

*A short guide
to help parents
and teachers use
Sparkle Stories to
support a gentle,
graceful, and
fully-engaged
transition to
school.*



A Back-to-School Guide for Parents and Teachers

Harnessing the Power of Story to Help Children Navigate
Times of Transition

by **Meredith Markow** and
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Introduction

We believe that storytelling is the single most effective parenting and educating tool there is. As elementary school teachers and parents, we have seen children's behavior, perspective, and demeanor transform after listening to a story well-told.

Going to school is a major benchmark for children. We parents make a big deal about it, as do their teachers. Inwardly children know that going to school means that they are getting older, that they are ready for bigger challenges, and that they are going to attempt them, away from their parents. It is a significant step towards independence and self reliance.

We parents and educators make the transition much more graceful and transformative for children if we honor it with eyes and hearts open.

How to Use this Guide

With this printable guide, we are sharing four free Back-to-School audio stories, which can be accessed by email after entering your email address at www.sparklestories.com/engage/back-to-school.

The four stories are:

Mr. Salamander, from the series *So Many Fairies*
Teeny the Toadlet, from the series *Sparkle Sleepytime*
Zebra Stripes, from the series *The Willowbee Tree*
The Schoolmaster, from the series *By Thistle By Thimble*

In this guide, you'll find insight into each story, with suggestions for practical applications to support your children at the school threshold.



Before you offer a story to your children, read the short points enclosed, so you understand what the story is conveying. Then invite your children to listen to the stories freely, without explanation or introduction.

If a particular story seems uniquely relevant and meaningful to your child, and they ask to listen to it a second, or even third, time, definitely allow for that! For children, hearing the same words over and over can be reassuring and soothing. It can also help deepen the pedagogical and therapeutic gifts within the narrative.

Note: You do not need to ask your children questions or have them summarize the meaning of the story for you. The story will do its own work. Use the themes included in this guide to support you if your child has questions or hesitations.

If none of these Sparkle Stories seems to hit the mark, you might consider telling your own. See the end of this guide for a short description of "storying," or how to spontaneously tell your own stories.



“Mr. Salamander”

Theme: Change and Transformation

Story Description:

“Mr. Salamander” is about a little girl named Cami who is to start school for the very first time. She does not want to leave her home and magical backyard to go to an unfamiliar place for first grade. As she lays by her backyard frog pond, she meets Mr. Salamander, who transforms her apprehension into excitement by telling her a story about a salamander who is quite like herself.

1. Children can have all sorts of emotions in times of change and transformation, some of them seemingly contradictory.

In this story, Cami was nervous about first grade, but she was also very curious and excited about learning. It doesn't matter what it is that we feel – the fact that we feel scared, or excited, or both is what needs to be recognized. There is room for all of these feelings!

If your child expresses a variety of emotions or confusion about contrasting feelings, be still and present, and connect with her. Reassure her that it's normal to feel a lot of different things, and invite her to make room for all of them.

2. We have so many untapped capacities inside us, and often we don't discover them until we try something new!

In this story, Amby the Nymph was delighted when she learned how to swim after she was born. This gave her the reassurance that she would learn new things when she went into the forest. Even though the pond was home, there was learning to do, and she needed to leave the pond to do it!

This is a wonderful thing to remind children if they feel concerned about not knowing how to “do” or “be” something. Try saying something like, “Remember how Amby the Nymph was able to learn so much more after she left the pond? She wouldn't have been able to do any of that if she'd stayed at home.”

3. Coming into a new, unfamiliar place can actually be fun and exciting when you are curious about it.

When we explore something with the spirit of adventure, we tend to be excited, but often when we are put into new and unfamiliar situations, we can feel nervous.

Encourage your child to approach new situations with the same spirit of exploration as Cami does with Mr. Salamander's help. What might it feel like if going to school were approached like a scavenger hunt?



“Teeny the Toadlet”

Theme: Change and Transformation

Story Description:

Teeny is a little toadlet who is about to go to school for the very first time. When he realizes that going to Toad School includes leaving some of his friends from the pond and making new friends on land, he grows nervous. His mother reassures him that toads are lucky, because they can make new friends at Toad School while keeping their old friends from the pond.

1. It’s reassuring when we learn that others, too, have experienced the things that we may think are unique to us.

In this story, Teeny and his friends know that in order to become toads, they have to first grow from tadpoles to toadlets, so that they can experience life in new ways one day as toads. Hearing the stories of others helped transform Teeny’s fears of all this change into feelings of excitement.

Your child may enjoy hearing older children talk about what they loved about school, or the upcoming grade. Invite others to tell positive school experiences, particularly if they too felt nervous at first but then found themselves at ease. Remember your own stories of school days, and share those too!

2. In big transition times, children need extra rest.

We all do! Teeny’s mama knew this when she told him that what he needed more than anything was some sleep.

Find extra pauses for children in the afternoon hours. Start bedtime early with special soothing routines. Take your own deep breaths as parents, and create more times of stillness so that your children can enjoy the peace this brings. And if they are resistant to rest, remind them about Teeny!

3. Exploring new relationships is also an adventure!

Teeny was very frightened to be separated from his friends, but he may not have gotten to know Zipsy and Popper as well as he did, had he been with his other friends whom he already knew.

If your child expresses apprehension about being around all new people, remind him about Teeny’s experience and what a great adventure it can be to meet new people.



“Zebra Stripes”

Theme: Entering a New Environment

Story Description:

“Zebra Stripes” follows six-year-old Clancy. He is starting first grade this year, and he worries that he won’t fit into the class and find good friendships. Luckily, he meets an African zebra who has similar worries, and the two of them realize that everyone is unique and special in their own way, and so everyone belongs.

1. Celebrate your own uniqueness.

In the story, Clancy feels worried that the other children will not like him — particularly when he compares himself to his classmate Jeremy, and all the things Jeremy can do. He feels like he won’t be good enough!

Similarly Ita, the young zebra in the Willowbee Tree, is never quite satisfied with her stripes — that is, until she compares them to all the other zebras’ stripes and discovers that every single zebra is completely unique! How can we compare, when we are all so individual? Through Ita, Clancy also learns how to delight in his own uniqueness.

If your children are looking outside of themselves for security by comparing themselves to others, remind them of Clancy’s journey. Encourage them to instead enjoy what’s wonderful and unique about themselves.

2. Together, everyone’s uniqueness makes a beautiful diversity!

In this story, every bird has its special quality and color and birdsong, and all together, those birds make up a beautiful melodic orchestra. Isn’t it the same with human beings?

If your child wishes that she were “like everyone else,” or if she worries that she is “different,” then try making a mental “Life Collage” together. Take a pause in that very moment to notice how varied the world around you is. Look at all the different trees, listen to the sound of the birds, notice taller and shorter people. Point out to your child how all these different

components work together to make a beautiful piece of art, just like the song of the birds in the Willowbee Tree.

3. All people have different strengths, as well as areas where we need support.

This is true whether or not we are school-aged, and this is equally true of the young zebras showing their stripes before they start training. There is no right stripe pattern and no wrong stripe pattern, just like there is no right learning profile and no wrong learning profile.

If your child is concerned that he won’t do well or be good enough, remind her of this story, the young zebras, and all of the different stripe patterns. Remind her that teachers know that all children have their strong areas and their challenges.

4. When we are nervous about something or need help ourselves, sometimes the best “medicine” is helping others.

When Clancy supported the young zebra, Ita, he gave her the confidence that she was fine just as she was, with her beautiful stripes. By telling her that all of the zebra stripes are different but equally beautiful, he was actually saying the very thing he needed to hear himself!

If your child is showing signs of anxiety or worry, talk about others who might be feeling the same way. Then consider performing a random act of kindness for that person to add a little ease to his or her day. (And don’t be surprised if your child suggests doing for another the very thing that she needs for herself.)



“The Schoolmaster”

Theme: Entering a New Environment

Story Description:

In the story “The Schoolmaster,” a boy named Micajah is looking for a teacher. His family has moved many times: from Concord, New Hampshire to Buffalo, New York to Rapid City, South Dakota to Denver, Colorado and finally to San Mateo, California. In California, he attends the one-room schoolhouse of a teacher named Master Simon. Master Simon enraptures the class with a magical geography lesson that draws Micajah into the fold and brings a sense of belonging to the whole class.

1. When we enter new situations, it can be helpful to bring proper closure to the one that we are about to leave.

Micajah felt it was important to say “goodbye” to his teacher, Miss Victoria, and even though she was not home, he left her a little note. That was his way of saying “thank you” to her, and with that, he could move on.

If your child is moving from one school to another, it can be helpful not only to say a clear goodbye to friends and teachers, but it can also be nice to pause and reflect on the previous experience. What did you enjoy about that school? What was a favorite thing you learned? And then invite your child to be grateful for the gifts of that time and place.

2. When we are entering new situations, it can be helpful to break down the tasks asked of us into smaller, more doable increments.

When Micajah came into Master Simon’s school, there was so much that was new, but Master Simon reassured him that they could take it step-by-step. First things first. Micajah’s first task was to sit in his new desk, and soon enough all the rest would come.

If your child is overwhelmed by all that comes with the first days of school, help him break things down into smaller tasks. Sometimes it helps to list the steps! “The night before school, we will make your lunch, lay out your clothes

for the next day, and get to bed early with extra snuggles for a good night’s sleep.” This not only reassures your child but also gives him something to refer to if overwhelm sets in again.

3. We are more alike than we are different.

In the story, Master Simon helped Micajah adjust to a new situation by reminding the other children what it was like for them to enter a new school. Also in studying geography together, the children could see that even though they were all from different places, they shared something in common because, if for no other reason, they were all in the same place at this moment.

If your child is feeling a sense of being on the outside at school, remind her of how much she has in common with her peers. Identify some ways in which they are all the same, so she can find confidence and enjoyment in the commonalities they share collectively.

Conclusion

For those of you that have unique circumstances around “Back-to-School” and haven’t found the right story to meet the needs of your children, we suggest two options:

1. Contact us at info@sparklestories.com and tell us about your situation. We can either suggest a different story, or we might create a new one!
2. Make up a story yourself.

Would you like some help with #2? Here are some pointers.

- Consider telling your children a story from your childhood that relates to a challenge similar to the one your child is experiencing. Using the environment of your childhood, you will have access to all the details that you can remember — the sounds and smells and expressions. You can describe your house and your room and what the outside of the school looked like, and your child will be fascinated. Children love stories about their parents’ childhood.
- For young children, animal stories can be particularly fun and effective. Likely you know a few species that are special to your child — otters, eagles, or maybe beagles. Pick an animal, and create a young animal character that is based on your child. You can be incredibly detailed, and children generally don’t realize that you are talking about them. In the story, you can describe the situation and the challenge, and then you can offer a solution that resembles a solution that your child might find.
- For instance, maybe your child has a lisp and is worried the other children will make fun of her. You can tell a story about a young goose that honked differently than other goslings, and how — with the support of an adult goose — she was able to appreciate her honk as her own, unique in all the world.

You can conclude that yes, one day she might learn to honk like other geese, but for now, this style is hers.

- Just make something up! This may sound irresponsible and cavalier, but it is how most of the Sparkle Stories are created. Simply set an intention — something like “a story about separation anxiety” — and then you just open your mouth and start talking. Once you get past the self-judgment and worry, it’s actually very freeing and fun! Enter with a spirit of adventure and openness, and be amazed at what you create.

If you can allow yourself to tell a story free of judgment, as clunky as it may be, then you will be amazed at how the power of story can help calm your children, make them feel understood, and empower them to walk bravely into a new chapter. We wish you and yours the very best as you enter this season of back-to-school.

Contributors

Meredith Markow has been “playing school” since she taught her collection of bean-bag frogs how to read when she was a girl. She has spent her adult life working with adults and children of all ages as a Waldorf teacher and Enneagram instructor. Her work in the classroom, and with individuals and groups, is designed to help people of all ages drop self-limiting beliefs and to live a more joyful and compassionate life.

David Sewell McCann fell in love with spinning stories in first grade, the day a storyteller came to his class and captured his mind and imagination. He has been engaged in storytelling all of his adult life through painting, film-making, teaching, and performing. Out of his experience as a Waldorf elementary class teacher and parent, he has developed a four-step method of intuitive storytelling, which he now shares through workshops and through the Sparkle Stories blog.

