

Section II: Supporting Children To Understand Their Story

SUPPORTING CHILDREN TO UNDERSTAND THEIR STORY (Written by Birgitte Granofsky)

"There is no shame in not knowing. The shame lies in not finding out." – Assyrian Proverb

An example: "Laura grew up in the care of child welfare because her parents were unable to look after her related to her mother being clinically depressed and her father having major problems with substance use. Laura lived in a warm, nurturing and supportive foster family. When she was six, her mother died by suicide. The foster parents, Laura's worker, her grandparents, and her father met with her to tell her about the circumstances of her mother's death. It was a very short meeting and emotional support was offered to her on an ongoing basis. I remained her worker over many years, and from time to time, Laura and I would talk about the reason she was in care, what happened to her mother, the role of her grandparents in her life, etc. When Laura turned 21, myself and other workers who had been involved with her took her out for a celebratory lunch. At this lunch, Laura turned to me and said "Why did nobody ever tell me my mother committed suicide?". I was shocked. We'd gone over the story many times. It was a life lesson for me that children do not always hear what we want them to hear, or integrate the stories they're given until they are ready."

Children have the right to be informed (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Child, Youth and Family Services Act,) and they need to be informed for the sake of their psychological growth.

Children, who have had "good enough parenting" (Winnicott's term), will grow up securely attached. They will mostly have a trusting attitude to the world, to themselves and to their own voice. Whereas children, who have grown up with unpredictable, or even abusive, parental figures, trying to survive physically and emotionally as best they could, might end up with poorly regulated emotions and in a state of chronic anxiety and hypervigilance. Theirs is not a world that can be trusted, and that is the inner working model or script of many children in care.

It must always be a priority to support parents in their role, whether that means help with finances, providing access to relevant treatment and/or supporting skill development. In the meantime, and sometimes more permanently, child welfare must attempt to provide nurturing relationships for the children in their care by help of foster parents, kin or through adoption. These caregivers are greatly challenged as they try to present a model for relationships that is new to the child. The child will, of course, act according to their inner working models. It takes time and consistency for those models to change. And it takes understanding and empathy on the part of the adults. And it takes communication about the past and about the present and help for the child to process that information. The child needs help to put the pieces together that are her life. Who were the people in her life? What were the

relationships like? What were good times? What was scary? Safe places? And unsafe? What happened before the child was born? What is the history of the extended family? Of the clan/community? Ideally this work is done together with the child's family of origin, but that depends on safety issues and many other issues, such as the child's permission.

In order to develop a strong sense of identity, rootedness and a strong voice, children need to know:

- Their parentage, their family history and their community of origin. And they need to maintain their connections where possible
- The reasons for being taken to a place of safety as well as the context of the neglect and/or abuse, such as poverty or multigenerational trauma
- Conditions related to the Child Protection System, such as the administrative difficulties or mistakes or insufficient supports.
- In preparation for the first, and successive placements, the child needs to be informed and engaged in a discussion about what is happening, what the future will, or might, bring and also about the uncertainties. And that needs to happen in a way that is age and developmentally appropriate. The child needs to be "kept in the loop" about decisions and events. The child's caretakers need to be informed along with the child, so that they can support the child and help the child process.

What does telling the child the truth look like?

- The way of telling is dependent upon the child's age, maturity, and capacity.
- Timing is important. The child should be informed sooner rather than later.
- What is happening at the moment needs to be communicated right then and there. Communication can be in words, and/or in body language, with use of toys, soothing objects, etc.
- One needs to pay careful attention to the child when starting to talk about traumatic events or about losses that the child has suffered. Does the child indicate interest or not? Is the child entering a state of hyperarousal? One needs to respect the child's refusal or incapacity to hear at that moment, but it is very important to indicate that nothing the child has experienced is too horrible to be talked about.
- Significant others need to be talked about with respect, but, of course, one should listen carefully to the child's feelings towards them.
- Extremely important to ensure that the child has somebody who knows and who is there to provide support as the child processes this material. It would be harmful to elicit strong emotions without appropriate support.
- The telling can be in words, pantomime, by help of toys and drawings.
- Telling the story of the child's life must include all the facts the workers know of – or find out about. Special friends, hobbies, pets, good times, and bad.
- Information needs to be given again as the child grows and matures.

What does "listening to the child's story" look like?

- The child has their own experience of events. The adults need to listen to the child. They need to be informed by the child.
- The child tells their story in behaviour (soiling, tantrums, anxiety and so on), in free play, in structured play and games, in artmaking, and of course, in words.
- It is extremely important that the adult listen to and try their best to interpret this communication and act based upon that understanding. And re-adjust if need be. All depending upon the child's response.

Who should be telling the truth to the child and be listening to the child's story?

- Ideally, children should hear the story of why they are not living with their parents from the parents themselves and be encouraged to ask questions of their parents. When a Family Group Conference is used at the time of children's admission to care, they can have their questions answered first-hand by the people who know. If there is a good reason to exclude the parents from talking to children about their story, then the child welfare workers and caregivers need to do this important work.
- Child welfare workers have access to information about why the children were taken into care. They also have access to the family history and to other relevant information, albeit on a second or a third hand basis. And they have information about court orders and about plans for the child. And they, hopefully, have an ongoing relationship with the child. Consequently, they are the ones who should provide the needed information to the child, to the parental figures and to the family of origin going forward. And they are the ones who should support the communication between the child and the current parental figure and between the child and the family of origin.
- However temporary the home, the child needs caregiver support when dealing with the given information. And the caregivers need to listen carefully to the child's story as it is expressed in behaviour and in words.
- It is very important that the systems (child welfare, legal, medical) grant the workers and the caregivers the needed authority to do this very important job of informing the child as well as grant them provision of time and any needed professional support.