

Words and Pictures Explanations

Purpose and Steps

Purpose

1. To create together with the parents and key adults a clear story that gives the children/young people an age appropriate explanation of the problems and the seriousness of the issues that got child protection involved in the family's life.
2. To help the parents and key adults process the past by connecting their experience of the problems with what the children need to know and creating an explanation they own. The parents and network are the first audience for the words and pictures explanation (creating and working on a words and pictures explanation often also builds the clarity and compassion of the professionals).
3. Focuses the professionals' thinking and language and builds their compassion.
4. Break open the secrecy/silence/shame/trauma around the child abuse/neglect and what caused it, creating openness that becomes the foundation for safety planning and/or a safer future where these problems don't recur.
5. Creates a relationship between professionals and family where they are able to talk in depth about the history and seriousness of the issues. Creates the foundation for safety planning work.

Steps in Creating the Explanation

1. Begin by briefing all key professional stakeholders on the process and obtain their support and endorsement to undertake the process. This needs to be done before presenting the idea to the parents and the more contentious the case and the more professionals involved the more important this step is. Clarify your purpose in doing this. Distil the facts of the harm from professional perspective (behaviour, severity, incidence and impact).
2. Explain process to parents and get their buy-in to the process (this can take time).
3. To create the detail for the explanation talk with the parent or parents about how they think about and talk about the problem (both the child protection concerns and any associated complicating factors such as mental health problem, severe illness, drug or alcohol misuse). Explore with them what they believe is most important for their children to understand, what questions the child has asked and what they may have overheard. Discuss what the child protection professionals require in the explanation.
4. Explore these same issues with the other parent, kinship system, and significant adults in the child's life (such as foster carers).
5. Show parents other words and pictures examples relevant to their situation.
6. Explore with the child/children what they already know and what they are concerned about (depending on the circumstances include the parents in this discussion if possible).
7. Where explanation involves the experience and story of older siblings (particularly teenagers) for younger siblings – discuss the explanation with those older siblings.
8. Draft the explanation utilising the families' own language and ways of expressing concerns wherever possible and bearing in mind family's race culture and religion. The explanation should always use neutral, factual language (NO judgements), where there is a dispute about the facts this should be stated factually.

9. Some practitioners invite parents to draft an explanation at the same time as the professional prepares a draft and then work together using both drafts to create a combined version.
10. The explanation should be framed with a neutral or affirmative beginning and a positive message at the end. Particularly when using long form words and pictures (e.g. explaining why a child is in care and subsequent events) the explanation should be interspersed with meaningful positive events in the child's life that fit and add to the overall story.
11. Bring the first draft to the parents. Develop and refine the words so that they are comfortable with the explanation and it reflects what they feel the child should know.
12. Decide how the drawings will be created. Decide whether the worker will draw (don't worry if you are a poor artist the worse you draw stick figures the better!), the parents or whether the drawings will be done together with the children when the explanation is presented (this will take significantly longer). DO NOT USE clip art – these have almost no significance and communicate very little.
13. Once the parents take ownership of the explanation, the next task is to have a final conversation about whether the explanation captures everything children's services would want the child to know.
14. Provide the explanation to the child/children with their parents, extended family, carers and key professionals present.
15. Ensure that all other significant extended family members and adults in the child's life have seen the explanation and will draw upon it if they need to talk to the child about the problems the parents face and the reasons the child is in care.