

A Words and Pictures for Every Case?

I have been asked a few times recently,

“Do we need a Words and Pictures for every case?”

My answer...

“No”

But let me clarify

On every case that requires comprehensive safety planning, that is, where an assessor / investigator has made the decision that this child requires an agency led safety plan to increase their safety, be that at home or in a period of out of home care - the Signs of Safety asserts that there must be an explanation for the children, developed with the family to explain to the children who and what the worries are about and what will be happening in the future to keep them safe. This explanation is shared with the naturally connected network so everyone is informed about the worries. Only an informed network of people around a child can plan for their safety.

It is for this reason that, in every safety goal we develop you will see one of our bottom lines is that there must be an explanation for the child/ren.

If you don't think the case 'needs' or 'should have' a Words and Pictures story as this explanation, then that's fine – but I will ask you to let me know how you are informing the children and their network about the worries? Who was worried, what they were worried about, what happened because of the worries and what will be happening in the future? If you have a process for this then excellent. You won't mind then if I ask you some questions about your plan to test its rigour;

- Is your explanation in language the child will understand?
- Does it capture the seriousness of the worries without blaming or shaming the family?
- Does your method provide a consistent story to everyone around the child?
- Does the explanation offer the opportunity for the child to revisit it time and time again if they want to?
- Was your explanation developed with the people the child belongs too?
- Does the explanation offer messages of hope and resilience for the child, providing memories and examples of positive and happy times for the child?
- Would the child say this explanation you are offering helped them understand their situation in a way that helped them talk about it?

If you answer yes to all of this, excellent. As you were then.

If not, then please consider how you could manage that? Because these are the points of the explanation that matter most in my view.

I recently read a tweet from a child in care who 'accessed her files' after aging out. She was devastated. She was referred to as having 'no moral compass' among other things. I wondered what else she saw on the file. About her mum and dad, her siblings, the people she belongs to? I wonder if she read about her 'reasons for coming into care' in a statement of facts from Police, or a report from a psychologist written in technical terms that don't even see her as a person, a little girl, a terrified teenager, a lost young woman? I wonder what her files tell her about her parents – who she is a direct extension of. I wonder what this did to her.

I wonder if she knew why she was in care before she read this and if she had a consistent story all her life from everyone, that was provided to her by the people she belongs too? I wonder if her case managers – I assume she had many – and her foster carers – I assume she had plenty of them too – knew this themselves and if they talked to her about it? I wonder how many versions of a story she got, if any, or did she just have to make that up for herself? I wonder if she had opportunities to ask questions about her story and revisit it when she needed to?

Because this child, this little girl, this terrified teenager, and this lost young woman absolutely deserves that. And I don't know anyone working in this field who would disagree.

I wonder too, what she might read about her parents? The good things they did. All the ways they loved, cared for and kept her safe even if it wasn't enough. Would she read about the ways everyone tired hard to keep her, her siblings, her parents connected? Would she find ways she could connect to them now if she hasn't been able to previously? Would there be things in case notes about her that would make her smile at the memory it evokes? Would she hear her mother or fathers voice, her grandmother or grandfathers voice on that file, read the things they most wanted to say to her?

I, and my Signs of Safety colleagues, will always stake a claim for the power of Words and Pictures in providing this for a child. I wholeheartedly believe in this process. I have seen the power of it so many times, for children, their parents and extended families and for the case workers who engage in it as a process, with their whole person.

And if the child has not experienced a period of out of home care, but our process of assessment and analysis has deemed the child needs an agency led safety plan because the worries were really serious then they still need, deserve an explanation. There is, of course, more capacity for the secrecy to continue when the children are at home. Again, I would stake a claim for Words and Pictures being the most effective way of providing this explanation – working with the parents so they can explain the agreed story to their child. Putting them in the expert seat rather than ourselves. When we share this with the network it is how we inform them so we can start to dispel the secrecy around the danger. This is also how we help the parents get really clear, it's how we help them tell their children who the children's services workers are and why they are involved. The work with the family with us on creating an explanation gives us an opportunity to help them develop an environment where they can talk about hard (the hardest in fact) things and come up with solutions. We help them have a vision for how to talk about the things that are shameful, the things where they feel most vulnerable. Once they can talk about it, once the network can talk about it, once the secrecy is opened up, the less likely the abuse is to recur.

Working with a family to create an explanation such as our vision in the Words and Pictures process is hard work. There is no denying that. But every child we work with to increase their safety, when we have assessed there is a need for our agency to do so, deserves this at the very least.

I hear now the protests of 'we don't have time' or 'what if the family won't work on it with us?' or 'it's too hard to talk about these things to a small child' etc, etc.

I know. I know.

Thinking how to tell a child that she is living away from home because of her stepfather sexually abusing her or working with a dad to get him to explain his violence to his children is hard. Explaining to a 12-year-old that his dad suicided is devastating. Working with families to get the language for this stuff is scary. Opening this conversation with children – little ones or big ones, even ones who are adults now is filled with possible problems.

But we can. We have. We do.

We need to take it seriously, invest in it as a process, commit to this with your whole person. Because the kids, who will grow to be adults and parents to their own children need this. To know your story, to have it told to you, wherever possible by your people, is a basic human right.

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