



Telling the Child's Story – Care Based Language

Introduction

Minute takers play an extremely valuable role in our Fostering, Adoption and Permanence Panel and in all the other reviews and meetings about children and young people.

Their contribution to telling the child's story in a truthful yet sensitive way is crucial in helping the Service to respect and explain the child's often traumatic childhood.

The Child's Story

The skill of the minute taker in capturing the story from the verbal accounts given by people attending Panel is pivotal in ensuring we reflect the child's journey, through an often complex process of legality and formality. It is essential therefore we use language which is "non-judgemental" and "human".

Personal Reflection

How we use language changes over time and we will not always get it right. The key is in self-reflection, asking the question:

"how would I like to have that part of my life recorded officially"?

When adults look back over their care records they experience the story through the eyes of the child they were at the time. This makes what we record, and how we record it, all the more important!

The Human Bridge

Minute takers are the bridge between the "verbal" and the "written" account of the child's story. The story has to be honest and reflective of the child's experience but not cold and unsympathetic.

All of us are likely to respond more constructively when we are treated with respect and dignity, even when we are given bad news about ourselves or members of our families. This is particularly true for children, young people and adults who have been part of the care system.

The Impact of the Written Word

When adults gain access to their personal files they often find out things about themselves or their parents and family, which they did not know. Often these things

are very distressing and can reflect childhood trauma, vividly brought back to life by the written account in the personal file or minutes from Panel.

While we cannot change the facts, we can present them in the context of “care and understanding” not bureaucratically and functionally.

It is the responsibility of us all to use language which reflects the human experience but does not add to the hurt and pain.

Minute takers can lead the way and make a real difference to the written account.

Listening to Children and Young People

Listening to children and young people is always important in telling their story and in trying to understand their journey.

One of the most compelling messages from the Independent Care Review is the impact of language on how care experienced children and young people feel.

As corporate parents we have a responsibility to use care based language just as we would for our own children and young people.

The list below is not exhaustive and can be added to or amended as we work together and develop our understanding and approach. Some of the examples are presentational and others relate to care based language.

- Always seek to use “care based” language
- The word “placement” is not care based it is process and organisational based. Try to avoid using it wherever possible. Use foster care, family care, when the child comes to live with.....
- Always have margins justified (admin presentational style)
- Stay consistent ensuring consistency throughout the entire minute
- Proof read your work and be proud of it
- Peer review is really effective in spotting errors and providing another human response in a trusting and supportive context
- Always use Social Worker where required, never “worker” – use full title when not a Qualified Social Worker. Even better, once we have identified a person’s role, simply use their name thereafter
- Always use “age and stage of development” never “age and stage”
- Not “Department”. We are Social Work Services
- Keep date formats the same, e.g. 25 April 2017
- Never LAC or LAAC – always use full words. This is what young people have asked for from Root and Branch Care Review
- Avoid the words “couple” and “medicals” – they are demeaning to individuality. “Carers” or “the couple” should be replaced with the names of the applicants/ foster carers e.g. Mr and Mrs Smith – again, much more personalised.
- “Medicals” should be replaced with Health Assessments which is much less clinical and a little more person centred

- Siblings should be replaced with the names of the actual children, or brothers and sisters – not surprisingly care experienced young people do not like this term
- When describing what people do use “way of life” not “lifestyle” which suggests we have styles of living which we can easily pick and choose
- Titles should stay consistent e.g. mother V Mother and names
- Always insert the year e.g. 2018. Not last year or next year
- The word “contacts” is not care based language – family time, visits, seeing the children, are all better terms.
- Parenting Assessment as opposed to parental capacity, the latter is demeaning
- Use formal but plain English, avoid colloquialisms
- Where quoting a particular turn of phrase used by a child or adult place in quotation marks e.g. it was “pure dead brilliant”
- Team Around the Child not TAC – this abbreviation is cold and embedded in process driven culture

Wider Application

It is important we all reflect wider into other situations when speaking about children, young people and families. This can be particularly challenging for admin staff who are taking minutes, for example, in Secure Care Reviews. Such Reviews are littered with jargon and institutional language. Hearing terms like “mobilities” (not even a real word) when undertaking Secure Care Reviews is common – do not be afraid to ask people to explain their use of language or words. Sadly many Residential Schools and Secure Care settings still use the term “units” – terms which are so institutionalised many people do not even blink when they hear them.

With courage, determination and by working together we can all begin to change the language and challenge the culture.

If we are all truly reflective we can make huge progress and really start to embed care based language – it can help to change the way we think.

Jim Lyon
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30 July 2020

Further References:

Detailed below is a recent news article and report with an A-Z of language change produced following engagement with children and young people In England – much of the matter remains the same for Scotland.

Children and Young People Now Article:

<https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/language-guide-challenges-care-system-jargon>

TACT (the adolescent and children's trust) Research and Engagement Project Report – Changing the way professionals talk about children in care:

https://www.tactcare.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/03/TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf