

Telling a child's story: creating a words and pictures story book to tell children why they are in care

Jill Devlin

Abstract

Open Home Foundation, an organisation that works with children and young people in care uses a story book approach to help them to understand why they were placed in care. The book is developed with input from caseworkers, family, and Family Court and Child, Youth and Family records, and uses age-appropriate language and illustrations. This account tells how one child's story was developed and shared with her.

A young woman sits across from the interviewer talking about her experience of being placed in care in her early teens. This vivacious young woman who is now a mother herself has agreed to talk about this very painful part of her growing years.

As the interviewer draws out her story of being placed in care, the young woman's demeanour moves from exuberance and confidence to that of distress, with a sense of overwhelming sadness. She stutters over her responses and gets a "far-away look" in her eyes as she tries to put words to those long ago feelings.

She begins by trying to describe it as a "huge emptiness" then adds "shock and confusion" and as her distress increases she whispers that "it was quite a traumatic event". Her distress increases when she is asked about her understanding of why she was placed in care. Her response is a slow stuttered whisper, "No. No, not definitively. No, I still do not have definitive answers."

If we could claim that for children and young people who are or have been in care that the story above was the exception and not the rule, then

we could just move on, thinking it was a very sad story.

In 2006, the Open Home Foundation interviewed ten young people who had been placed in care as children. What we found was that this young woman's story was not the exception but rather the general rule.

One young person talked about the shock they experienced at 15 years of age when they read their Child, Youth and Family file and discovered the record of what had happened in their family prior to being placed in care at the age of six. This young person had no recollection or memories about this time in their life. Another young person said they were probably told, "but in all the jumble of what was going on, it got lost in our minds. In one ear and out the other, just make sure that the kids understand as well. I mean it's a big thing, a lot to take in as a kid."

With what we heard from young people who had been in care as children, it would seem that the 'words and pictures' story book could go some way to bringing understanding and alleviating the trauma of not knowing why. Explaining to children is not enough – they deserve a collaboratively developed account that gives them a record of these events.

As an organisation, the Open Home Foundation was faced with the question: "What do we need to do differently so that children have a clear understanding of why they aren't living at home with their parents?" Part of the answer to the question came when the book *Working with Denied Child Abuse: The Resolutions Approach* by Andrew Turnell and Susie Essex (2006) was

published. Chapter 5 of the book presents a process called 'words and pictures', which is an illustrated storyboard steeped in the Resolutions Approach of creating a foundation of openness with family.

What is it?

The 'words and pictures' story book process is not to be confused with what is commonly known by social workers as 'Life Story' books. These are usually a record of a child's life that includes significant information and events for a child to refer to when they are older or while they are growing up, such as a description of their birth family, where they were born, significant people in their lives, and their care history. Life Story books are vital for children who are in care as they may experience many changes of social workers and foster parents and as a result, information about them and their family history can be lost if it is not carefully and purposefully recorded.

The purpose of the words and pictures story book is to take a snapshot of a very difficult time in a family's life when it was necessary for the child to be placed in someone else's care. The development of the story book requires all the adults involved to work collaboratively to develop a child-centred and age-appropriate record of those events.

Parents and social workers work together to develop the shared story for the child. Integral to the process is that everyone comes to an agreement about how to express the "worries, struggles and difficulties" that the family were having in providing for the needs of their child and why it was necessary for the child to be placed in care.

The process of all the adults working together to record the story creates an opportunity for them to focus on the child's needs, and view the situation from the child's perspective. This requires the adults to put aside their own needs and perspectives. As the story is agreed to by

all those involved, the risk of children hearing differing versions of events is lessened.

The story provides the child with a record of "why", and gives parents, caregivers and professionals a resource to refer to when assisting the child to make sense of these events. Although the words and pictures story book is developed to inform the child about the "worries, struggles and difficulties" that led to them being placed in care, it also gives a balanced perspective of what was happening in the family, by interspersing difficult messages with happy and positive memories.

The story book always begins with a happy event, which gives a contextual introduction to the story for the child, for example, "Mum and Dad met and fell in love".

The story is the story and contains the blended perspectives of those adults involved during the difficult time. It is written in a way that even the youngest child in the family group can understand. Parents, caregivers, social workers, other family

members such as grandparents, and the child all have their own copy.

The completed story ensures new social workers, caregivers and adults entering the child's world will be able to become quickly and accurately acquainted with the child's story. It ensures the child does not need to keep

repeating and reliving their story and that the story does not change over time.

When?

Ideally the words and pictures story book is developed with parents when the decision is made for the child to leave their care or very shortly after the child is placed in care. If the development of the story book occurs at this time, it can form part of the intervention plan, explaining the things that need to be addressed before the child can return to their parent's care.

Although a words and pictures story book is best created when a child enters care, it is still

an extremely useful process for any child who has spent any length of time in the care system. However, the longer the child has been in care, the more complex it is to gather all perspectives. Social workers have moved on and the parents of a child are often full of grief and anger with the system and what has occurred. Despite how angry they may be, most parents will jump at the opportunity to have a say in the story that is created for their child. They would rather do this themselves than have someone do it for them.

The social worker who undertakes the development of a words and pictures story book must be prepared to build collaborative relationships with the child's family and any professionals or agencies who were involved. They need to listen to all the different perspectives and take the time to blend and negotiate those perspectives into an agreed shared story for the child. When undertaken some time after the event, the amount of time it takes to complete can be significantly longer.

The steps in the process are:

- ⋮ explaining, and engaging parents and professionals/agencies involved in the process of the child coming into care
- ⋮ gathering information and drafting the story
- ⋮ refining the story and gaining agreement to the story
- ⋮ taking the child through the story.

The structure and content of the story book includes:

- ⋮ an age-appropriate record of events that resulted in the child being placed in care
- ⋮ positive events that have occurred in the family
- ⋮ the worries and concerns held for the children in the family
- ⋮ who held those worries and concerns
- ⋮ what assistance was given/is being given to the parents to combat those worries and concerns.

An account of developing a words and pictures story book

The Open Home Foundation was approached by Mary and Bob, permanent foster parents of Grace, aged seven. Grace had been with them since she was eight months old. They had heard about the words and pictures story book and were very keen to have Grace's story recorded. Bob and Mary felt this would be a way to answer lots of the questions Grace was asking about why she didn't live with her "Tummy Mummy".

When Grace was placed in care, her four older siblings were already in care. Her two younger siblings subsequently also came into care.

At the time Bob and Mary approached the Open Home Foundation, Grace had been in their care for over six years, she was achieving well at school, had lots of friends and was generally doing well. She had begun to ask more often about why she did not live with her Tummy Mummy. Bob and Mary had been reluctant to answer her questions as they did not know the full story and didn't want to give her wrong information. In not knowing her story, Grace began to create her own stories about her family and those events.

When children do not have a clear and consistent explanation of events, they often make up an imaginary account, and take on the responsibility for those events.

As Grace had been taken into care by Child, Youth and Family, they were approached to access the information they held on Grace and her care history. It is important that all the different perspectives are sought when developing the story, especially from the agency that holds the official record of what occurred. Fortunately the Child, Youth and Family social worker who was working with Grace's family when she was placed in care was available and able to work with us to develop Grace's story.

When children do not have a clear and consistent explanation of events, they often make up an imaginary account, and take on the responsibility for those events.

The social worker accessed Grace's file and obtained the information regarding the investigation, the worries and concerns held for Grace at that time, details from the family group conferences and other meetings, and her own recollections. One strand of Grace's story was now available.

Bob and Mary were able to source a recent address for Grace's birth mother, and contact was made with her. Her initial reaction was one of indignation and anger: she thought it was "a real cheek" to ask her to be involved in this process when Grace had been removed from her. She had concerns that becoming involved may take her back into the Family Court system, an experience she described as a "war zone". That it would "open up things" for her again, given that she had done a lot of work on herself and had tried to put this in the past.

Grace's birth mother had a strong mistrust and dislike for the Family Court system and Child, Youth and Family, so a large part of early engagement with her was to give her the space and time to talk through her long-held thoughts and feelings.

During this time of engagement, she was able to come to a place where she was willing to consider doing something for Grace. When the story was completed, she was asked what had happened that made her feel like it was worth taking the risk of being involved. She said it was when she realised that the Open Home Foundation social worker "actually wanted to help me and Grace and recognised me as a mum". The impact on her being referred to as Grace's mum was huge and she felt that it acknowledged that she did love Grace.

Grace's older two sisters were now living with their mother and initially did not want to be involved in the process and had strongly advised their mother not to get involved. However, they slowly became involved in the development of Grace's story and encouraged their mother to remain involved. Seeing their mother being treated with

respect and her story being listened to in a non-judgemental way had such a positive effect on her that they wanted to be part of developing the story for their sister.

After the story was completed and they were asked what they thought would be the likely impact of Grace having her story, they thought that knowing the reasons she was in care would help her, as they had both found not knowing why they were in care very difficult. They believed that the story would take away the secretiveness and allow Grace to ask questions, something they had felt was frowned upon when they were in care.

It was their experience that it was not okay to ask questions. As a result of this, they listened into adult conversations and often interpreted things they heard incorrectly. Her eldest sister felt Grace would probably experience "a lot less angst as a teenager, a lot less 'I hate the world'", and they

were pleased that Grace would know that she did have a family that loved her. One of the things they had longed to hear as children in care was "Your mum stills loves you, that's all we needed to hear, your mum still loves you", and Grace was going to hear this important message.

Grace's mother reported that knowing that Grace's foster parents had initiated the development of the story for Grace had made an impact on the way she thought about them. She felt that they had a lot to lose by Grace knowing her story and yet they had "put their own stuff, how they felt, whatever their feelings were aside" and that in doing this they were giving Grace the opportunity "not to carry unanswered questions and unnecessary baggage through to the rest of her life". Allowing Grace to have her story showed Grace's mum that they actually really cared for Grace and her wellbeing.

Grace's mum and sisters were shown an example of a words and pictures story book and the process and purpose for the development of story was explained. Grace's birth family's input had

One of the things they had longed to hear as children in care was "Your mum stills loves you, that's all we needed to hear, your mum still loves you".

been added so that Grace's story could now be developed.

The words for Grace's story were crafted together taking in both accounts of that time and submitted to both the Open Home Foundation social worker and the family for comment. Changes were made, things were added with each draft being negotiated until agreement was reached that it was an accurate and age-appropriate account of the situation and the family's circumstances that led to Grace being placed in care.

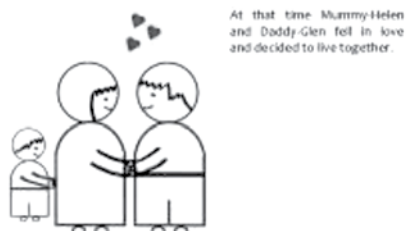
This was an exacting and at times a very painful experience for Grace's mother, but with great courage she continued to work on the development of the story for her daughter. Although the process opened up a lot of feelings for her, she reported that it had brought her much healing. She said that the process had done more for her than all the counselling she had undergone, and the best part was it had given her the opportunity to give something to Grace personally from her heart.

With the narrative agreed to it was time to put pictures with the words. For Grace's story I drew the pictures to go with the words and also included photographs so that when Grace was presented with her story the book would be complete, though she could colour the pictures and add to them if she wanted to.

There is no right or wrong way to do this – it entirely depends on the situation. It may be appropriate once the narrative is agreed to by the adults for the children to draw the pictures as they are told their story or for the person presenting the story to draw them at that time.

Examples from the story

The story should always begin and close with a positive event and have a logical flow.



The worries and who had those worries are clearly outlined.

Mummy-Jean was often unwell and very tired and was finding it very hard to manage and to look after Grace and Adain. Baby Grace had feeding problems and needed medicine to help her as she would 'sick up' all the time. Daddy-Glen found it difficult to know how to help.



Dr Smith was Grace's special children's doctor at the hospital and he was very worried about Grace so he talked with a Social Worker called Pam about these worries.

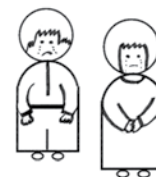


The people and things that were tried to help the parents combat the worries are recorded, along with who was involved in making the decision to place the child in care.

This meant the Judge had to decide what would happen. After listening to what everyone had to say, the Judge decided it would be best if Grace stayed with her Foster Parents Martha and John.



Very sadly Mummy-Jean and Daddy-Glen gathered together Grace's clothes and medicines and her favourite little purple dog so she would have her things with her at Martha's and John's.



The story book finishes with something positive about the child and their current circumstances.

Presenting the child with their story book

The decision about who is present when the child hears their story depends on the situation and what is in the child's best interests. In Grace's case, Bob and Mary and her Child, Youth and Family social worker were present. In other situations the child's parents and grandparents and other significant people may also be present.

It is important that the child receives their story in an environment where all the adults present are in agreement to the story. Given that the story is written in an age-appropriate way, it will not always contain all the details of what occurred but it needs to provide enough information to answer the child's wonderings and questions they currently have and give them a platform to ask more questions as they grow older.

The story is delivered to the child at their pace so they are able to control the situation. Using child-friendly tools such as 'traffic lights' – stop, slow down and go – and feeling cards (for example, bear cards from St Lukes Innovative Resources) assist in making the delivery of the story child-centred.

The traffic lights tool is very useful when working with children, especially when you are giving them serious information. For Grace's story I made up three little signs like the pedestrian signs used at a school crossing. Red for stop, orange for slow down, and green for go. Grace had control of these signs and was able to use them to manage the flow of her story. When she wanted to stop the process all she needed to do was hold up the red card and so on. The bear cards can be used as a simple non-verbal way of communicating what a person is feeling. A range of the cards were set out beside Grace and she was encouraged to stop the process of her story being told at any time, and if she wanted to communicate how she was feeling she could select the appropriate card.

Grace made use of both of these tools while she listened to her story.

Grace was excited to receive her story and was very engaged throughout the process. She was given the responsibility of turning the pages as the story was read to her and asked questions as we worked through the story.

Just how much Grace wanted to know about the detail of her early life and who was involved became apparent when we came to the page that talked about the Family Court involvement in her life.

Throughout the book the names of the adults had been given e.g. Grace's paediatrician, her social worker, those who had attended the family group conference, but when it came to the Family Court

judge, I had omitted their name. Grace stopped the reading at this time and enquired what the judge's name was. I told Grace their name, and she added this information into her book later. Children want to know why and who was involved. They want the detail of their lives.

The final paragraph in Grace's story is very significant. It is a statement that her mother wanted in the book. This statement displays the therapeutic impact for Grace's mum of being involved in the development of a words and pictures story book for her daughter:

"Mummy-Mary loves Grace very much and is really proud of her. She knows that her foster parents love and care for Grace and even though she misses her precious Grace she is glad to know that Grace has her foster parents as her second Mum and Dad."

After reading this Grace asked "Did she actually write that?", and gave a little giggle when I said yes.

Grace then became very still and thoughtful and after a time I asked her if she could tell me what she was thinking or feeling. She immediately turned to the bear cards, chose three cards very quickly, and threw them one after the other into a pile. The

cards included a baby bear sitting down crying, a baby bear sitting down and covering its eyes and shaking, and a big grumpy bear. Grace remained silent and after a short period of time she went to where her foster parents were sitting and cuddled into them. When her foster mum asked her how she was feeling Grace returned to the bear cards and chose the happy baby bear. In a short space of time, Grace experienced a range of powerful emotions. She also said that she felt “pretty good because it gives me some memories back”.

Five months after Grace received her story, her foster parents reported some subtle differences in her. Initially she became very clingy and needed to be close to them. The story provides the child with a written record of “why”, and gives parents, caregivers and professionals a resource to refer to when assisting the child make sense of these events. Grace wanted the book read to her most nights. Slowly the need to hear the story so often diminished and now she only picks it up every now and then. Grace took her words and pictures story to school.

Bob and Mary reported that they had got a lot more than they expected from the process. Grace not only had her story, but they had a resource to help them assist her to make sense of why she now lived with them, and they felt that what Grace’s mother wrote at the end gave permission to Grace to be with them and to love them.

The Child, Youth and Family social worker said that her best hope for Grace receiving her story was that she would have an understanding of who her mother is, and where she had come from, without the fairytale view that she was developing. Watching Grace receive her story “was one of the nicest things I’ve done for many years really, just watching her look at that and things unfolding and her asking relevant questions about the situation was really great”, she said.

When asked what she would say to other parents whose children were being raised by other people,

Watching Grace receive her story “was one of the nicest things I’ve done for many years really, just watching her look at that and things unfolding and her asking relevant questions about the situation was really great”

Grace’s mother said “I would say that as hurt as you are and as hard as it is, give it a chance, because it may be the best thing that ever happened to you”. She also asked if it would be possible for her other children to receive a story book about their early lives. The Family Court recently directed that a words and pictures story book be completed for two of Grace’s siblings.

Grace’s older sisters would also encourage families to be involved in the development of a ‘words and pictures’ story book for children who are not in their care. “It might be difficult at first, but give it a shot, an open mind. When you open your mind, you open your heart. And then just think of your brother or your sister or your daughter or your son and think about how they’re going to feel, how they’re going to grow up differently if they know that you’re there, that you love them and care about them.”

Future picture – hopes and dreams for children placed in care in New Zealand

Just as the Three Houses tool (Weld & Greening, 2004) has become part of our social work process in gaining children’s views and contributing to the families intervention plans, our hope is that the development of a words and pictures story book would occur for every child entering care. For those children already in the care system, we hope that the development of their words and pictures story becomes a high priority.

The Open Home Foundation believes that in all cases where permanent care orders are being sought, a words and pictures story should be developed and presented to children prior to those orders being made. Children deserve to know their stories and when we are making life-impacting decisions, such as placing them permanently in another family, they have a right to accurate information presented in an age-appropriate way. ■

Acknowledgements

Our development of using the 'words and pictures' story book approach has been influenced by:

- ⋮ the voices of young people who have been in care
- ⋮ Grace's foster parents, her birth mother and older siblings
- ⋮ Child, Youth and Family social worker
- ⋮ social work practitioners within the Open Home Foundation
- ⋮ authors such as Hiles et al. (2008), Turnell and Edwards (1999), Turnell and Essex (2006), and Weld and Greening (2004)
- ⋮ Andrew Turnell who supervised the work undertaken with Grace's words and pictures story book.

REFERENCES

- Hiles, M., Essex, S., Fox, A., & Luger, C. (2008). 'The 'words and pictures' storyboard: making sense for children and families', *Context (the Magazine of the Association of Family Therapy)* 25:24–25.
- Turnell, A., & Edwards, S. (1999). *Signs of Safety: A Solution and Safety Oriented Approach to Child Protection Casework*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Turnell, A., & Essex, S. (2006). *Working with "Denied" Child Abuse: The Resolutions Approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Weld, N., & Greening, M. (2004). 'The Three Houses', *Social Work Now*, 29(December): 34–37.

Jill Devlin is National Manager of Care Services for the Open Home Foundation a Child and Family Support Service offering services throughout NZ. She has a wealth of experience and understanding, both as a foster parent and social worker, of working with children in care. She has a strong belief that children knowing and understanding their story of why they are not in their parents care is a vital component to their wellbeing.