

Creating Words and Pictures Explanations
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Words and Pictures Explanations

For children and young people to be meaningfully involved with child protection work they need to understand the concerns professionals have about their family and parents. As noted earlier, research consistently indicates that most children and young people cannot explain why social workers are involved in their family's life and most children in the care don't understand why they can't be with their family. If children are to understand and be involved in a safety plan they need to know why there is a need for that plan.

The 'Words and Pictures' explanation process developed by Susie Essex and colleagues (Turnell and Essex, 2006), was created to inform children and young people about serious child protection concerns as a foundation to promote and involve them in their safety and healing. The most crucial aspect of creating Words and Pictures explanations is that they must be created together with the active involvement of the parents and the parents must be comfortable with the story before it is presented to the children. This distinguishes the Words and Pictures process from Life Story Book work. Placing parents in the middle of creating the explanation requires skilful, compassionate practice, including skilful use of authority, particularly when there is little or no prospect the child(ren) will be returned to the parents. Involving the parents is always vital, however, because at the end of the day children want an explanation from their flesh and blood, their parents. Professional explanations alone, no matter how child friendly and age-appropriate, will rarely hold for children since blood is always thicker than social services.

Professionals sometimes confuse the Words and Pictures and My Three Houses methods. A simple way to be clear about the overall purpose of each is to understand that the My Three Houses is used to capture the child's views, images and words so that significant adults, including parents, carers, social workers, judges and guardians understand their perspective and experience. Words and Pictures explanations create the parents and immediate family members explanation for the children about why child protection professionals are involved in their lives.



Purpose of Words and Pictures Explanations

Beyond this overall purpose the purpose of the Words and Pictures work is:

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. 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. Enable the professionals to better understand and have greater compassion for the parent's experience and enable to use their thinking and language in the explanation and ongoing work
4. Break open the secrecy, silence, shame and trauma surrounding the child maltreatment 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. To create a relationship between professionals and family where they are able to talk in depth about the history and seriousness of the issues which in turn creates the relational foundation for developing safety planning work.

Steps for Creating Words and Pictures Explanations

1. Begin by briefing all key professional stakeholders and obtain their support and endorsement of the process. This needs to be done before presenting the idea to the parents. The more contentious the case and the more professionals involved, the more important this step is. Distil the facts of the harm from professional perspective (behaviour, severity, incidence and impact).
2. Explain the Words and Pictures work to parents and secure their commitment to the process (this can take time)
3. It is often helpful to show parents other words and pictures examples relevant to their situation
4. To create the detail for the draft, talk with the parents about how they think and talk about the problem, both the child protection concerns and any associated issues such as mental health problems, severe illness, drug or alcohol misuse etc. Explore with the parents 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.
5. Explore these same issues with the other parent if separated, key members of extended family, and significant adults in the child's life, such as foster carers
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 the 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 family's own language and ways of expressing concerns wherever possible, bearing in mind the 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. The explanation should be framed with a neutral or affirmative beginning and a positive message at the end. When using the 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. The story usually moves from past to present and future tense. Always write the story in the third person, the majority of children's stories are written in the third person perspective and third person narrative often makes it easier to take in the harder issues.
10. Bring the first draft to the parents. Develop and refine the words so that the parents are comfortable with the explanation and it reflects what they feel the child should know.
11. The first draft should include pictures suggestions. This ensures the pictures enhance the story and creates the opportunity to discuss and negotiate the pictures with the parents.
12. Pictures should always be simple stick figures (**not** photos or clip art) with specific connection to the frame they accompany. Pictures can add to messages of resilience or positive reinforcement (for example, when a child has made a disclosure about sexual abuse the picture might be of a teacher or policeman telling the child they did the right things and were very brave). Pictures need to point to the abusive events but should not explicitly portray them – so the picture should not be drawn of sexual abuse or a father hitting a mother, rather might show a child telling their teacher that 'daddy touched me on my privates' or show an angry father with hieroglyphics in a speech bubble and the mother sad and perhaps crying and the children holding their ears in another room.
13. Prior to presenting the explanation to the children, discuss with the parents and key adults that following the explanation it is likely the child(ren) will ask more questions as they process what they have heard. Ensure that the parents, all significant extended family members and adults in the child's life have a copy of the explanation so they can use it to explore any questions the children might ask them.
14. Present the explanation to the child/children with their parents, extended family, carers and social service workers present

Further Reading

Turnell A. and Essex S. (2006). *Working with 'denied' child abuse: the Resolutions approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.