THE STORIES OF CIRO AND BEBA

How to enhance conversation with toddlers on emotions

Veronica Ornaghi
Alessia Agliati
Ilaria Grazzani

Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca
Fronteretro, Milano
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Veronica Ornaghi
Alessia Agliati
Ilaria Grazzani

Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca
Fronteretro, Milano
Editing and Layout
Veronica Ornaghi

Authors
Veronica Ornaghi, Alessia Agliati and Ilaria Grazzani

Language advisor
Clare O’Sullivan

Cover Design
Francesca Piralli

Illustrations
Francesca Piralli

‘R. Massa’ Department of Educational Human Sciences
University of Milano-Bicocca

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Introduction

This book contains a collection of stories especially written for children of 2-3 years, a crucial age for linguistic development during which the child acquires a range of basic lexical, grammatical, syntactic and semantic competences that will enable it to fully participate in its own linguistic and cultural community.

The main characters in the eight short stories making up *The Stories of Ciro and Beba* are two rabbits who get caught up in a series of “exciting situations” that make them scared, happy, angry and sad. Each story follows a classical story schema: after a brief introduction, a problematic situation eliciting a particular emotion occurs, and action is undertaken to solve the problem. For example, in *Beba gets mad at the beach*, the main character loses her temper because a cheeky bear cub snatches her bucket; with Ciro’s help, the conflict is resolved and the story ends happily with all three characters playing together. Thus the dimension of cooperation and mutual assistance also features in each of the stories, as the means of resolving the key issue in each scenario.

Furthermore, the story texts boast a rich psychological lexicon (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995) that differentiates them from those most commonly used with or aimed at early childhood audiences. The psychological terms in these stories are primarily emotional (*gets mad*, *is scared*, *is surprised*, *is happy*, and so on), but also include expressions of perception (they can’t *see* anything), volition (that train I really *wanted*) and cognition (e.g., *decide*) as in *The Stories of Jack and Theo* (Ornaghi & Grazzani, 2013).
Exciting stories and the development of socio-emotional competence

How to read the book with toddlers: the conversational activity

On the basis of our research conducted at day nurseries for infants and toddlers (Agliati, Grazzani, & Ornaghi, 2013), we have developed an innovative format for reading stories to groups of young children. This procedure, summarized in the table below, comprises four phases: the creation of a suitable context in which to introduce the activity, the reading of a story, conversation about the emotion thematized in the story and a windup stage.

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<th>STEPS</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
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<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>The children are settled in a suitable space and the reading material prepared.</td>
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<tr>
<td>STORY READING</td>
<td>A story from <em>The Stories of Ciro and Beba</em> is read aloud to the children.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONVERSATION</td>
<td>The educator initiates a conversation among the children, using the story just read as the starting point for the discussion, and asking specific stimulus questions about the target emotion.</td>
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<td>WIND UP</td>
<td>The educator summarizes the discussion and winds up the session.</td>
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The crucial element of the procedure is the *conversation about emotions*, conducted with small groups of young children. Specifically, the moderator of the conversation draws on the story content to focus on the three main aspects of the construct of socioemotional competence (Denham, 1998; Grazzani & Ornaghi, 2011), namely the *expression, comprehension* and *regulation* of emotion, as well as on the dimension of *altruistic cooperation*. 
(Tomasello, 2009). The stimulus questions, of which some examples are reported in the table below, are designed to encourage the participation of all the children, giving them the opportunity to “narrate” situations in which they themselves, their family members or friends, or familiar cartoon or story characters, have experienced the emotion being discussed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-emotional Competence Construct</th>
<th>Examples of How the Conversation May Be Launched (Stimulus Questions)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion Expression</strong>&lt;br&gt;(both verbal and non-verbal indicators of emotion)</td>
<td>...and what face do you make when you are mad?&lt;br&gt;...when we are happy we can also say that we are pleased ... or delighted ...</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion Understanding</strong>&lt;br&gt;(appreciating the causes of emotion)</td>
<td>...do you get mad too if somebody takes your toys?&lt;br&gt;...Ciro was sad because ....</td>
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<td><strong>Emotion Regulation</strong>&lt;br&gt;(acting to control emotion)</td>
<td>...is there something you do so as not to feel so sad?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cooperation and Help</strong>&lt;br&gt;(positive social behavior)</td>
<td>Did you see how nice it was of Ciro to help Beba?&lt;br&gt;...And Sara, do you help Elisa too, when she has a problem, when she is crying? ....</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This procedure, which may seem unusual for use with toddlers, acts a stimulus to foster and accelerate the development of linguistic abilities. Furthermore, given its focus on the emotional dimension of the story characters, it enhances children’s ability to reflect on internal states, and on the relationship between private experience and manifest actions and behaviours, as well as on individual differences in emotional experience and outward behavior (Reddy, 2008; Hughes, 2011). The same stories, read aloud and followed by conversation about emotions, may also be successfully used with older preschool children.
References


Ciro and Beba are two little rabbits.
Ciro is light brown and Beba is white.
The dark is scary!

Ciro and Beba are in their room. They are playing with building blocks. It’s fun to play together!
They want to try to build a very high tower, with lots of different colors.
They are busy playing, when suddenly the light goes out.

Oooh, it’s so dark... and the two little rabbits can’t see anything. This is scary!
They stay still because they don’t know what to do. They can’t see anything at all in the dark. Beba feels like crying, but Ciro yells loudly for their Mom.
Luckily the light soon comes back on.

Beba and Ciro don’t feel scared any more. They smile and go back to building their tower.
It’s Ciro’s birthday today.

When morning comes he’s still fast asleep.
As soon as he wakes up, the family wish him a happy birthday and give him a beautiful gift.
Ciro sees the parcel with the present inside and smiles happily. It’s a really big parcel!!!
Ciro is curious and he can’t wait to open the parcel to see what’s inside.

“Go ahead and open it” says his Dad “it’s your gift”. Ciro starts to unwrap his present.
It’s such a big parcel that it’s hard to unwrap. But in the end Ciro manages to open it!

And what is inside?

“What a wonderful surprise!!! It’s the train I really wanted” says Ciro.
Ciro is delighted. He could not be having a nicer birthday. He starts to play with his new train.
Beba is at the seaside. She is playing on the beach with her bucket and spade. She is having a wonderful time. She loves playing in the sand. There she is sitting peacefully by the sea and having fun with her beach toys.
Just then, Toby Bear comes over, snatches Beba’s bucket and runs off.
Beba is mad because she doesn’t want the bear to take her bucket.
“Give it back, it’s mine!” Beba yells at the bear.

But Toby doesn’t listen to her and starts to play with Beba’s bucket himself. Beba is really angry now!
Ciro sees that Beba is really mad and tries to help her. He goes over to Toby Bear and say: “Hi, that’s Beba’s bucket. She wants it back. Would you like to come and build a huge big sandcastle with us?”
Toby says yes, so the three friends play together and Beba doesn’t feel mad any more.
Ciro wants to play with his favorite car, but he can’t find it. He looks in his room but it’s not there.
He tries looking in the bathroom, but ... the car’s not there!
Ciro looks on the balcony, but his car is not there either. Oh no! He just can’t find the car anywhere.

Ciro is very sad and he starts to cry.
Ciro is really upset because he can’t play with his car.

His Mom comforts him and she says: “Don’t worry, Ciro, I’ll help you look for your car”.
They look everywhere, in every corner of the house, but there is no sign of the car! And Ciro is sadder than ever.
When Beba sees that Ciro is so sad, she decides to try to help him too.

In the end, after they have looked all over the house, it is Beba who finds the car... it was under Ciro’s bed.

Thank goodness!

“Thank you Beba”, says Ciro.
I’m scared! What’s that noise?

Beba and Ciro are playing hide-and-seek in the garden. Beba is counting at the wall and Ciro is hiding behind a bush.
It’s very quiet in the yard and all the two little rabbits can hear is Beba counting.

But suddenly….BRRRRRRRR…. they hear a horrible loud noise coming from the garage.
When he hears the noise, Ciro gets a big fright. He is so terrified that he comes out from behind the bush and runs over to Beba: “Help Beba, I’m scared!!!”
Beba smiles, takes Ciro by the hand and brings him over to the garage.

Then she says: “Ciro look, it’s only Dad using the drill”.
We’re happy ’cos we’re going to the pool!

It’s very hot, Ciro and Beba are at home, but they would love to go to the pool to cool down and play for a while.
The door bell rings. Ting-a-ling!

Who can it be? What do they want?
It’s Aunt Patty who says: “Hi, I’m going to the pool. Ciro and Beba, would you like to come with me for a swim?”
Ciro and Beba would really love to go to the pool and they say: “Hurray! We want to come!” Ciro is so happy that he can feel his heart thumping. Beba is delighted too and she smiles and smiles.
A little while later, Ciro and Beba are at the pool with their auntie: they are having great fun splashing one another with water!
I’m so mad!

Beba is at the supermarket with her Mom: they need to buy shapes to make cookies.
Beba and her Mom walk by the toys. Beba sees a doll with a pretty dress and curly hair. She really likes that doll. “Mom, will you buy it for me?” she asks her mother.
Her mother says: “No, Beba, not today”. But Beba wants the doll so much that she tries again: “Mom, please buy it for me. I really want it!” Her Mom says: “No, I said no. Let’s go!”

Beba feels very angry inside and she goes all red.
Then Beba yells: “Mom, I want the doll!!” and she bursts out crying: “I want the doll!”
Her Mom moves on with the shopping cart and says to Beba: “Come on, let’s go and buy the shapes for making the cookies!”
Beba calms down. She dries her tears and says to her Mom: “Can I choose the shapes?”
Beba is at the playground. She is hoping to meet her friend Violet. She sits on the swing and thinks to herself that she will soon see Violet coming.
Some time goes by, but Violet is nowhere to be seen. Some more time goes by, but Beba cannot see her friend anywhere, and she starts to feel sad.
Ciro realizes that Beba is sad and he says: “Beba, will you come and play with me?” But Beba is not listening to him.
So Ciro runs over to the grass, picks a pretty flower and takes it to Beba. "Here Beba, this is for you", Ciro says as he gives her the flower.
Then Beba says: “Thank you Ciro, that’s very nice of you” and smiles. Ciro smiles too because he can tell that Beba isn’t sad any more.
About the authors

**Veronica Ornaghi** holds a PhD in Human Sciences and lectures in Educational Psychology at the ‘R. Massa’ Educational and Human Sciences Department of the University of Milano-Bicocca. She conducts training and intervention research in educational contexts on the theme of children’s cognitive and socioemotional development.

**Alessia Agliati** is a psychologist with a PhD in the Psychology of Communication and Linguistic Processes. She lectures at the Department of Psychology of the University of Milano-Bicocca and carries out training, supervision and intervention-research at different levels of schooling on themes related to socioemotional development and intercultural processes.

**Ilaria Grazzani** is associate professor of developmental and educational psychology at the University of Milano-Bicocca (‘R.Massa’ Educational and Human Sciences Department), where she has conducted studies reported in Italian and international scientific publications. She carries out research and training on the development of socioemotional and cognitive competence in toddlers and preschoolers. She also coordinates research projects with primary school children.

Further information on the authors’ research activity is available at the link: [http://www.socioemotionalcognition.formazione.unimib.it](http://www.socioemotionalcognition.formazione.unimib.it)