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Growing up under corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the impacts on children's socialization in Jimma City, Southwest Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at exploring the impacts of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on children's socialization in Jimma City, Ethiopia. A qualitative-phenomenology research design was employed with asynchronous email interview for data collection purpose. The study participants were children's parents via email interview due to COVID-19 social distancing requirements. Non-probability sampling technique specifically purposive sampling technique was employed for identifying research participants. Thematic analysis was employed for analysing classifications and explaining themes relating to the data. The values of privacy, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were considered in this study. The finding of this study revealed that the emerging of COVID-19 pandemic affect children's socialization in positive and negative manner. Poor language skills, limited in learning societal value, obesity, limited socialization opportunities, addicted to films and games, loss of appetite, homesick/nostalgic, quarrel with siblings, create noises and disturbing the family are the negative impacts of COVID-19 on children's socialization. As positive impacts, developed intimacy between families, personal hygiene, protected from communicable diseases, learn domestic activities and develop their creative skill. Finally, the study recommends that families should take great responsibility in following their children's behavior and deal with changes related with the pandemic. Encouraging them to read stories, fables, reading text books, physical exercises and encouraging them to engage in domestic activities which are not beyond their capacity are some of the strategies.

KEY TERMS: COVID-19 pandemic, children's socialization, impacts, Jimma, Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

All challenges that have been happening because of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) are the concerns of all human beings and children were not out of danger from this pandemic. The lockdown in relation with the alleviation of the pandemic have compacted vital services for children's development and socializations. The socializations of children have been endangered as the pandemic and related mitigation measures have resulted in school closure, bereavement and decrease in family income. Since children are the part of highly vulnerable segment of the society during COVID-19 pandemic, the aforementioned factors have exposed them to several pressures (Chineka & Kurevakwesu, 2021). Moreover, these authors explained:

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of human existence, devastating the livelihoods of many across the globe. Children, who are amongst the most vulnerable members of society, have had their fair share of challenges. Though not primarily the face of the pandemic, children are affected by the socio-economic ramifications of COVID-19 and other associated measures, casting their future into a precarious balance (Chineka & Kurevakwesu, 2021, p. 209-214).

Africa has the largest segment of population which is not tested yet and declaration of the lockdown as well as the protective measures may remain as additional challenges for some time. As coronavirus continues on, children will be vulnerable during and after the pandemic's period of time. Therefore, they need the attention of concerned bodies, such as government, professional (social workers) and etc. to manage their needs (Omorogiuwa & Amadasun, 2020).

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

The first cases of the novel corona virus were reported in Wuhan, China at the beginning of January 2020, which was linked to the respiratory disease called COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020). Due to this emerging virus, in many countries drastic changes and stressful conditions have been developed like imposing lockdown, school closures, quarantine, travel restrictions, social distancing, and fast-deteriorating business environment (Orgilés et al., 2020).

Even though all are the victims of COVID-19, children are among biggest victims of COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 on children's wellbeing, poverty, survival and health, learning, and safety are influential (UN, 2020). For instance, since they are more disconnected from existing support systems like extended family, child care, schools, religious institutions and other community organizations could experience many risks and hidden challenges (Samhsa, 2020). Children's health is one of the most important issues in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and genetic predispositions are modified by environmental influences, such as those experienced during a pandemic, and affect learning capacities, adaptive behaviors, lifelong physical and mental health, and adult productivity (De Araújo et al., 2020). Also the goals and priority areas of agenda 2063 indicated that an African whose development is people driven, relying on the potential offered by African people, especially its women, youth and caring for children and the empowerment of children (African Union, n.d).

The COVID-19 pandemic teaches us school is not only an educational mission of knowledge acquisition, but it also satisfies the children's socialization; provides a structured setting in which children can learn and develop social skills, develop self-confidence and competence, friendship, empathy, participation, respect, gratitude, compassion, and responsibility, but, during this pandemic socialization with peers – transitioning to electronic-based platforms (Segre et al., 2020). Also, these scholars added that this pandemic changed children's dietary habits during the lockdown like eating different amounts of food and consuming more junk food, disturbance in sleep, especially waking up many times during the night, and wished to sleep in their parents' bed. Besides, school is not only a place for children to learn, but also opens opportunities for interaction with friends and for psychological comfort (Sylva, 1994, as cited in Morgül, Kallitsoglou & Essau, 2020). A school delivers the social and competitive actions that many children enjoy and interacting with children from different area, helps them to adjust to varied environments and develop social connections (Evangelin, 2021). However, school closure due to the pandemic has also been linked to dangerous behaviors such as juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, drug use, risky sexual behaviors and unwanted pregnancies. During the lockdown, children spent more their time using screens and less engaged in doing physical activity and sleeping (Morgül, Kallitsoglou & Essau, 2020). Moreover, with a lot of free time on hand, children are spending long hours in watching TV/videogames, smart phones and tablets for entertainment as an alternative to outdoor activities, and this in turn affects their sleeping pattern (Al-Balushi & Essa, 2020).

From a developmental perspective, socialization in the early stages of life is paramount because it has long-term impacts across the lifespan not only the socio-emotional domain, but also cognitive and physical domains (Isaacs, 2013). Consequently, efforts must be made to ensure that children's well-being to counteract the potential harm of social isolation (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). In the current context of lockdown and restriction of movements,

children have constrained access to socialization, play and physical contact with their peers, which are critical for their psychosocial wellbeing and development (UNICEF, 2020).

One of the information from Canada, explained that since COVID-19 began, children across Canada have been pulled from schools and daycares, required to isolate from their peers. Socialization is a vital part of growing up, however the COVID-19 pandemic brought that to a rapid halt, leaving many parents thinking if their children are disadvantaged of an important developmental step — peer-to-peer interaction. Statistics from Canada shows that almost three-quarters of participants were extremely concerned about their children's chances to socialize with friends, loneliness or social isolation. This is a great failure for children because children learn about how to reciprocate relationships, respect other opinions and maintain a conversation via peer interaction. Hence, isolating children from their peer group can have several effects on children's development of social competence and social relationships. This is why children should obtain alternative socialization strategies, such as games, play with parents and relatives (Dangerfield, 2020).

Socialization is about learning how to view our world, learning gender roles; teaching accepted society's cultural values; how, where, when, why and with whom to be intimate, what we shouldn't do under certain circumstances; what our society defines as moral and immoral (Newman, as cited in Okoroafor & Njoku, 2012). Socialization cannot take place in a vacuum. For instance, socializing agents like parents, institutional agents (school, workplace and government), friends, culture and mass media can play a great role in children's socialization (Huang et al., 2019). For instance, agents of children's socialization contributes in teaching toilet training, self-care skills, language, cognitive, motor and social skills, and gender roles, correcting errors as well as orienting about their immediate families, clans and community (Wario, 2020).

Generally, there are scarce data regarding the impact of covid-19 pandemic on children's socialization. The all above studies are more focused on the psychosocial, socioeconomic, education and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Protecting children's well-being during such stressful situation like pandemics needs greater attention of everyone in the society. Therefore, this study has been undertaken with the purpose of exploring the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on children's socialization to fill the existing gaps and adds new knowledge in the study area by addressing the following research questions:

- How the COVID-19 pandemic effects children's socialization in Jimma city?
- What strategies are developed by parents during the COVID-19 pandemic in addressing children's socialization issues?
- What are the challenging factors for children's socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ubuntu theory

Though social work practitioners understood that person-in-environment has tremendous contributions for the occurrence of the problems and possible solutions, they failed to acknowledge the potential of Ubuntu to inform their professional practices. Thus, social work practitioners inclined to choose western perspectives, models and theories (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie as cited in Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). Mugumbate & Chereni described that Ubuntu presents in professional practice and indicated that the code of ethics of social workers in Zimbabwe recognizes Ubuntu as humaneness and promotes social justice (2019). Accordingly, an integrated framework of Ubuntu elaborated "*Ubuntu theory is about how Africans view themselves, interact with others, their environment, and their spiritual beings and how outsiders ought to interact with them*" (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019, p. 31). They also depicted that an integrated framework of Ubuntu in social work with children intervene at different system levels, such as at individual where the child is responsible for learning and personal hygiene; at family level where responsible to conception, provide basic needs and socialization; at communal level where responsible for basic needs and socialization; at environmental level where responsible for basic needs and spiritual level where responsible for companionship, comfort and advice (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). Hence, Ubuntu theory with its integrated framework of Ubuntu in social work with children perspective is relevant to this study.

Utilizing indigenous knowledge, such as Ubuntu in social work with children gave us a chance to comprehend children themselves, families, communities and the professional practitioners too. We preferred to view children from family, community, environmental and spiritual perspectives to fully understand their situation during COVID-19 pandemic. Because in African's case, it is impossible to get the real picture of the situation with the lens of western perspective unless using our own indigenous knowledge.

African family theory (Ukama theory)

Ukama is a relations and an asset in the family hood as well as a social capital. Families care each other. So, children are growing up within family which includes immediate, extended and tribal relatives. Among many

African family theory, they value for child bearing, for extended family (tribe or clan), for strengthening the bond between the families involved in the marriage, for sharing or dividing family roles, for looking after one another and not putting individual needs first, for community and maintaining African values. The member of the family have a role within the system, such as family, extended family and community in rearing children though a member fails to play their role, the system will not function well. As a social capital, children get from the family and extended relationships economic support, moral and psychological support, e.g. during sickness, disasters or death, social support, e.g. mentoring, care, belonging are among many more (Africa Social Work Network, 2022).

RESEARCH METHOD

The study used qualitative phenomenology research design. Qualitative researchers frequently use purposive sampling when selecting participants to interview since the sample is deliberately selected based on the aim of the study. The online interview researcher modifies purposive sampling depending on the level of experience with the internet-related phenomenon or behavior under investigation or the technology skills someone would need to participate in the interview. Recruiting in e-mail interviewing studies is done in several ways, including individual solicitations. So, we selected ten participants purposefully. Researchers encounter considerable travel costs and time commitments to undertake in person interviews with study participants situated in diverse geographical parts. Thus, email interviews save both time and money in transcription costs. More often, transcription costs are the major expense in qualitative research. The asynchronous email interview is a qualitative research method where data is recurrently exchanged online among researcher and participant within a specific timeframe. It is cost efficient and lessens the time required, however in-depth information can still be obtained. Therefore, we have employed a qualitative phenomenology research design with asynchronous email interview for data collection purpose.

Email interview guideline has been developed with same open-ended questions asked in same order, with alike follow-up questions and probes. The data analyzed thematically. Researchers who select asynchronous methods report high-quality exchanges that result when participants have a chance to think about the response, it is often denser, more structured and more explicit compared to face-to-face interviews. Participants have more time to think and consider their answers and can review their responses and reflect on them, which helps them engage in more careful communication. Some participants also simply prefer to express themselves in writing rather than having to improvise when speaking. Hence, these opportunities of email interview enhanced trustworthiness of the findings of this study. Anonymity of the participants kept in secret since they were not directly observed by the researchers. And we sent informed consent for the participants by email attachment and they signed and sent back through email. Totally, purposively ten parents (four mother and six fathers) from different family households were participated in this email interview.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on children's socialization

As the findings show the emerging of COVID-19 pandemic has both negative and positive impacts on children's socialisation.

Negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on children's socialization

As to the participants, COVID-19 negatively affects children in many ways. For instance, as negative impacts, fear of infection, burnout, obesity, depression, limited socialization opportunities, distracted informal education, unemployment, constant fear, addicted to films, hating confinement, lost appetite, homesick/nostalgic. One participant (P: III) stated:

It is known that this COVID-19 outbreak was uncertain and brought quit many impacts on children and their caregivers. My children are less than six years at which socialization is considered as a landmark for them. Just only from socialization point view, the kids' got attachment from us than before. However, there were psychological strains from the children's side not because of fear of COVID-19 but because of staying at home all the days. During the stay at home children more influenced by the adolescents who were attending their elementary and high schools but living together in the same fence/compound. These adolescents stayed all the day at home and felt burnout. Gradually, they started to refuse and became unresponsive to their parent's order.

When children stay at home due to the pandemic, they actually give you a hard time (since they don't like being confined into a small room; they frequently create an environment in which they quarrel, create noises and disturb

the family; watch films continuously and tend to be addicted to it. Because they stay at home, some of children suffered from loss of appetite; they were also nostalgic about their peers and frequently talked about them. Besides, during this COVID-19 pandemic children face less connection with other children in the neighbor, missed support from social networks such as uncles, aunts and other joint family members which highly important for their social development. In connection with their social environment they can develop language skills, learn what is moral and immoral, gender roles and social values. But, these all are limited during this pandemic. Additionally, one participant (P: I) stated, *“The negative one is restriction of their natural freedom, playing with others and the enforcement of using face mask at school and while meeting friends.”*

As it is known, children learn a lot by communicating their peers at schools and in their neighborhoods. However, this is totally restricted during COVID-19 lockdown. COVID-19 lockdown almost cut down the interaction between children and their fellow friends. This has various negative impacts on children’s socialization. As they are confined at home, they lost the opportunity to play and get joy from their friends. Their opportunity to learn important social elements such as societal culture (values, norms, beliefs and morals) which are paramount for their future social life is totally limited. Above all, the knowledge and skills they should have got from formal education is highly jeopardized. One participant (V) said:

During this pandemic the socialization process was limited to oral communications without sharing materials and spaces that are very important in socializing children to develop knowledge and skills on routine daily activities. The lockdown also restricted going outside home which hampered socialization processes pertinent to community level like having exposure to the surrounding social and physical environment. Given socialization takes place through different agents in addition to parents or other family members, the lockdown limited children’s exposure to their fellow children in the community and schools, neighbors, relatives, religious gatherings, visits to economic activities like markets, service centers and recreational areas.

Positive impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on children’s socialization

The emerging of COVID-19 has not only negative impacts on children’s socialization. But, also it has positive impacts. According to the participants, as positive impacts, having family time, developed intimacy between families, personal hygiene, protected from communicable diseases (e.g. common cold), learn domestic activities and skills, fathers got time to care for children and engage domestic activities or joint responsibility. These all helped them to develop responsibility and self-care skills. Moreover, one participant (P: VI) said, *“The positive one is that it helps our children to develop their creative skill; and it gave them chance to learn some domestic activities. They learned also to keep their personal hygiene frequently, and less infection with common cold.”*

Furthermore, the positive impact is that the COVID-19 lockdown gave some families the opportunity to closely supervise the behavior and respond to the needs of their children as both are available at home due to COVID-19 lockdown. One participant (P: II) stated:

As positive impact of COVID-19 lockdown for the agents of socialization like the parents is that some parents have got the opportunity to have intimate relationships with their children as they stay long time at home. This helps to manage and learn children’s behaviors.

Agents of children’s socialization during COVID-19 pandemic

As the finding shows, agents of children’s socialization were limited to the family and the media whereas the community and neighbors, education and religious lost their roles of socialization. Parents regained their central roles of primarily socializing their children that was dominated by schools. The family and the media were the major socializing agents during that time. The family played the roles of regulation, controlling and guidance with regard to their day-to-day activities. The media served as a main source of entertainment, recreation and sources of information. Little or no role of some socialization agents means their potential contribution of socializing were missed like lockdown of religious centers could have hampered children’s socialization in terms of moral characters. For instance, one participant (P: IIX) stated, *“COVID has changed our life style and places we used to visit recurrently like church. In my case, it is myself and wife who are main agents of socialization as we limited ourselves to our house and don’t receive guests.”*

Factors affecting children's socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic

Limited social interaction

According to research participants lack of active interaction with their peers can be one impacting factor for the children's socialization. The other is the habit of continuous watching and staring at TV screen instead of playing in their own ways; absence of the elderly who according to our culture and good sources of early knowledge and exposure for children's socialization. Also, one participant (P: I) said:

There are many factors that can affect children during the COVID-19 lockdown. During COVID-19 lockdown which restricts their interaction with their peers and neighbors which in turn restricts the joy, knowledge and skills they should have got, loss of their formal education, long hours watching of movies on television which affects their motivation for study and child abuses are some among them to mention.

In addition to this, One participant (P: V) stated, "Limited socialization agents may take place during the lockdown. This has an impact on the holistic development of children during this crisis."

Challenges experienced by parents during COVID-19 in socializing children

Challenges faced by parents in children's socialization during COVID-19 pandemic are multiple. Few of them are: lack of adequate materials to provide them with or financial difficulties in buying what help them to get entertainment like toys; lack of persons who have more time and experiences to deal with children; taking more time to arbitrate their quarrels; addressing loss of appetite and overweight, consoling their desire to play outside; lack of appropriate playground and the critical fear of infection by the pandemic. Also, the parents face challenges of answering their unexpected questions like when Corona goes, when to meet their friends and enjoy lives. For instance, one participant (P: II) said:

Difficulty to control the length of time they invest on watching movies, frequent conflict between siblings over minor issues, difficulty to meet their recreation needs due to mobility restrictions and confinement at home to care for them are some of the challenges I faced.

While explaining the challenges he faced in socializing children during this pandemic, one participant said:

I faced difficulties to celebrate their birth days. Birth days of the two older children were by-passed because of the fear yet they were urging to celebrate. Convincing them to miss the event was beyond their understanding. Children want to have close relation with their parents. Refusing them to do so was difficult as they cannot comprehend the reasons. Also, it was not easy to keep away from touch by others, fellow children in particular, was among the toughest challenges.

Strategies for children's socialization during COVID-19 pandemic

Engaging them in home based activities

The finding shows that in order to address the problem related with children's socialization during this COVID-19 pandemic, various different strategies were designed. These are: use video games, introduce new toys, engage in sport activities, watching TV, read story books and organize those home activities and engagements for home activities such as cleaning, washing and personal hygiene. Besides, one participant said, "I have tried to provide them with some modern games; provided them with some activities like drawing; gave few books to read and answer questions. I have taken some time to teach them some ways of life." Furthermore, another participant (P: X) said, "Reading stories, fables, helping them to do exercises from text books and instructing them to do domestic activities which do not go beyond their capacity are some of the strategies I used to address children's socialization challenges during this pandemic". Besides, one participant (III) said:

I was advising them to distance themselves from adult family members who were going outside home for different reasons. They were also advised not to touch persons or materials coming from outside until they are cleaned. Also, I was controlling them not to leave home especially at day time.

Praying and budgeting time for activities

The strategies used by the parents as agent of socialization are different from family to family which can be influenced by their experiences, religion, economic and education status. For instance, one participant (P: VIII) said:

There were regular times in our family to alert the family members about the corona virus and its protective mechanisms. There was also a time reserved for praying. Besides, play therapy was used to teach and protect the children from stresses. The other important strategy we used during the lockdown was all family members provided secure attachment for the children. My children got appropriate care and nurturing from all members as a single entity. This helped them to suffer less from the lockdown.

In line with the above idea, another participant (P: II) said:

I tried to manage it in terms of scheduling their reading time, playing and having family time. Later, since the adolescents highly brought a propounding negative influence on my kids I forced to rent another house. Now things are going good and safe than before.

DISCUSSION

Though several findings of the study are congruent with previous contributions of studies, there are newly emerged themes from this particular study. For instance, lack of social interactions, depression, and limited socializing agents are the challenges and playing, praying and watching TVs are the coping strategies of children and families which are similar with previous studies. However, heated conflict among siblings, teaching children indoor activities, dealing with loss of appetites and obesity of children, personal hygiene and sparing from communicable disease (like common cold) are newly emerged themes of this study. Thus, we gave context to our findings with literature support as following.

The finding of this study shows that socialization of children is hampered because of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Families, siblings, and close relatives as well as mass Medias are remained the only socialization agents. Therefore, children are lost the opportunities to engage with their peers and learning social skills. Similarly, Segre et al. (2020) stated that the school plays not only an educational mission of knowledge acquisition, but it also satisfies the children's socialization; but, during this pandemic socialization with peers – transitioning to electronic-based platforms. The finding also indicated that children are spared their maximum time in watching TV and playing games and parents are challenged in budgeting their time. However, sometimes they help them to engage in indoor activities. Consistently, during the lockdown, children spent more their time using screens, watching TV/videogames, smart phones and tablets for entertainment as an alternative to outdoor activities and less engaged in doing physical activity and sleeping (Morgül, Kallitsoglou & Essau, 2020; Al-Balushi & Essa, 2020). Agents of children's socialization contributes in teaching toilet training, self-care skills, language, cognitive, motor and social skills, and gender roles, correcting errors as well as orienting about their immediate families, clans and community (Wario, 2020). However, the finding of this study revealed that the confinement of children with their immediate families hindered them from obtaining the socialization agents to the expected standard. For instance, as per the finding, parents, siblings and TV are the only socializing agents at home and they failed to get support from their peer group, clans, communities and the schools. And families, extended relatives and communities unable to play their shared responsibilities to the level of Mugumbate and Chereni described in African context (2019). Contrary to previous studies, this study pointed out that parents were help their children to involve in indoor/domestic activities, such as house cleaning, personal hygiene, washing clothes and supporting their mothers.

More or less, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has an impact on children's socialization since it limits the socialization agents to the familial level instead of involving all responsible bodies of socialization. COVID-19 pandemic lockdown reduces children's engagement with their peers and villagers which negatively affect their socialization. COVID-19 pandemic lockdown hindered them from finding their role models (i.e. school teachers, peers, relatives, community leaders etc.) except their parents and siblings. In the same manner, the lockdown in relation with the alleviation of the pandemic have compacted vital services for children's development and socializations. The socializations of children have been endangered as the pandemic and related mitigation measures have resulted in school closure, bereavement and decrease in family income (Chineka & Kurevakwesu, 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Children are obviously one of the most vulnerable groups. That means more care is needed for them than ever. They have to be trained in such a way that they learn to be independent and self-reliant when it comes to playing and learning. They have to learn to stay at home and budget their time to play and/or read.
- Children were asking a series of questions about the pandemic and their interest of going out. Listening to their questions and giving convincing justification for restrictions are helpful.
- Families should take great responsibility in following their children's behavior and deal with changes related with pandemic. Giving attention to children and a chance to entertain is very important. Continuous follow up and guidance is also equally important.
- Encouraging them to reading stories, fables, reading text books, physical exercises and instructing them to do domestic activities which are not beyond their capacity are some of the strategies.
- Psychologists, sociologist and social workers should support the parents on the way can provide appropriate socialization for their children during such kind of pandemic crisis.
- Schools and families should have a ways to communicate children with their teachers and classmates through mobile phone, email, telegram and manage the challenging situations.

CONCLUSION

As the findings indicated the emerging of COVID-19 pandemic affect children's socialization in positive and negative manner. As positive impacts, having family time, developed intimacy between families, Personal hygiene, Protected from communicable diseases (e.g. common cold), learn domestic activities and develop their creative skill. Obesity, depression, limited socialization opportunities, addicted to films and games, loss appetite, homesick/nostalgic, quarrel with siblings, create noises and disturb the family are the negative impacts of COVID-19 on children's socialization. As finding shows, the agents of children's socialization during this COVID-19 pandemic mostly limited to parents, siblings, TV and mobile phone games or online games. The finding shows that lack of active interaction with their peers and the habit of continuous watching and staring at TV screen instead of playing in their ways can be the impacting factors for the children's socialization. Challenges faced by parents in children's socialization during COVID-19 pandemic are: taking more time to arbitrate their quarrels; addressing loss of appetite and overweight, consoling their desire to play outside, difficulty to control the length of time they invest on watching movies, and frequent conflict between siblings over minor issues. The finding shows children's socialization strategies used by parents during this pandemic are using video games, introduce new toys, and engage in home and sport activities, watching TV, read story books and fables, and riddle.

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