

Once Upon A Time

Old fairy tales are gruesome because they were intended to serve as cautionary tales and moral lessons. The Brothers Grimm played a significant role in popularising fairy tales and shaping the stories we know today. Gruesome fairy tales explore psychological themes and use symbolism to convey deeper meanings.

Even more shockingly, much of the violence in “Grimm’s Fairy Tales” is directed at children. Snow White is just 7 years old when the huntsman takes her into the woods and tells her to run away. Evil stepparents are very popular in fairy tales, but the Grimms originally included some evil biological mothers as well. In the 1812 version of “Hansel and Gretel,” a wife persuades her husband to abandon their children in the woods because they don’t have enough food to feed them. Snow White also has an evil mother, who at first wishes for and then becomes infuriated by her daughter’s beauty. The Grimms turned both of these characters into stepmothers in subsequent editions, and mothers have essentially remained off the hook ever since in the retelling of these stories.

Below are four stories written by The Brothers Grimm. All depict several examples of abuse and neglect. This exercise can be completed in two parts.

Part one – Identify which category of abuse is highlighted in each story ie physical, emotional, neglect or sexual.

Part two – Refer to the discussion point notes to further explore and debate the concerns.

Hansel and Gretel

A poor woodcutter and his wife had two children named Hansel and Gretel. Their mother died and they were all very sad. Soon their father remarried but their stepmother was very cruel. They had no money for food and the woodcutter was very worried.

The stepmother had an idea, she would take Hansel and Gretel deep into the woods and leave them alone. They would not be able to find their way home so they wouldn't have to worry about feeding them.

The next day their stepmother woke them up saying "get up you horrible children". They all went in to the woods. Their father gave them some bread and made a fire. He told them to stay there while he and their stepmother chopped wood. They did not return to take the children home.

Hansel had been very clever. He had dropped crumbs of bread along the path. He told Gretel not to worry they could find their way home by following the trail. Sadly, all the crumbs had been eaten by birds. The children were well and truly lost. They walked until they found a cottage made of cakes and sweets and sugar glaze windowpanes. The children began to eat it. It tasted delicious.

An old woman opened the door and invited them inside. "Come on in, no harm will come of you". She gave them food and comfortable beds. They thought they were in heaven. The old woman only pretended to be nice. She wanted to eat the children. She locked Hansel in the stable and made Gretel cook food to fatten him up so he would be tasty to eat. Gretel only got chicken bones to eat.

The oven was switched on. The old woman wanted to eat both children. Gretel was wise and knew this. The old woman went to check the temperature of the oven. She put her head inside and quickly Gretel pushed her in. The old woman burnt to death. Gretel released Hansel from the stable and they rejoiced.

Ideas for discussion points

bereavement

Seeking revenge

Jealousy

Treating the two children differently

Stepmother wanting to leave the children alone = abandonment. Her influence on the children's father, encouraging him to leave the children.

Lack of finances to buy food

The old woman pretends to be nice = plausible people

Food issues – Gretel not given enough. Hansel given too much

Snow White

Snow White met a charming prince. Her evil stepmother was so jealous of Snow White's beauty, she ordered her huntsman to kill her. She wanted the prince for herself. The huntsman couldn't kill Snow White. He took her to the woods and told her to run far away, so the Queen would never find her.

Snow White ran deep into the woods. She was lost and alone and very scared. She found a cottage and went inside. Upstairs were seven little beds. She cleaned everywhere, then curled up on one of the beds and fell asleep.

The Seven Dwarfs arrived home from working all day in the jewel mine. They wanted to protect Snow White from the evil Queen so they invited Snow White to live with them. The Queen heard that Snow White was still alive. Enraged she made a magic potion to change her appearance. Her plan was to trick Snow White.

While the dwarfs were at work the Queen disguised herself as an old pedlar woman and visited Snow White. She offered her a beautiful red apple. Snow White took a bite and fell into a deep sleep. The Queen had poisoned her.

Ideas for discussion points

'Evil stepmother' Who is who is a family. What does the child mean to this person and vice versa.

Sometimes non biological parents can be immature, jealous of the attention the birth parent gives to the child.

The huntsman may represent the wider community wanting to protect children. Very often the public, family or friends will contact the NSPCC to report concerns who in turn notify the local Children's Social Care team to investigate further.

Child isolation and out alone.

Poisoning is Fabricated or Induced Illness

Little Red Riding Hood

One day Little Red Riding Hood's mother said to her "take this basket of goodies to grandma's cottage, but don't talk to strangers on the way". Little Red Riding Hood set off by herself and walked through the woods, although her mother told her not to as bad things lurked there.

In the woods she meets the Big Bad Wolf who plans to eat her up. When he asks where she is going Little Red Riding Hood says she is off to see her grandma. When the wolf asks where she lives Little Red Riding Hood tells him.

The wolf trots alongside Little Red Riding Hood for a while and tempts her to take a slow journey and enjoy the scenery. She picks flowers and goes deeper into the woods.

Meanwhile the wolf reaches grandma's house. He enters the house and gobbles up Little Red Riding Hood's grandma.

He then disguises himself as grandma. He puts on her clothes and night cap and lies down in her bed. Little Red Riding Hood arrives at the cottage. The door is wide open, so she goes inside. She goes up to the bedroom to see her grandma and give her the goodies from her mother.

Her grandma looks very strange. "Grandma what big teeth you have".

"All the better to eat you with" the wolf replies. He leaps out of the bed and gobbles up Little Red Riding Hood. A huntsman then comes along, he cuts open the wolf's stomach and out pops Little Red Riding Hood followed by grandma.

Ideas for discussion points

Mother sending the child out alone

Are strangers more of a risk than people a child may already know?

The wolf is manipulative and gains her confidence. Grooming and ulterior motive. Pretends to be nice. Disguises himself as someone else as a mask.

Cinderella

Cinderella lived with her stepmother Lady Tremaine and her two stepsisters Anastasia and Drizella. They were very mean to Cinderella making her work all day cleaning, sewing and cooking. She tried her best to make them happy.

Lady Tremaine was cold, cruel and jealous of Cinderella's charm and beauty. She enjoyed giving Cinderella extra chores to do such as cleaning out the ashes of the fireplace. The King wanted his son the prince to find a bride. Every young woman in the kingdom was invited to the ball, including Cinderella.

Lady Tremaine didn't want Cinderella to go to the ball. She wanted the prince to marry one of her daughters. She kept Cinderella busy with chores that would take her all night to finish. All the animals worked through the night to make Cinderella a dress to wear to the ball.

When the stepsisters saw the dress, they flew into a rage and were horrid to Cinderella. They ripped her dress and pulled off the sparkly beads. Lady Tremaine didn't stop them. The animals helped Cinderella to mend the dress.

Cinderella went to the ball and danced with the prince. As the clock struck midnight she shouted "goodbye" and hurried away. As she fled one of her glass slippers flew off. The prince went to find the girl with feet to fit the glass slipper. He called at the house and Lady Tremaine locked Cinderella in the attic.

Ideas for discussion points

Step mother – Find out more about significant people in the family. Get to know new partners and wider family. How do we do this? Who is who in a family? What influence do family members have on each other? A non birth step parent may have a lack of attachment to the child.

Wider family may stigmatise one child in the family. The child may be isolated, teased, ridiculed, stigmatised or treated differently.

'Blended families' where two families come together. How may dynamics change?

Is this emotional abuse and neglect?

Locking children in rooms as punishment or manage behaviour