



Protective narratives with embracing words, the story is a shield and childhood flourishes safely

Narrativas protectoras con palabras que abrazan, el cuento es escudo y la infancia florece segura

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ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse remains a critical issue in both school and family settings, highlighting the urgent need to implement preventive strategies from early childhood. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of storytelling as an educational resource to strengthen the prevention of sexual abuse in 4- to 5-year-old children at the La Pradera Municipal Primary School. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach with a quasi-experimental design, using surveys directed at parents and a questionnaire adapted for children as data collection instruments. Initial results showed that 83% of children had a low level of knowledge about prevention. After implementing a guide of activities based on stories, the percentage of children with a high level of knowledge increased to 45%.

Descriptors: early childhood; sex education; story. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

El abuso sexual infantil persiste como una problemática crítica tanto en contextos escolares como familiares, lo que plantea la necesidad urgente de implementar estrategias preventivas desde la primera infancia. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo evaluar la eficacia del cuento como recurso pedagógico para fortalecer la prevención del abuso sexual en niños de 4 a 5 años de la Escuela de Educación Básica Municipal "La Pradera". La investigación se desarrolló bajo un enfoque cualitativo con diseño cuasiexperimental, utilizando encuestas dirigidas a padres de familia y un cuestionario adaptado para los niños como instrumentos de recolección de datos. Los resultados iniciales evidenciaron que el 83 % de los niños presentaban un nivel bajo de conocimientos en prevención. Posterior a la aplicación de una guía de actividades fundamentadas en cuentos, el porcentaje de niños con un nivel alto de conocimientos se incrementó al 45%.

Descriptores: primera infancia; educación sexual; cuento. (Fuente: Tesoro UNESCO).

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Research articles



INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse is currently one of the most serious problems affecting the well-being and development of children, especially in their early years. This form of violence, often hidden by fear or lack of knowledge, leaves deep emotional, physical and psychological scars. In this context, children's literature, particularly stories, is a valuable and effective educational tool for addressing the prevention of child sexual abuse. Through narratives adapted to children's level of understanding, we can convey clear and confident messages that encourage reflection, identification of risky situations, protection of personal boundaries and strengthening of self-esteem.

Child sexuality continues to be a taboo subject in many social and educational contexts, creating significant barriers related to fear, insecurity, and shame when addressing these issues. In this context, Cando and Valverde (2021) found, in their research with teachers of Early Childhood Level 2 at the Santiago de Guayaquil Intercultural Bilingual Community Educational Unit, that a considerable proportion of teachers do not have pedagogical training in sex education. This lack of training limits their ability to adequately guide children, which increases their vulnerability to sexual abuse as they do not have the tools or information to identify, prevent or report risky situations.

Similarly, the study by Ludizaca et al. (2024), conducted at the Enriqueta Cordero Dávila Basic Education School in Azogues, revealed a worrying lack of knowledge about child sexual abuse among children aged 4 to 5. This lack of information prevents children from distinguishing between play and violence, affecting their understanding of self-respect and respect for others, and resulting in inappropriate use of language. The lack of attention given to this issue both at home and at school limits children's ability to protect themselves or react appropriately to risky situations. This misinformation can lead to severe emotional and psychological consequences, such as depression, anxiety, isolation, poor school performance and even suicidal ideation.



On the other hand, the effectiveness of storytelling as an educational resource for the prevention of child sexual abuse is taken into account by Uchuari (2018) in his research with children at the José Ingenieros Primary School in Loja. This study found that, prior to the educational intervention, 61.54% of participants had an average level of knowledge about child sexual abuse, and 65.39% had an average level of prevention skills. However, after implementing a guide of activities based on children's stories, the results showed a notable increase: 91.16% achieved a high level of knowledge and 100% showed a high level of prevention skills. These findings demonstrate that children were able to acquire significant knowledge about their bodies, personal boundaries, and the risks present in their social environment, highlighting the effectiveness of literary resources as an educational strategy.

Similarly, research conducted by Cuenca (2019) with children aged 4 to 5 at the Dr. Daniel Rodas Bustamante School, also in Loja, initially revealed that 25% of participants had a low level of knowledge about child sexual abuse, while 75% showed a low level of prevention skills. However, after designing and implementing an educational proposal based on children's stories, a significant improvement was observed: 75% of the children achieved a high level of knowledge and 69% achieved a high level of prevention skills. This study concludes that the use of stories as a teaching resource not only facilitates the understanding of complex concepts, but also strengthens children's self-protection skills.

Comparing the results obtained in these studies with the findings of the present study, it is clear that they make an important contribution to the educational and social fields, as they all coincide in highlighting a critical issue such as child sexual abuse and insufficient sex education in the early stages of development. The relevance of this research lies in demonstrating that, through appropriate pedagogical strategies such as stories, videos, and games, it is possible to educate children in a safe, affective, and respectful manner, allowing them to



recognise their rights, protect their physical and emotional integrity, and know how to act in risky situations.

Therefore, the objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical resource to strengthen the prevention of sexual abuse in children aged 4 to 5 years at the La Pradera Municipal Primary School in Loja, Ecuador.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The story as an educational tool

According to López (2017), a story is a short narrative structured around real or fictional events, in which a few characters participate in a central action, developing until reaching a generally simple and concise conclusion. This narrative form is presented by a narrator, who introduces the characters, describes the settings, presents the conflict and leads the reader towards the resolution of the story.

The short story, as a cultural manifestation deeply rooted in human history, has origins that predate oral language and writing, when stories were transmitted through symbols and graphic representations. With the evolution of language and writing, short stories expanded their scope, establishing themselves as educational and training tools (Jaimes-Rodríguez et al., 2024).

Classification of stories

Stories are classified into two main groups: popular or traditional and literary, subdivided into different types according to their function and content.



Table 1. *Classification of stories according to type, description and examples.*

Category	Subtype	Description	Example
Folk tale	Folkloric	Traditional transmitted orally	narratives The Ugly Duckling (Hans Christian Andersen)
	Wonderful or fairy tales	Stories with supernatural characters	The fairies of self-care
Literary tales	Educational	Stories that convey values and knowledge	The Colour Monster (Anna Llenas)
	Realistic	Stories set in real settings	The Day I Learned to Say No (Paola Andrade)
	About animals	Stories featuring humanised animals	The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle)
	Adventure	Stories where the protagonist faces challenges	The Brave Bear

Source: Rabal et al. (2020), Vicente (2024), Ortiz (2021).

Story structure

As a short narrative form, stories have an internal structure that gives them coherence, meaning and appeal. This structure facilitates not only the understanding of the story, but also its pedagogical application in early childhood education. According to Pérez-Molina et al. (2013), stories consist of three fundamental parts:

- 1) **Introduction:** This corresponds to the beginning of the story and provides context for the reader. The main characters, settings and the emergence of the conflict are presented.
- 2) **Development:** This is the central part where the most relevant events take place and the conflict manifests itself, generating interest and tension.
- 3) **Denouement:** This is the ending, where the conflict is resolved, offering a solution or lesson, usually moral or educational.



Benefits of stories in education

Stories address three fundamental aspects: self-knowledge, allowing children to learn values and recognise their emotions; understanding of the environment, helping them to differentiate between reality and fiction; and language development, facilitating oral and written expression (Macas-Velepucha & Jumbo-Salinas, 2023). On the other hand, Rondón (2018) highlights key benefits that position storytelling as a comprehensive educational tool: it fosters creativity, transmits values between generations, stimulates language development, allows children to face challenges and fears, promotes active listening, and provides opportunities for children to create their own stories.

Pedagogical models for the use of storytelling

Various pedagogical approaches recognise the potential of storytelling to develop cognitive, emotional, and social skills:

- a) **Reggio Emilia:** Values artistic expression as a means of learning, allowing emotions to be explored through dramatisation, drawing or modelling (Fernández & Feliu, 2017).
- b) **Montessori:** Promotes autonomous learning where stories are linked to concrete experiences through manipulative activities (Zambrano & Villafuerte, 2015).
- c) **High/Scope:** Integrates stories into routines and thematic activities, stimulating active participation through games and dramatisation (Castejón, 2015).

Prevention of child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is defined as any act of a sexual nature committed against children or adolescents, which occurs through abuse of power, coercion or manipulation, taking advantage of their vulnerable situation. Statistics reflect the seriousness of the problem. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), in 2019, 32% of women surveyed reported having



experienced some form of sexual violence during childhood (Pan American Health Organisation, 2021). Between January 2018 and June 2023, the Attorney General's Office recorded 52,051 reports of child sexual abuse in Ecuador, of which only 2,161 resulted in a conviction, equivalent to 4.15% (Ombudsman's Office of Ecuador, 2023).

Importance of prevention

Prevention of CSA is an essential strategy for ensuring safe and protective environments. According to the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC, 2020), this work involves empowering the educational community, promoting respect for the body, establishing clear boundaries, and strengthening family bonds based on trust. UNICEF (2022) highlights that emotional education and self-awareness are key dimensions in this process.

Risk factors

Risk factors can manifest themselves in various contexts. At the personal level, Franco and Finol (2021) indicate that certain children are more vulnerable due to their young age, greater dependence on adults, and less knowledge about bodily boundaries. At the family level, Latorre (2023) points out that dysfunctionality, domestic violence, neglect, and the absence of protective figures constitute a high-risk environment.

Roles in prevention

Role of the family: The family is the first protective environment, responsible for providing love, care, and guaranteeing rights. Strengthening family bonds through open dialogue, trust, and active listening is essential to prevent abuse (Cárdenas-Yáñez et al., 2021).

Role of the teacher: Teachers play an essential role given their daily contact with children, which allows them to detect warning signs and offer initial emotional support. It is essential that educators receive specific training to understand the issue and identify signs of risk (Leguizamón & Caballero, 2022).



Role of the school: Schools play a strategic role as safe and educational spaces. They should promote respect for the body, education on rights and self-care, and ensure adequate supervision to minimise risks (Quintero-Mendoza & Silva-Alfonso, 2022).

Stories in the prevention of child sexual abuse

Stories are a powerful tool for addressing sensitive issues such as the prevention of sexual abuse, as they allow these issues to be introduced gradually, respectfully and in a way that is appropriate for children's understanding. By using accessible language and symbolic situations, stories make it easier for children to understand fundamental concepts such as respect for their bodies, identifying personal boundaries and the importance of communicating any situation that makes them feel uncomfortable.

Stories also facilitate the expression of fears, anxieties, and emotions in general. By listening, reading, and discussing the narrative, children critically analyse and reflect on the events of the story, relating them to their own situation. This leads to better social development thanks to the reorganisation of mental schemas about individual experience (Michea, 2015).

METHOD

The research was conducted using a quantitative approach, allowing data to be collected, analysed and interpreted objectively. The design was quasi-experimental, manipulating only the independent variable to observe effects on the dependent variable. It was descriptive in scope, characterising the elements of the variables theoretically and practically. Deductive-inductive and analytical-synthetic methods were applied.

We worked with a population of 18 children aged 4 to 5 years from the "La Pradera" Municipal Basic Education School in Loja, Ecuador. We specifically chose this population because the institution has only one parallel class for early childhood education II.



We used the observation technique through a checklist applied during the intervention to record the children's performance in the proposed activities. We also conducted an 8-question survey of 18 parents to find out if they talk to their children about issues related to the prevention of child sexual abuse.

As instruments for the pre-test and post-test, we used Leslie Tutty's (1992) Sexual Abuse Knowledge and Prevention Skills Questionnaire, which meets validity and reliability requirements. This instrument has 33 questions with "Yes," "No," and "I don't know" answers, evaluating positive and negative statements related to care and abuse prevention.

RESULTS

To determine the level of prior knowledge about child sexual abuse, we administered the knowledge and prevention skills questionnaire.

Table 2. *Results of the level of prior knowledge about child sexual abuse*

Level	f	%
High	1	6
Medium	2	11
Low	15	83
Total	18	100

Note: Data obtained from the questionnaire on prior knowledge of sexual abuse and prevention skills.

The data show that 6% have a high level of knowledge, 11% have an average level, and 83% have a low level of knowledge. The results revealed an alarming lack of knowledge about child sexual abuse in most of the children evaluated, as they did not recognise the difference between good and bad secrets, were inhibited when talking about private parts, did not know what personal boundaries were, and were confused between good and bad touching.



Results of the activity guide

To assess the impact of the story on the prevention of child sexual abuse, we present the results obtained through the intervention of the activity guide called "Laugh, tell and learn in the brave adventure."

Table 3. *Results of the activity guide.*

Components	Indicators	Achieved	Not achieved
Knowledge of the body and gender	6	16	2
Self-care and hygiene	4	15	3
Self-care and risk prevention	11	14	4
Emotional expression and self-esteem	4	16	2

Note: Data obtained from the application of the activity guide.

The application of the activity guide showed remarkable progress in the different components evaluated, achieving a high percentage of compliance in all components.

Pre-test and post-test comparison

Table 4. *Comparative results between the pre-test and post-test.*

Level	Pre-test		Post-test	
	f	%	f	%
High	1	6	8	44
Medium	2	11	6	33
Low	15	83	4	22
Total	18	100	18	100

Note: Results obtained from the pre- and post-test of the questionnaire on prior knowledge of sexual abuse and prevention skills.

The comparison shows that initially, 6% were at the high level, which increased to 44% after the intervention. At the medium level, 11% were initially at this level, which subsequently rose to 33%. At the low level, 83% were initially at this level, which then fell to 22%.

These results show that storytelling is a feasible tool for preventing child sexual abuse in children aged 4 to 5 years, with most students showing significant



improvement in the areas of body and gender awareness, self-care and hygiene, abuse prevention and self-protection, and emotional expression and self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research provide solid evidence of the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical tool for the prevention of child sexual abuse, confirming the theoretical postulates of various authors and complementing the results of previous research in the field of education. The results obtained show that 83% of children initially had a low level of knowledge about the prevention of child sexual abuse, a figure that was significantly reduced to 22% after the intervention. This result is consistent with the studies by Uchuari (2018) and Cuenca (2019), who also found worrying initial levels of misinformation in similar populations. Specifically, Uchuari (2018) reported that 61.54% of participants had an average level of knowledge before the intervention, while Cuenca (2019) identified that 75% of children had a low level of prevention skills.

The improvement observed in our study, where the percentage of children with a high level of knowledge increased from 6% to 44%, even exceeds the results reported by Cuenca (2019), who managed to get 75% of children to achieve a high level of knowledge. This difference could be explained by the specific characteristics of the guide "Laugh, tell and learn in the brave adventure," which integrated playful and narrative elements specifically adapted to the local context of the participants. The positive results obtained are theoretically supported by Piaget's (1984) approach, which argues that children's literature stimulates language, imagination and creativity, responding to the evolutionary needs at each stage of development. In our study, this was particularly evident in the "emotional expression and self-esteem" component, where 16 of the 18 children (88.9%) achieved the proposed objectives.

Similarly, Vygotsky's (1973) postulates on the value of social interaction and the role of the mediator as a facilitator of learning were realised in the implementation of the activity guide. The children not only acquired knowledge individually, but



also developed skills through group interaction during the story reading and dramatisation sessions. This aspect is particularly relevant considering that Macas-Velepucha and Jumbo-Salinas (2023) identify social interaction as one of the key benefits of using stories in educational contexts.

When comparing our results with those of Ludizaca et al. (2024), who worked with a similar population in Azogues, we found consistent patterns in terms of the initial problem. These authors identified that children could not differentiate between play and violence, a situation that we also observed in our initial diagnosis, where participants confused "good and bad touches" and were unaware of personal boundaries. However, our post-intervention results show more pronounced improvements in the "self-care and risk prevention" component, where 14 out of 18 children (77.8%) achieved the objectives, compared to the 69% reported by Cuenca (2019) in preventive skills. This difference could be attributed to the integration of specific self-protection elements in the stories used, following Michea's (2015) recommendations on the importance of addressing fears and emotions through narratives that allow children to relate fictional situations to their personal reality.

The results confirm Rondón's (2018) arguments about the multidimensional benefits of storytelling as a comprehensive educational tool. In our study, we observed that the implementation of the guide not only improved knowledge about prevention, but also strengthened aspects related to body and gender awareness (88.9% achievement) and self-care and hygiene (83.3% achievement). These results are particularly significant considering the risk factors identified by Franco and Finol (2021), who point out that young children are more vulnerable due to their dependence on adults and less knowledge about bodily boundaries. Our results suggest that storytelling can be an effective tool for mitigating these specific risk factors.

A concerning finding from our study was that most of the parents surveyed do not talk to their children about issues related to the prevention of child sexual abuse. This finding is consistent with the arguments of Cárdenas-Yáñez et al. (2021),



who identify lack of communication as one of the factors that can create vulnerability within the family unit. Parental resistance to addressing these issues can be explained by what Cando and Valverde (2021) call "significant barriers linked to fear, insecurity, and shame" that arise when addressing childhood sexuality. This situation reinforces the importance of the role of the school as an educational space, as proposed by Quintero-Mendoza and Silva-Alfonso (2022), who emphasise that the educational institution should be a place that promotes open communication and the construction of personal boundaries.

Our results provide empirical evidence for the pedagogical models proposed by different approaches. The effectiveness observed in the "emotional expression and self-esteem" component validates the principles of Reggio Emilia pedagogy, as described by Fernández and Feliu (2017), where storytelling allows for the exploration of emotions and values through activities that strengthen emotional development. Likewise, the improvement in "body and gender awareness" supports the approaches of the Montessori method described by Zambrano and Villafuerte (2015), where stories are linked to concrete experiences, facilitating the internalisation of values in a meaningful way.

The results of this study have direct implications for teacher training, considering that Leguizamón and Caballero (2022) identify as essential that educators receive specific training to understand the issue of child sexual abuse. The effectiveness demonstrated by the guide "Laugh, tell and learn in the brave adventure" suggests that teacher training programmes should include specific strategies for the use of stories in the prevention of child sexual abuse. This aspect is particularly relevant considering the findings of Cando and Valverde (2021), who found that a considerable proportion of teachers lack pedagogical training in sex education, limiting their ability to adequately guide children.

A significant strength of our study lies in the use of Leslie Tutty's Questionnaire (1992), an internationally validated instrument that guarantees the reliability of the measurements. In addition, the quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-intervention measurements allows us to establish causal relationships between



the implementation of the story guide and the improvements observed in prevention knowledge. However, we recognise limitations related to the sample size ($n=18$) and the specific context (a single educational institution), which could limit the generalisation of the results. Future research could benefit from multi-institutional designs that allow these results to be validated in more diverse contexts.

The results obtained open up multiple avenues for future research. It would be valuable to explore the differential effectiveness of different types of stories (realistic, fantastical, didactic) in the prevention of child sexual abuse, as well as to examine the long-term impact of these interventions on the development of self-protection skills. Furthermore, considering UNICEF's (2022) views on the importance of emotional education and self-awareness in prevention, future research could delve deeper into how different specific narrative elements (characters, conflicts, resolutions) contribute differentially to the development of preventive skills in children.

CONCLUSION

It is confirmed that storytelling, used as a pedagogical tool, is a highly effective strategy for the prevention of child sexual abuse in children aged 4 to 5 years. Through stories carefully adapted to their level of understanding, children were able to identify personal boundaries, recognise risky situations, strengthen their self-esteem, and develop basic self-protection skills.

The results obtained reflect significant advances in both the knowledge and preventive attitudes of the participants after the implementation of the teaching guide, which supports the value of storytelling as an integral resource in prevention education. It is essential to actively involve parents and teachers in affective-sexual education from an early age, fostering safe, sensitive, and informed environments.



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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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