

Following Up the First Great Story

(transcript)

I hope you enjoyed learning how to tell the Great Stories last week, and were able to watch the bonus video where I told the first Great Story to my children. This week, let's talk about what happens after that story.

Many children will have questions, but some won't - at least not right away. Both are ok. Let's talk about what to do in each case. If your child doesn't have questions, then YOU can choose how to start exploring geography. You might want to start with the Nature of the Elements experiments, or explore the Three States of Matter. Regardless of your choice, you approach it the same way: read through the lessons; prepare all the materials; think about how you're going to present, clean-up, and store the supplies. Then, find at least one book to connect to the concepts you're going to introduce; and finally give your lesson remembering to tie it back to the first Great Story. It sounds like a lot, and yes, it's more involved than handing over a workbook, but the learning that will happen is a lot deeper and teaching becomes easier in the long run because you have an engaged and interested audience that remembers what they learned.

If your children do have questions after the first Great Story, then your job is to decide which lesson best aligns with their question. For example, one of the questions my son had was "Are apple sauce and ice cream liquids or solids?" In this case, I would start with the experiments for three states of matter. I might start by reminding him of what he asked, then give the lesson. And then after the lesson, I'd see if he can extrapolate an answer to his question based on his new knowledge. This is how critical thinking is built!

I want to point out something that I think is very important: You do NOT have to answer every question directly. You can use their curiosity as a guide, and start with the album lessons that relate to the general area of their curiosity. This gives them a foundation that will give them context as they search for more specific answers later on in books.

For example, my son asked me "How fast does the Earth spin and what would happen if it stopped spinning?" There is no specific lesson that addresses the speed of the Earth's rotation, but there are a couple of lessons that focus on rotation and the relationship between the Earth and the Sun. These lessons provide important keys, so that when later he goes off to explore his answers in books, he'll do it with a clear picture of the bigger context in his mind. This is what I mean when I say that we move from the whole to the detail.

Now, say your child asks a question and you can't find a lesson that's even remotely related - say, for example, that your child asks about volcanoes. What do you do? Well, they've had the experience of volcanoes in the lesson, so you let them repeat that experiment as many times as they want. And then, you think about how to craft a story about volcanoes. Coming up with

your own stories is really not as hard as it sounds. You don't even have to be a good writer! Let me explain how to do it.

Do you remember the keys to storytelling that we discussed at the beginning of this module? That's what you're going to use to craft all your stories! Let's do a quick review. Most stories include some of the following elements:

1. An orientation in space and time
2. A problem and a solution
3. An exploration of right and wrong
4. Connections:
 - a) between the details and the whole
 - b) between subjects
 - c) between things, living Nature, and humanity
 - d) Between one's acts and the needs of others
5. Human powers:
 - a) The use of human gifts (creativity, hands, connection) to solve problems
 - b) Roles of individuals within a group
 - (1) Contributions, struggles, and commitment
 - c) Human laws, signs & symbols, language

You don't have to use all the elements in every story, but it helps to become familiar with them so you can use them as a framework.

I like to go online and either find an article or a short video that gives me facts for what I want to talk about. For example, to learn more about volcanoes, I did a search for "how volcanoes shaped the earth" and right away found an amazing article with just the right amount of information. You won't always be this lucky so quickly, but don't give up!

To come up with my story, I'm going to connect it to the first Great Story by asking if they remember how the Earth was shaped by volcanoes in the first Great Story. Then, I'm going to orient the children in space and time by saying that volcanoes have been around since the Earth formed. I might even show the chart of the volcanoes from the first Great Story. Then I'll point out how they're mostly found in an area called the Ring of Fire, and also show a picture.

The next key is cause and effect. Here, I'll review how volcanoes follow the law that nature gave the elements, which was that gases expand and move in all directions, while liquids have to flow and take up the space of the container they're in. I'll remind them that temperature determines how each element behaves. I'll point out that volcanoes have been responsible for a lot of destruction over the millenia, and then I'll bring in the concept of right vs. wrong and ask: "Are volcanoes trying to destroy the Earth on purpose?" No, they're just following the laws of nature!

And then I'll ask the question that will hook them: We know volcanoes are destructive, but have you ever wondered if they're helpful too? This is an invitation for them to ponder the interconnectedness of nature. And that little phrase, "have you ever wondered", gets their brain thinking and engages them in the story because they now want to find the answer!

From there, I'll go on to briefly - just briefly - talk about how greenhouse gases from volcanoes trapped heat from the sun and warmed up the planet just enough to make life possible. I'll discuss how outgassed water vapor condensed and rained down to form oceans, and I'll share how civilizations like the Mayans, the Etruscans, and the ancient Greeks and Romans owe their fertile lands to volcanoes. We'll also talk about how volcanoes bring gold, silver, and diamonds to the Earth's surface, and how volcanoes create islands where people can live, like Hawaii and Iceland. And I'll talk about how Icelanders are learning to use geothermal energy to heat their homes and power their industries. All of these are examples of the connection between things, living nature, and humanity. And I got all this information from that one article I found.

I'll conclude my story by saying that thanks to humans' ability to study volcanoes and learn from past eruptions, we're figuring out how to live safely near them and how to benefit from volcanoes, one of nature's most powerful forces.

The beauty of crafting oral stories this way is that you don't have to write them in paragraph form, so even if writing is not your strong suit, you can still be a talented oral storyteller. It's actually better if you keep writing to a minimum, because then you don't feel pressured to memorize the story! Bullet points or a mind map are all you need to craft a wonderful oral story. Then just practice it, make sure you have the right props, and tell it to your children.

And then you can see how they want to follow up, maybe by learning the parts of the volcano, studying igneous rocks, or researching the Ring of Fire. The possibilities are endless now that you've got them started!

I'm going to leave you with one more suggestion: take it slowly. One good, solid, well-prepared lesson is much more valuable and effective than a bunch of busy work. Montessori learning is slow learning, but it's powerful and lasting learning, which is the best kind. Have a great week exploring and growing with your children!