not shared the experience. If clinicians do not know what the child experienced, they cannot scaffold the telling and cannot determine whether what the child is saying is accurate. Hence, it is best to reminisce about therapy activities. Interesting thematic language activities can include science, art, or cooking projects (or, if possible, field trips). Rather than having a totally different activity for each therapy session, sessions can begin with reminiscing about earlier activities. The Pictello app is useful for reminiscing. One can take photos or videos of an experience and then write the story that goes with the pictures. The photos provide support for children with language impairments to reminisce. Having photos or videos of the experiences helps achieve accuracy of the reminiscing.

Clinicians can stimulate discussions about students’ important memories. A recent popular Disney movie, Inside Out, talks about emotions and core memories and can be used to trigger reminiscing about notable events or experiences. It is the story of Riley, a teenage girl distressed by a family move, as told from the perspective of the emotions inside her head. Many students have seen it, and even if they have not, several clips on YouTube can be downloaded and discussed. In one section of the movie, the character Joy explains Riley’s core memories and shows examples from her life (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXGhFYVAOKE). Each core memory is represented by a ball; there are different colored balls for different emotions. Clinicians explained the concept of core memories to parents of children in a language intervention program and asked them to send in photos that could represent such memories for their children. In a group, children watched the Inside Out clip about core memories. Clinicians bought large clear plastic balls that could be opened. Children put two pictures (back to back) in each ball, decorated their balls, and shared with one another in their group their memories about the pictures.

Evoke and Model the Construction of Personal Event Narratives

Clinicians can model the telling of event narratives and ask children to relate their own experience about a similar event. One clinician told of a time when she did not close the door on her hamster’s cage, and the hamster escaped and was never found. The telling of that experience elicited a child’s story about a time when he had pet crickets in a cricket cage and the family cat got into the cage and ate the crickets.

Fictional narratives can also be used to evoke event narratives and model construction of similar real-life stories that include evaluations and emotional connections. Drawing on a bibliotherapy process, clinicians can share stories from books with children and ask if something like that has happened to them. For example, young children can listen to the story Franklin in the Dark (Bourgeois, 1986) about a turtle who is afraid to go into his shell because it is dark. He visits his friends to learn what frightens them. Children can then be asked about something frightening that happened to them. Or they can listen to the story My Rotten Redhead Older Brother (Polacco, 1994) in which the character, Patricia, falls off the merry-go-round and has to have stitches in her head. Children are then asked about their experiences with accidents. In Duck in the Truck (Alborough, 2009), duck gets his truck stuck in mud and many of his friends come to help him out. Children can talk about ways they have helped their friends. Older children can read Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez (Krull, 2003), discuss how Chavez helped people, and then share experiences in which they have helped someone. Table 1 gives examples of children’s books that can be used to trigger reminiscing.

Life Stories

Like event narratives, life stories are an account of past autobiographical memories. However, a life story requires integrating experiences into a unified, coherent whole. When creating life stories, tellers must select appropriate aspects of their experiences to convey and imaginatively construct one account that makes sense to themselves and their audiences; they must weave past events together with present concerns and future goals (McAdams, 2001). Although most of the research related to the telling of autobiographical narratives has focused on descriptions and development of single personal experiences, clinicians must also know about developmental processes in life stories, mechanisms for achieving coherence, life story deficits, and procedures for assessing and promoting life story narratives.
Table 1. Books to trigger reminiscing for event narratives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Book</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Think of a time you were scared.</td>
<td>Thunder Cake by Patricia Polacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Out of the Woods by Rebecca Bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Franklin in the Dark by Paulette Bourgeois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Brand New Kid by Katie Couric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each Kindness by Jacqueline Woodson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Runaway Rice Cake by Ying Chang Compentise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think of a time you were unkind/kind to someone or someone was kind/unkind to you.</td>
<td>Duck in the Truck by Jez Alborough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angelo by David Macaulay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passage to Freedom by Ken Mochzuki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother by Patricia Polacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine by Evaline Ness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giraffes Can't Dance by Giles Andreae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You Can Do It, Bert! by Ole Körnneck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Salt in His Shoes by Diane Jordan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too Many Tamales by Gary Soto (Christmas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Lost Ring by Fawzia Galani-Williams (Eid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Trees of the Dancing Goats by Patricia Polacco (Hanukkah/Christmas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Through My Eyes by Ruby Bridges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hatchet by Gary Paulsen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courage by Bernard Webber</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Developmental Processes**

On the surface one may think of life stories as one of several forms of narrative genre. However, the nature and development of life stories affect more than the acquisition of complex language and storytelling skills. Life story narratives involve the development of autobiographical reasoning, identity, self-regulation, and social problem solving.

**Autobiographical Reasoning**

Like event narratives, the development of life stories is based on the process of reminiscing on and storing significant personal events in long-term memory. For life stories, reflecting on experiences is essential for connecting them because such reminiscing can permit individuals to notice possible themes. The evolution of personal narratives from stories of single events to connected stories of multiple events involves autobiographical reasoning—the ability to create coherence among remembered autobiographical events and to mold them into a meaningful story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The development of autobiographical reasoning leads to the emergence of global coherence in the life narratives.

Without autobiographical reasoning, a life narrative would consist only of lists of isolated autobiographical memories. Development of autobiographical stories evolves from relating single experienced events to ordering a sequence of events to telling coherent life stories. Children ages 9 to 11 years cannot craft an entire life narrative, even though they are able to craft single event narratives (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). When asked to write their life story, 28% of 10-year-olds in Peterson and McCabe’s study wrote an isolated life event instead of a life narrative. By age 12 years, children coherently related several single life events. By age 14 years, most adolescents shared a detailed and coherent life story, indicating the emergence of overall life narrative coherence in adolescence (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008).

**Identity**

Narrative identity is a “person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). Life stories give an individual a sense of identity. This identity takes the form of a story with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme. Through life stories the self is integrated synchronically and diachronically (McAdams, 2001). Synchronic integration involves the integration of the wide range of different and possibly conflicting roles and relations in individuals’ lives. Everyone seems to assume multiple roles: student, professional, daughter, mother, niece, aunt, artist, musician, bicyclist, and so on. In these different roles, people may act in very different ways: for example, “I’m so comfortable around my sister, but my brother makes me furious,” or “I’m confident in my work with children but find it difficult to work with administrators.” Diachronic integration is the way people integrate themselves through time: for example, “When I was young, all I thought about was soccer; now I spend more time with my music,” or “I’ve been drawing as long as I can remember; now that I’m in high school I’m taking art lessons.” This synchronic and diachronic integration enables people to explain who they are and why they are and why they might have changed. Psychologists call these integrative life stories a narrative identity (Singer, 2004). Through narrative identity, people convey to themselves and others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they
think their lives may be going in the future. Persons create their identity by constructing stories about their lives.

Narrative identity begins to develop in conversations between parents and their children as they reflect on and explain experiences in the preschool years. By the mid-elementary years children can sequence a series of their personal event narratives, and by adolescence they integrate autobiographic narratives for individual events into life stories that provide the foundation for a narrative identity. Narrative identity continues to develop through late adolescence and adulthood as individuals construct life stories to make meaning out of their lives, determining who they are and where they are going. Developing an identity—a sense of oneself as a unique person with values and beliefs and a coherent sense of past, present, and future—is a critical aspect of adolescent development. As adolescents' life stories become increasingly more integrated, they exhibit a more stable identity.

Self-Regulation and Problem Solving

In addition to providing a sense of identity, the construction of life stories promotes self-regulation and problem solving. Good autobiographical memories for the past are associated with social problem-solving skills for future events (Brown et al., 2012; McAdams, 2013). In this sense, life stories serve as an aspect of executive functioning, encouraging reflecting and planning. Personal life stories give purpose and direction to life. Individuals can choose to follow a set course of action on the basis of the significance given to past experiences and actions, or they can decide to move in another direction.

Coherence in Life Stories

Because life stories place high demand on connecting ideas in an organized way, they also lead to and demand the development of mechanisms for signaling coherence in texts. The creation of a life story requires the teller to piece together individual autobiographical memories in a unified, coherent way. A coherent life story entails linking different episodes in one’s life so that the individual stories flow together in some logical way. Although coherence is important in all stories, it is essential in life stories. Without coherence, there is no point or purpose to the life story.

Single autobiographical memories are gradually strung together into life stories that are increasingly coherent (Grysman & Hudson, 2010; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). Children in the intermediate grades begin to give accounts of a series of experienced events, but adolescents can integrate different autobiographic narratives into a unified life story. Four different types of coherence—temporal, causal, thematic, and cultural—are used to form a basic, skeletal life narrative. Temporal coherence is the ability to order events chronologically. Basic temporal coherence is acquired across the preschool years (Friedman, 1992). However, the ability to order autobiographical events by the seasons of the year does not develop until about 8 years of age. By age 13 years, a majority of children have acquired this ability (Friedman & Lyon, 2005). Temporally ordered events are indicated by time-based connectives such as when, next, then, and first; dating events by calendar reference; and cross-referencing events and life periods to other parts of a life story (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008). Temporal coherence increases significantly between 8 and 12 years of age (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008).

A causally coherent life narrative is told in terms of one’s motives and causes. Narrators explain their actions or changes in their values or personality as a result of events over time. Causally coherent accounts may explain how actions and values within a single event or may link episodes in a life story in a causal way; behavior or attitudes in one event lead to behavior and attitudes in another event. Through causal coherence, narrators’ references to reason and meaning lead to an explanation of how one has become the person one is. When causal coherence is lacking, life appears to be determined by chance. Causal coherence is closely interwoven with the establishing of an identity during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Development of causal coherence accelerates between 12 and 16 years of age (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008).

Thematic coherence is the ability to create a central idea or underlying message in a life story narrative and to establish similarities among various events. Thematic coherence is created by maintaining some overarching idea, value, or message among various events or elements in a life story. With the development of thematic coherence, individuals are able to relate multiple episodes to gain insight into themselves. The theme, however, is often not explicitly stated. The listener must infer it from the apparent motives of the storyteller. At other times, the theme is explicit, particularly when narrators are telling a “turning point” story—an event in their lives that caused them to change direction or think about things in a different way. Themes may be explicit when students declare an event that they are describing as “typical” or when they describe life in terms of evaluative trajectories (e.g., “My life has been a series of ups and downs”). To tell a thematically coherent life narrative implies the ability to see one’s life in a framework of life ideas or to see different autobiographical events as typical for one’s life. Thematic coherence begins to emerge in mid-adolescence, with the rate of development increasing between 16 and 20 years of age (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008).

A culturally coherent narrative includes shared normative expectations concerning appropriate and probable life sequences. Together with temporal coherence, cultural coherence is used to form a basic, skeletal life narrative consisting of an ordered sequence of socially defined, major life events such as birth, school entrance, graduation, marriage, children, and so forth. Awareness of cultural expectations for stories begins in elementary school.
**Nature of Life Story Deficits**

There is no research available on how children and adolescents with language impairment or autism put individual experiences together to form a life story. In theory, children who have difficulty telling organized and elaborated event narratives, however, would most certainly have difficulty generating well-formed life stories. Harter (2012) posited what she called an “impoverished self” in individuals who lacked the vocabulary to formulate and communicate mental representations of the self. It may be that without sufficient language, mental images would be inaccessible to the internal dialogue necessary for self-reflection, self-instruction, and problem solving. Because the life story evolves from reflecting and reminiscing on specific experiences, children who have metalinguistic and executive control weaknesses (i.e., those with language impairments, autism, or conduct disorders) may have difficulty formulating coherent stories. Deficits in the ability to construct life stories could limit their ability to develop a narrative identity that gives purpose and direction to life.

Some data are available on deficits in life stories of at-risk or troubled youths (Eagan & Thorne, 2010; Matsuba, Elder, Petrucci, & Reimer, 2010), adults with psychological or psychiatric problems (Singer, Blagov, Berry, & Oost, 2013), and incarcerated adults (Adshead, 2011). Therapists working with these populations attempt to assist persons in developing coherent life stories and restructuring life stories that are incoherent, inaccurate, or inappropriate. Narrative interventions with these groups encourage people to tell their stories and then explore how the retelling of the story, considering other perspectives, might lead to psychological difficulties. SLPs should, however, be alert to traumatic content in life stories that indicate the need to provide counseling or other services. SLPs should also be alert to developmental or cognitive delays that may be uncovered during activities that involve self-disclosure.

**Eliciting Life Stories**

An approach to eliciting life stories comes from a study by Habermas and de Silveira (2008), who created indicators of coherence to investigate the life stories of children and young adults (ages 8, 12, 16, and 20 years). To evoke life stories, Habermas and de Silveira first asked participants to do the following.

Think about the seven most important events that have happened in your life. These may be events that have just happened, or they may have happened a long time ago. Then please write your seven most important events on these cards. Please name only memories of very specific events. Now arrange these cards in the order in which the events happened.

After arranging the cards in order, the individual was asked to tell a story involving their whole life (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008, pp. 711–712).

Now tell me a story involving your whole life. Think about all the events that have happened in your life since you were born. Integrate the seven events into your story. You can tell me things that someone like me, who doesn’t know you, might like to know about you.

Reese et al. (2010) designed the Emerging Life Story Interview to elicit children’s and adolescents’ reporting of life events and their ability to organize these events into lifetime periods. They told 8- to 12-year-old students that they wanted to hear about some important things that had happened to them. They asked the children to think about their lives as a story in a book and, if they wanted to tell their life story, what the chapters would be. Children were prompted to go as far backward in time as they wished to name all the chapters in their lives and to relate a few events from each chapter. Then the children were encouraged to go forward in time from their first chapter to make sure that they had touched all the important periods in their lives. Participants received a point for each chapter that was supported by at least one specific memory. In the second part of the Emerging Life Story Interview, children were prompted with “Now try to think of one particular thing that happened in an earlier chapter that changed your life. It should be something that happened to you that’s still really important now.” The prompt was followed up with specific questions: “How did you feel? How did others feel? How did this event change your life?”

Grysman and Hudson (2010) elicited components of life stories from adolescents and adults by asking them to describe three types of events. One event was one in which they experienced something extremely positive (a high point or “peak” experience). A second was one in which they experienced something extremely negative (a low point or “nadir” experience). A third was a turning point experience in which they experienced a time of change or transition.
Analyzing Coherence at the Microstructure Level

In analyzing life stories, Habermas and de Silveira (2008) applied linguistic indicators for temporal, causal, and thematic coherence in life stories. Reese et al. (2011) developed a Narrative Coherence Coding Scheme (NCCS) for individual personal event narratives or life stories. They combined Bohn and Berntsen’s (2008) temporal and causal coherence into a single temporal coherence, maintained the thematic coherence category, and added a category of contextual coherence that refers to specifying the place and time the events occurred. They applied the NCCS to personal event narratives of preschoolers and personal event and life stories of school-age students and adults. For each coherence category, they proposed 0- to 3-point rubrics.

Grysman and Hudson (2010) focused on causal and thematic elements of macrostructure coherence. Their assessment approach included two dimensions that address causal coherence—narrative complexity and meaning making or self-meaning making—and a scale that addresses thematic coherence. The elements of these life story macrostructure coherence rubrics are displayed in Table 3 and described below. SLPs could potentially use these rubrics to assess and monitor students’ development of life stories.

Analyzing Coherence at the Macrostructure Level

Researchers have proposed several systems for evaluating the macrostructure temporal, causal, and thematic coherence in life stories. Reese et al. (2011) developed a Narrative Coherence Coding Scheme (NCCS) for individual personal event narratives or life stories. They combined Bohn and Berntsen’s (2008) temporal and causal coherence into a single temporal coherence, maintained the thematic coherence category, and added a category of contextual coherence that refers to specifying the place and time the events occurred. They applied the NCCS to personal event narratives of preschoolers and personal event and life stories of school-age students and adults. For each coherence category, they proposed 0- to 3-point rubrics.

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Temporal coherence. The chronology or temporal coherence domain of Reese et al.’s (2011) NCCS is used to evaluate the degree to which the events in the story are on a clear timeline. It addresses the question of whether the listener of the story can determine the time sequence in which the events occurred. Given children’s early capabilities with temporal ordering, coherence with respect to chronology is the first to emerge in development. Even preschoolers are able to create a reasonably temporally ordered narrative, such as one represented as a “chronological” narrative in high-point analysis (Peterson & McCabe, 1983).

However, the ability to create a more complicated, causally connected narrative that would allow for the majority of actions to be presented in temporal order does not emerge until later childhood (Reese et al., 2011). Temporal coherence continues to develop into early adolescence because of the cognitive and linguistic demands of coordinating and marking the causal and temporal links of actions within and across events. The narrator must place each action in the story in relation to other actions, which requires the abilities to engage in causal reasoning and to create links both forward and backward in time to understand how multiple actions within an event are intertwined (Friedman, 1986, 2005).

The contextual dimension of the NCCS (Reese et al., 2011) provides information on where and when the event occurred. This dimension also contributes to temporal coherence, but rather than focusing on the sequence among the events, it refers to specific times in which an event occurred—for example, a specific month or year, a time of year (fall, spring), or a period in one’s life (preschool, middle school, first job). Performance on the contextual dimension does not emerge until middle childhood. Children’s understanding of time dimensions is developing during middle childhood and adolescence, especially their attempts

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Table 2. Indicators of microstructure coherence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coherence indicator</th>
<th>Proposition example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporal indicators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life phase</td>
<td>In elementary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, calendar date</td>
<td>When I was 9 years old; in March 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasons, holidays</td>
<td>Last winter; at Christmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from present</td>
<td>About a year ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal indicators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality explaining actions</td>
<td>I’m kinda shy so I don’t talk to new people I meet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events explaining personality</td>
<td>I’m in swimming and karate ‘cause I’m strong and like a lot of physical stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical</td>
<td>My dad died when I was in preschool, so we had to move in with my grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and they wouldn’t let me bring friends over.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson learned</td>
<td>I got expelled in sixth grade for hitting a kid and missed the big school trip to Denver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I never did that again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life generalizations</td>
<td>Hanging out with the wrong kids can get you into a lot of trouble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic indicators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving illustrations</td>
<td>I’ve always been good at art. I won a contest in second grade and started art classes in middle school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving opinions</td>
<td>I’d been in speech therapy a long time. In high school I decided I didn’t need it anymore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My mom thought I did.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibiting understanding</td>
<td>I finally figured out why I get so stressed out around her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving hedges regarding explanations</td>
<td>Maybe [hedge] I would’ve done better if I had asked for help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving descriptions or interpretations</td>
<td>I think I’ll have trouble in college ’cause I never learned how to study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 3. Indicators of macrostructure coherence compiled from Reese et al. (2011) and Grysman and Hudson (2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Temporal coherence</th>
<th>Causal coherence</th>
<th>Thematic coherence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chronology</td>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>Meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contextual (time/place)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Lists actions without maintaining a temporal order</td>
<td>Does not provide information about time or place</td>
<td>Does not describe a lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Includes fewer than half of the actions in a timeline</td>
<td>Mentions time or place but not both</td>
<td>Relies on one dimension or emotion for evaluating or making a choice; sees a situation from only his or her perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Includes 50%–75% of the actions in a timeline</td>
<td>Mentions both time and place but only one with specificity</td>
<td>Recognizes that there might be another perspective but does not know what it is or does not explain it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Includes 75%+ of all relevant actions in a timeline</td>
<td>Mentions both time and place with specificity</td>
<td>Provides a clear specification of there being two perspectives or two ways of dealing with something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to coordinate multiple time scales (months, years, seasons, school years) in reconstructing the times of personally experienced events (Friedman, Reese, & Dai, 2010).

Causal coherence. Grysman and Hudson (2010) used the narrative complexity scale to evaluate an aspect of causal coherence. They used the descriptions in this rubric to analyze the ways storytellers use perspective and relate emotion to causally connect events. In their analysis, Grysman and Hudson addressed two questions: Do the storytellers relate the story from only their perspective, or are they aware that others may view the events differently? If the storytellers are aware that there are different viewpoints, can they explain the different perspectives and various potential ways for dealing with situations?

Grysman and Hudson also evaluated causal coherence with a meaning-making rubric that reflects how storytellers fit the story into a broader framework. The meaning-making rubric addresses how the story is relevant (or focuses on what makes the story relevant). Has the storyteller learned a lesson or gained knowledge that can direct future behavior? A second component of the meaning-making rubric distinguishes between general lessons and insights gained and lessons and insights related to the self.

Thematic coherence. If a life story is to be coherent, the individual events must be related in some topical or intentional way. The NCCS thematic category (Reese et al., 2011) is used to evaluate the degree to which the storyteller maintains and elaborates on a topic or theme. Grysman and Hudson’s (2010) thematic coherence scale enables assessment of storytellers’ ability to interpret and summarize multiple events or episodes along thematic lines. Do the storytellers recognize and explain a relationship among the memories they are reporting?

By the end of the preschool years, children can generate, maintain, and elaborate on a topic (Peterson & McCabe, 1983), but the ability to provide a resolution or a connection between an event and the self does not emerge until adolescence (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). Providing a resolution, or drawing a connection to the self, requires the additional ability to create overarching temporal links between a past event and the current state of affairs as well as the ability to self-reflect and create explicit links between experience and self-understanding. These types of metacognitive skills do not emerge until early adolescence (e.g., Friedman, 1986; Harter, 2012). Thus, full development of the thematic dimension of coherence does not emerge until adolescence. Given that the ability to reflect on the meaning and consequences of events continues to develop into young adulthood (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008), development of the thematic dimension of coherence continues over the life span.

Example Life Story Assessment

An SLP and a collaborating high school English teacher worked with students with language impairments to develop their ability to write life stories. They gave students the following task.

Think about what has happened in your life since you were born and up to now. You can, for example, write about the most important things in your life, or what changes have happened in your life since you were born and up to now. You can also tell about other things you have experienced. Imagine that you are writing the story of your life to someone who would like to know something about you and the things that have happened in your life.

BJ, a 10th-grade boy, wrote this story:

I’ve grown up to be a good guy and a respectful guy and being a good kid in school and having a good job and learning new things and making new friends. This happened when I was little my dad pasted away I never got to see him or do anything with him he was a good father and good guy and when I was 10 I cracked my head open because I was jumping of the beds and hit a the corner and made a hole in my head and bled all over my face and went to the hospital and got a lot of stitches and got better and when I was in 6th grade and I got in trouble for hitting a stundt and then I got suspendes and for hitting a teacher and just for doing stupid stuff.

BJ begins with an evaluation of himself—a reflection of his self-identity—but he does not explain how he became this person. He relates three events in a temporal sequence: his dad passing away when he was little, cracking his head and getting stitches when he was 10 years old, and getting in trouble in sixth grade for hitting a student and a teacher. The appropriate sequence of events gives the story a temporal coherence, but references to time frames are vague: “when little,” age 10 years, and sixth grade. If the temporal macrostructure rubric is used, BJ could receive 3 points for chronology because the three events he mentions are in a sequential order; however, he would receive only 1 point for contextual coherence because he refers only to time and makes no reference to place. If his story is scored for microstructure components, he has three temporal microstructure signals (“when I was little,” “when I was 10,” and “in 6th grade”).

There are some physical causal relationships within events in the story (cracked head because he was jumping; got in trouble and suspended for hitting a student and teacher). There are, however, no microstructure elements for signaling causal coherence because BJ never evaluates any of the behaviors in terms of personality, biographical experiences, lessons learned, or life generalization. He receives no points for causal macrostructure coherence. Although he mentions getting in trouble for hitting a student and teacher, he never explains or evaluates the experiences. There is no meaning making in the story. BJ does not report that he learned any lessons from cracking his head open or being suspended. BJ says his dad was a good father, but he does not report any details regarding what showed he was a good father.

There is no thematic microstructure or macrostructure coherence in the story. BJ does not maintain a topic or
The theme. He reports three events—his father dying, cracking his head, and getting suspended—but he makes no connections among these events. BJ begins his story by saying that he is respectful and a good kid. He ends it with talking about being suspended for hitting a teacher and another student. One wonders if there was a life-changing event that happened between sixth grade and 10th grade to bring about this change.

Intervention for BJ could begin with assisting him in developing single personal event narratives that are temporally and causally coherent. This will necessitate that BJ develop temporal and causal microstructure markers. He will need to learn how to reflect on and evaluate experiences—to see the relationships between his personality and likes and dislikes and the events. To do so, he will need vocabulary to express mental states (e.g., think, remember, forget, feel) and emotions and the ability to construct complex syntax structures to express temporal and causal relationships (e.g., to produce sentences such as “I was worried when I realized I had forgotten my wallet ‘cause I was going to pay for the movie. I didn’t want my girlfriend to think I did that on purpose ’cause I didn’t want to have to pay for her.”).

Strategies for Promoting Life Stories

Once students with language-learning deficits are able to produce reasonably complete and coherent personal event narratives, SLPs could begin to assist students in generating coherent life stories. Discussions about emotions, character traits, and threads in themes might be paired with books that model each of these domains.

Focus on Emotions and Character Traits That Cross Events

If students are to have causal coherence in their life narratives, they must have an understanding of their emotions and physical and psychological traits as well as the influence these factors have on their thoughts and behaviors. Books in which the nature of the character drives the story can be useful in developing this understanding. Children can be asked to complete physical and psychological charts for characters. For example, a chart about a python named Verdi, from the story Verdi (Cannon, 1997), might look like Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Psychological</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snake</td>
<td>Impolite, ill mannered, rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No legs</td>
<td>Exuberant, energetic, high spirited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow, buttery</td>
<td>Thoughtless, inconsiderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bold, vivid stripes</td>
<td>Reckless, irresponsible, rash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short, thin, lean</td>
<td>Worried, nervous, troubled, concerned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active, vigorous, energetic</td>
<td>Lethargic, sluggish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast, quick, speedy, swift</td>
<td>Fearful, anxious, apprehensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forked tongue</td>
<td>Patient, long suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green, verdant</td>
<td>Sensitive, touchy, thin skinned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long, heavy, hefty</td>
<td>Adaptable, flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Droopy, limp</td>
<td>Reflective, introspective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

animal characters, and typically the stories arise because of an interaction of these traits. In Running Rhino (Hadithi, 2010), Rhino was so short sighted he would run at anything that moved. When the animals asked him to stop, he refused. Brave little Tickbird finally stood up to Rhino, challenged him to stop running around, and won the contest. In Lazy Lion (Hadithi, 1990), Lion orders the other animals to build him a house. They do their best, but Lion is proud and very difficult to please. Because of Lion’s physical characteristics, many of the houses do not work for him. Because of his critical behavior, the animals are never able to construct a satisfactory house, and he is left to roam the African plain. At a more abstract level, students can be asked to list words that describe physical and psychological characteristics and specify what persons with these characteristic might like or not like and what they are likely to do or not do. Students can then be asked to think about their physical and psychological traits and how these traits influence what they like and do not like and what they do and do not do.

Model Turning Points in Books

Life turning points can be a complex concept for students, but many children’s books provide examples of turning points. In a true story, Tomas and the Library Lady (Mora, 1997), Tomas Rivera is a Mexican migrant child in Iowa. One summer he encounters a librarian in a small rural town who works with him and lets him check out books. This was a turning point for Tomas. He went on to become a noted author and the chancellor of the University of California at Riverside. In The Promise (Davies, 2014), a young girl living in the inner city is hard and mean. She steals what she wants. One evening she snatches a bag from an old woman. At first the old woman holds onto the bag, but she then releases it with the condition that the girl plants what is in it. The girl discovers acorns in the bag. She does plant them, and the planting transforms her life and the lives of those around her. To get students to think about turning points in their lives, Calkins (2006, p. 21) suggested asking students questions about the following.

- First or last time you did something hard to do
- First or last time you did something you now do every day

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• First or last time with a person, an animal, a place, or an activity
• A time you realized something important about yourself or someone else
• A time you realized that a huge change in your life almost happened

Many life story turning points bring about significant changes in the psychological traits of characters. *Thank You, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998) is a true story of the author. At the beginning of the story, Patricia cannot read; she feels lonely and afraid and thinks she is dumb and stupid. Mr. Falker, a teacher, recognizes her problem and teaches her to read. This was a major turning point in her life. She realized that she was smart, she became confident, and ultimately she became one of the foremost children’s authors.

In *The One and Only Ivan* (Applegate, 2012), Ivan is a gorilla in a cage in a mall. He keeps his head down and focuses on himself, what he knows, and his painting. He does not think beyond the immediate. Stella, the old elephant, becomes ill and asks Ivan to take care of Ruby, the baby elephant. With this responsibility, Ivan begins to change, thinking about others and thinking beyond the present. When Stella dies, Ivan plans how to get Ruby out of the mall and successfully achieves his goal. Graphic organizers such as those in Figures 1 and 2 can be used to help students chart these transformations.

**Analyze and Capitalize on Thematic Connections in Books**

Narrative plot structures are often categorized as character versus character, character versus nature, character versus self, and character versus society. Stories with character-versus-self plots can provide students with a cultural framework for life stories as well as frameworks for causal coherence in stories. In stories with character-versus-self plots, the characters’ struggles take place in their own minds. Character-versus-self plot struggles often have something to do with a choice (choosing between right and wrong) or may have to do with overcoming emotions or mixed feelings. The actions in the story are driven by the traits and thoughts of the characters. The events of the story are explained by the nature of the characters that lay the foundation for causal coherence in life stories.

Stories for young children, as well as for older children, can make fairly explicit connections between traits and actions. In a picture book, *Grumpy Cat* (Teckentrup, 2008), an old cat is lonely and does not know how to join in. Other cats think he is grumpy. A young kitten intrudes in Grumpy Cat’s world. At first, Grumpy Cat does not know how to deal with the kitten, but gradually he learns how to interact with the kitten and is never grumpy again. *El Deafo* (Bell, 2014), written for children in elementary school, is an autobiographical narrative, in graphic novel form, about a child who is deaf who struggles in general education in elementary school. The main character is explicit about her thoughts and feelings and how these influence her talk and behaviors. *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012) represents a complex character-versus-self plot. Auggie, the main character, is a student with a severe facial deformity. The story describes his coping with this, but it also describes the ways that many of the students around him cope, given their particular personalities.

![Character Transformation Diagram](image-url)
Call Attention to Threads in Biographies

Biographies can also be used to demonstrate the types of coherence in life stories. For young children, clinicians might choose biographies that focus on life stages (early childhood, school, adulthood) without much discussion of character traits. The intent is to have children identify the temporal sequence of events and the types of content that are expected in the life stages. Holiday House Publishers has a series of picture book biographies written by David Adler that fit the earliest stage. For older students, clinicians should select biographies that show how the nature of the person and his or her experiences affect the course of his or her life. Some biographies focus on one chapter in an individual’s life. For example, *Salt in His Shoes* (Jordan & Jordan, 2003) relates a “chapter” event from the story of a young Michael Jordan. Jordan’s neighborhood peers would not let him play basketball because he was not tall enough. He had heard that one could grow taller by putting salt in his shoes. He tried that, but he did not grow taller. Instead, he began to practice and practice and practice. Even though he did not grow taller at that particular time, eventually his playing so improved that he was permitted to join the game. *The Man Who Made Time Travel* (Lasky, 2003) is the life story of John Harrison, from his early twenties to his death. Harrison dedicated his entire life to his quest to measure longitude. Although the scientific establishment of the 18th century was certain that the answer lay in mapping the heavens, Harrison, an uneducated clockmaker, imagined a different solution: a seafaring clock. Harrison persisted in his vision, and by the end of his life he created a timepiece that would change the world. Readers see in the story how Harrison’s attributes influenced his behaviors throughout his life. Table 5 gives examples of children’s books that can be used to facilitate development of the components of life stories.

Cultural Influences on Stories

Narratives are told in all cultures, but the types of narratives and the reasons they are told can vary, as can the content and structure of the narratives and the way in which children are socialized to produce narratives. Although much of the available literature deals with the nature of personal narratives in mainstream U.S. culture, SLPs serve a culturally linguistically diverse population. U.S. census data from 2014 indicate that 13.7% of the population are Black or African American, 16.9% are Hispanic, and 5.9% are Asian; in addition, in 20% of homes, a language other than English is spoken (American FactFinder, 2016). Specific data are not available on numbers from other ethnic groups and regions of the world. It is likely that SLPs will have a number of children and adolescents on their caseloads who have been socialized to personal narratives and life stories that differ from those of mainstream students. As a consequence, they need to be alert to these narrative variations.

One factor that affects narrative development is the extent to which cultures are individualistic versus collective. Elaborative reminiscing is relatively common in individualistic cultures such as the mainstream North American culture and northern European cultures. In these families, parents support elaborative reminiscing and encourage children to talk about themselves and their feelings about the past. Parents in collective cultures tend to engage in less reminiscing about the past, provide fewer details, and emphasize adaptation and accommodation to others (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemer, 2003). It is not surprising that these reminiscing experiences with parents influence
the types of personal narratives children produce. Children from individualistic cultures produce more specific elaborative narratives about one or two events with references to themselves and self-evaluation. In contrast, children in collective cultures are likely to produce more general, sparse narratives with skeletal descriptions of multiple events and a greater orientation toward social engagement and moral correctness. In bilingual or multicultural individuals, the function, content, and structure of the narratives may differ depending on the language in which the story is told (Ervin-Tripp, 1967; Minami, 2011; Wang, Shao, & Li, 2010). In families that are enculturating, stories may incorporate elements of both cultures. For example, Chinese American families were reported to uphold their culture of origin when reminiscing by mentioning others, referencing their own children’s behavior, and commenting on moral and social rules more than mainstream U.S. families. At the same time, they made reference to their children’s internal states like the American families (Koh & Wang, 2013).

As discussed earlier, life stories must have cultural as well as temporal, causal, and thematic cohesion. The content and structure of life stories are constrained by cultural norms that influence what should be included (Berntsen & Bohn, 2009). Life stories are framed by cultural life scripts. A life script is a mental representation of the culturally expected life events and their age norms. These life scripts influence what events persons retrieve from memory and how they organize and interpret these events. The events that are expected and acceptable to include in life stories, and the way these events are to be interpreted, vary across cultures (McAdams, 2008; Wang, 2014). Because children and adolescents develop a sense of identity as they construct their life stories, the nature of this identity varies across cultures. They come to internalize cultural belief systems (e.g., individualistic vs. collective) into their own self-understanding and remembering (e.g., with an individual orientation vs. self-orientation). For bicultural individuals, the sense of identity can vary depending on the language they are using in the interaction (Chiao et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2010). Persons’ views of self and others, as reflected in their life stories, influence their problem-solving and self-regulation strategies.

**Implications**

In this tutorial, we reviewed the literature on development and assessment of personal narratives, offered strategies for promoting production of personal event narratives and life stories, and explained how cultural differences might influence the development of personal narratives. Here we suggest a framework for synthesizing the information and making the intervention manageable. Elements of an intervention framework can entail setting functional goals, addressing intervention processes to build clients’ narrative capacity, and implementing strategies for facilitating clients’ narrative performance in social and academic contexts.

**Focus Intervention on Functioning**

In terms of setting goals that affect functioning, clinicians can support all clients, including those from different cultural backgrounds, in producing narrative structures that students encounter in school. Although SLPs should be aware of cultural variations in students’ personal narratives and life stories, this does not mean that they must attempt to assist children’s development of stories within a

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**Table 5. Books to build components for life stories.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content to include in life story</td>
<td>Younger students: Diary of a Worm and Diary of a Fly by Doreen Cronin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Older students: Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kinney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life periods to discuss in life stories</td>
<td>Biographies written by David Adler, such as A Picture Book of Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alva Edison and A Picture Book of Amelia Earhart (This set focuses on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>what the persons do or what happens to them in different life periods—not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>much attention to character development.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life periods with character development</td>
<td>What’s the Matter with Albert, Manya’s Dream, and The Man Who Made Parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Frieda Wishinsky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborated event within a life story that is</td>
<td>Salt In His Shoes: Michael Jordan in Pursuit of a Dream by Delores and Roslyn Jordan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important to overall life story</td>
<td>Richard Wright and the Library Card by William Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ben Franklin’s Big Splash by Barb Rosenstock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and psychological characteristics</td>
<td>Verdi, Crickwing, and Pinduli by Janell Cannon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African animal stories by Mwenye Hadith, such as Awkward Aardvark, Baby Baboon, Bumping Buffalo, Crafty Chameleon, Cross Crocodile, Greedy Zebra, Handsome Hog, Hot Hippo, Hungry Hyena, Laughing Giraffe, Lazy Lion, Running Rhino, and Tricky Tortoise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life story that shows consistency of character</td>
<td>Yours for Justice, Ida B. Wells: The Daring Life of a Crusading Journal by Philip Dray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over time (lifetime theme)</td>
<td>The Man Who Made Time Travel by Kathryn Lasky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marvelous Mattie: How Margaret E. Knight Became an Inventor by Emily McCully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books to trigger reminiscing about life</td>
<td>The One and Only Ivan by Kate Applegate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turning points</td>
<td>The Promise by Nicola Davies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thank you, Mr. Falker by Patricia Pollacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tomas and the Library Lady by Pat Mora</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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particular cultural framework. McCabe (1996) has noted the cultural diversity of stories school-age children are exposed to when reading. She proposes that students become chameleon readers—that is, that they be able to comprehend a variety of narratives. Although clinicians working with culturally and linguistically diverse students can expect and accept event narratives and life stories that may differ in content and structure, they can establish goals on the basis of standard U.S. narratives to affect students' functioning in mainstream education.

In addition to establishing mainstream narrative structures as the intervention goal, clinicians should work toward ensuring that the quality of clients' personal stories positively affects their functioning. The Preferred Practice Patterns document of ASHA (2004) emphasizes focusing on expected outcomes of assessments and intervention. The foundational document for this framework, the WHO's International Classification of Functioning (WHO, 2001), states that the ultimate goal of intervention is to enable persons with disabilities to participate in natural contexts within their family, school, and community. The ability to share stories is important for participating in most social and academic situations. Participation, as defined by ICF, requires the capacity to do a skill or activity and the performance of that skill or activity in a social context. To function in many social situations, persons must have the capacity to produce stories with logical, temporal–causal sequences and organized plots and must be able to share their stories with others (performance) in ways that are coherent to their listeners.

To function well with personal narratives, students with language learning impairments usually require intervention at both the capacity and performance levels. They must be helped to develop vocabulary, syntactic patterns, and discourse structures at the capacity level, and they must then use these skills as they communicate in natural contexts. Interventions must address both capacity (with impairment-based goals addressing skills) and performance (with socially based goals addressing functioning in natural contexts). Because training at the capacity level does not automatically result in transfer of skills to the performance level and training at the performance level does not necessarily result in improved capacity skills (Milman, 2016), both need to be considered.

Address Processes to Build Capacity

To assist clients in developing narrative capacity, clinicians can address intervention processes that are likely to improve clients' production of personal event narratives or life stories. Four key processes synthesized from the literature on intervention—reminiscing, reflecting, establishing coherence, and conveying plot structure—can be implemented to support clients' capacity to generate personal stories.

**Reminiscing**

The first of the four processes, reminiscing, is common to both personal event narratives and life stories. In supporting personal event narratives, clinicians may elicit clients' memories about noteworthy and emotionally charged events, ask questions about feelings and details related to the events, and elaborate on the information the clients provided when possible. Clinicians may also assist clients in storing personal memories by ensuring that interesting things that are worthy of reminiscing about happen in clinical settings. Similar to personal event narratives, life stories develop from reminiscing, but in regard to a series of events rather than a single specific experience.

**Reflecting**

The second influencing process, reflecting, entails evaluating experiences included in personal event narratives and life stories. In personal event narratives the process of reflecting can be supported by eliciting and acknowledging evaluative acts—affective statements or nonverbal behaviors (e.g., a sigh or gesture) that serve to appraise the event. The intent of clients' evaluative acts can be acknowledged, interpreted, and recast by the clinician, often with emotion or mental state terms. In life stories, the reflection process requires greater metacognitive analysis than that involved in evaluating personal event narratives. This higher level evaluating in life stories permits clients to attribute significance to a sequence of events and find relationships among events in a series. Clinicians can scaffold or engage clients in “meta” talk by presenting leading questions that focus on evaluating and integrating experiences across time.

**Establishing Coherence**

The third process, establishing coherence, which involves making logical connections among ideas, is addressed in slightly different ways in personal event narratives and life stories. In personal event narratives, clinicians could provide questions or cues about the proper order of events and indicate places to insert connector words that are then used in retold versions of the same story. In addition to temporal and causal coherence, life stories require thematic coherence, where a topical thread runs through a series of events and where later actions are influenced by earlier ones. Because the thematic thread often relates to clients' personal traits, encouraging clients to reflect on how their own characteristics could relate to actions taken across events can be useful in getting clients to identify life story themes. Clinicians could engage clients in discussions in which they identify lessons learned, recognize traits and experiences that may have affected their decisions, and imagine actions they may take in the future.

**Conveying the Plot Structure**

The fourth process, conveying the plot structure, influences the development of personal event narratives and life stories in slightly different ways. In personal event narratives, the underlying plot structure relies on the signaling of sequential and causal relationships. Although the plot structure requires a chronological order, it also entails a reason for sharing the story—the high point, which is usually an interesting aspect of an experience that evokes
an emotional response. Clinicians can support the structure of clients’ event narratives by providing a graphic organizer or guiding questions that are likely to trigger the signaling of a goal, actions in temporal or causal order, and an evaluation and/or resolution. For life stories, clinicians can support the telling in a temporal or causal order by having the client sequence cards that represent individual events and then explore turning points or lessons learned. Supporting production of well-structured life stories, by drawing on either clients’ own stories or published model texts, requires metacognitive reflection about lessons learned, identifying factors that might have contributed to a change in the course of action, or considering other interpretations from the perspectives of others involved.

Because the four processes interrelate, addressing them together can make the intervention approximate the demands of authentic personal narratives. The processes operate to build capacity that ultimately can affect performance in social and academic settings. The stories generated with those four processes in mind approximate the complexity of authentic stories and narratives.

**Support Performance**

Enhancing the capacity to produce personal narratives can serve as a bridge to functional use. However, the following additional performance-based strategies can increase the likelihood that well-formed narratives will be generated in social and academic settings.

**Evoke and Embed Stories in Naturalistic Conversations**

In real-world conversations, a story contributed by one participant can lead to another story, related to the topic, shared by the conversational partner. The same eliciting process can be used in the clinical setting to make the telling of personal stories approximate natural contextual demands. When participating in conversations with clients, clinicians can find genuine reasons to relate a personal event (or a series of events in the case of life stories) that relates to the current topic of conversation. Stories can appear to evolve naturally from conversations by having clinicians connect their own stories to topics that relate to the clients’ past experiences or to compelling topics of conversation. Embedding requests to contribute stories about similar events (e.g., “Has anything like that happened to you?”) permits stories to be woven together in conversations. Clinicians’ openers can also make storytelling appear natural—for example, “Well, something silly (or unusual or scary) happened to me this week” or “Remember when you were talking; well, that reminded me of….”

**Support and Monitor Spontaneously Initiated Stories**

Another way to work on narrative performance is to encourage clients’ spontaneous productions of stories and support them, if necessary, through elaborations and reflective questioning. Once a story has been spontaneously introduced, the clinician can find reasons to elicit that story in other contexts. Spontaneously produced narratives—even those that occur in clinical contexts—can serve as data for monitoring performance. Clinicians can observe the clients’ functioning in natural contexts to determine the extent to which capacities that are demonstrated in the clinic generalize. Clinicians can plan for interesting events to occur in the clinical setting and then arrange for clients to relate those events to someone else. Observing how clients relate experiences worth sharing to a parent, teacher, or peer can provide useful information about their performance. In addition, although parents and teachers may not record exact tellings, they may report their impressions about how well clients function when relating events in home or school contexts.

**Involves Parents**

Clinicians may receive ideas for stories from noteworthy past happenings that clients or their family members encountered. The clients’ experiences, offered or suggested by parents, can be elicited in the clinic in natural ways. Clinicians may also support clients’ personal narrative performance by helping parents engage in effective, elaborative reminiscing in which parents not only elaborate the information offered, but also encourage the clients to retrieve information. Families also tend to have personal stories that are likely to be shared periodically. With help from parents in knowing the details and sequence of events, clinicians can support the telling of family stories in the clinical setting and then ask parents to elicit them in naturalistic contexts.

**Arrange for Clients to Tell Previously Scaffolded Stories to Others**

Clinicians can ensure that stories that are practiced and scaffolded in the clinical setting are shared with family members, teachers, or peers. After providing interesting experiences or drawing on stories the child initiates, clinicians can scaffold the telling of those events and arrange for clients to share those same stories with others. Well-formed narratives are likely to be shared in other contexts if intriguing experiences serve as the content for stories.

**Draw on Authentic Model Texts**

Clinicians can select model texts (biographies or fictional narratives) to fit with the content or expectations that students encounter in school. This can permit clients to talk about, retell, or discuss stories from texts and the characters (people) they address. Prior experience conveying events and details about a person’s life can prepare clients to produce personal narratives in academic settings—either event narratives that deal with an episode in a person’s life or life stories that deal with a series of events with turning points and reflections.

Drawing on authentic model texts and implementing other performance-based intervention strategies can affect functioning in the realm of personal narratives. The focus on personal narrative performance in naturalistic contexts, along with efforts to improve capacity in clinical settings, is important for both academic and social functioning. This
tutorial provides SLPs with the justification for making capacity and performance of personal narratives a language goal and for implementing assessment and intervention strategies necessary for facilitating clients’ development of personal stories.

References


