

How parents want to tell their stories

A resource for practitioners working with birth parents engaging with child protection, child and family services, and the Courts

The Voice of Parents project worked alongside birth parents with lived experience of child protection and child and family service contact. These parents spoke of the difficulties associated with telling their stories to services: feeling misunderstood through inadequate opportunities to share their stories or being at risk of re-traumatisation when they did. This was particularly difficult for parents who dealt with significant levels of staff turnover throughout their service contact, or who were in contact with multiple services. Parents wanted options for telling their story to their workers, so they could be understood as a person, without having to re-tell this to every worker they came into contact with. Together, we identified some solutions for improving this process for parents; this is outlined below in combination with research on trauma-informed practice.

The quotes included in this resource are from participants in our Parent Advisory Group.

Prioritising child safety is a critical part of this engagement and is ultimately most important. This resource recognises research that shows improved outcomes, including enhanced safety for children and young people, can be achieved when their parents are effectively engaged by services including child protection¹.

Why is this important?

“So much trauma and stress at having to tell my story again and again.”

Parents can be re-traumatised by re-telling their stories. For many people, re-telling the most difficult parts of their life story can place them at risk of re-traumatisation. This can be triggered by many things: the specific recollections as well as the presence of attitudes or expressions that can replicate dynamics from the original trauma². This is important for services engaging parents to understand, as re-traumatisation can result in:

- a loss of trust,
- higher rates of self-injury,
- increased reluctance to engage,
- increased symptoms of PTSD,
- re-experiencing symptoms and emotions from previous trauma,
- increased chronicity of stress with greater risk for psychiatric morbidity³.

¹Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare; University of Melbourne. (2020). A literature review of parent engagement and participation approaches in child protection: The Voice of Parents: A model for inclusion project in partnership with the University of Melbourne. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Centre-Voice-of-Parents-Literature-Review.pdf>.

²Zgoda, K., Shelly, P. & Hitzel, S. (2016). *Preventing retraumatization: A macro social work approach to trauma-informed practices and policies*. Retrieved from: <https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/preventing-retraumatization-a-macro-social-work-approach-to-trauma-informed-practices-policies/>

³Smyth, N.J. (2015). *Trauma-Informed Social Work: What is it, and Why Should We Care?* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/njsmyth/toronto-tic-june-2015-handout>

As well as being at risk of re-traumatisation, parents can simply become frustrated and feel unheard by repeating their stories to various service providers. This can erode the relationship that needs to be cultivated between parents and practitioners for engagement, and can may contribute to feelings of distrust from a parent⁴.

“Repeating your story requires you to put more energy into rapport building so they can understand you and your needs.”

Don't forget that parents are often required to re-tell their stories due to system failures outside of their control, such as those that lead to staffing and resource problems, and poor coordination between services. Parents told us that the way services deal with these problems, and the impact it has on families through requirements such as re-telling your story, does not always work. Services need to consider how to balance the need for parents and children to be understood and to have control over their narratives, with their need to be protected from repeated story telling.

“Part of the difficulty is how often the workers actually change. There's no consistency and every time you get a new worker you're back to square one. Instead of progressing with new and more information you're going round in circles, it's exhausting”

What did parents tell us?

Parents want to feel like they have control over their own narrative

Like everyone, parents want to feel like they have control over their own narrative. In our work with parents, we heard that they did not feel they in control of their narratives; in fact, they did not feel that they had any real chance of having their stories properly understood by service providers. Additionally, there was a sense that other people's version of their story was privileged over their own personal lived experience. This could contribute to a major setback in parental engagement with services, due to feeling unheard, misunderstood, and judged.

The information a service has about a parent may not necessarily be accurate or the full picture, and everyone's side of the story deserves to be heard.

A parent's story and their experience of family life is likely to be different to how practitioners see it from the outside. It is important to understand how these perspectives can differ, and to acknowledge that a practitioner's perspective is often built on risks, and coming from a risk-averse culture of practice. This has the potential to bias practitioner attitudes towards parents, and could influence ongoing case management decisions about a family if the strengths and parent experiences aren't understood.

Time needs to be dedicated to sharing these perspectives, and deeply listening to the experience and accounts of the parents and their child/ren. These conversations should be sensitive and aim to come to a shared understanding of what is happening.

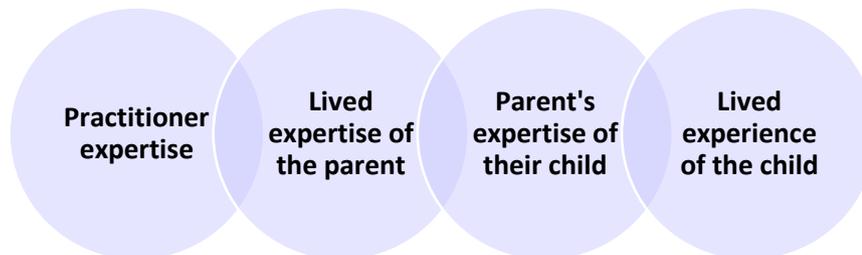
⁴ Hall, T., Price-Robertson, R., & Awram, R. (2020). *Engaging with parents when there are child protection concerns: Key considerations*. Retrieved from: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/engaging-with-parents-when-there-are-child-protection-concerns-key-considerations/>

Parents want to feel comfortable to share their story

For practitioners in non-statutory services: Consider how you can help parents to feel comfortable sharing their story with you, and reaching out for help, when they know you a mandatory reporter and they very likely fear losing their child. This may be one of greatest, yet under-acknowledged, barriers to parental engagement and accessing early intervention support.

For parents to be in a position where they feel comfortable to share their stories, some relationship building is required. Parents need to feel that they are being shown respect and are not being judged, and that they trust the worker and are being listened to genuinely. They need to understand why the service is involved and they want to feel prepared to share their story.

Practitioners should make space to receive information from both the parents and child/ren, and take the time to understand their perspective and experience. While practitioners have an incredible wealth of knowledge and professional expertise, they do not have all the pieces of the puzzle without hearing from the parents and the child about their experiences:



Parents want options for sharing their story

Parents we worked with told us they had limited options for sharing their stories, in a way that worked for them, and in the context of a respectful and trusted partnership with their worker. Being flexible and taking the time to understand the parent and child's experiences is a crucial step in relationship building and increases the potential for positive engagement.

Flexibility to accommodate parental preferences in telling their story was highly recommended by parents with lived experience. They considered this a potential solution to reducing pressure on parents to re-tell stories and decreasing the risk of re-traumatising families. They suggested that other parents could provide:

- a timeline of key events in the child and family's life,
- a written account of their story, prepared in their own time,
- a video recording of their story; something that could be recorded on a USB and easily shared between multiple services (with consent).

In addition to this, options for when and where parents and children share their stories are worth considering. Explore these options with parents and consider what might work for both sides of the partnership.

Consider including a process in your engagement that reviews parent stories every 6-12 months at a minimum, or regularly checks for updates according to parent preference or pace.

Parents want to be involved in worker handovers

Be conscious of how staff turnover impacts parents' need to have their story understood, and the associated risks of having to re-tell their story.

Staff turnover has a clear impact on the need for parents to re-tell their stories. As well as having to repeat themselves, the parents we worked with felt that aspects of their stories had been lost or misinterpreted in the handover of cases between staff. This was a cause of concern for parents, who once again felt they did not have the opportunity to be fairly represented and to contribute the record of their own narrative. They cited examples of case notes being outdated, incorrect, or not showing the full picture of their families.

We also heard that families felt their strengths and progress made over time were not always recorded in case notes or taken into account. Parents felt this contributed to a negative assessment of their parenting, which could influence new relationships when their case was picked up by a different worker. The accuracy of case notes was very important to parents we worked with due to the frequent changing of workers they experienced.

Consider how you can include parents or families in the handover of a case between professionals. For example, you could arrange a meeting of both the outgoing and incoming case workers and the family, so that the handover of a family's story is accurately represented, and a respectful partnership can begin from a place of shared understanding.

Parents want to be asked if they consent to workers sharing their story on their behalf

Part of supporting parents and children to tell their story in a way that reduces pressure and risk is to promote practices of interagency collaboration and knowledge sharing. Interagency collaboration can be effective and appropriate for addressing the needs of families who have multiple and complex needs⁵; those who are more likely to be in contact with child protection. When families are in contact with multiple services and at increased need to re-tell their stories, obtaining consent to share their story on their behalf may be helpful in reducing the burden on parents and children. It can also allow for the formation of "local knowledge" between services, which can help to target resources that will be most helpful for the family⁶. Where a parent's personal information must be shared across services due to information sharing provisions or reporting obligations, ensure parents know this upfront so they can make informed decisions about what they share and what the expected consequences may be.

Ensure you are aware of the privacy regulations around information sharing in your organisation, and that you follow any professional code that might apply (e.g., the [AASW Code of Ethics](#)). If privacy policies at your workplace are a continual barrier to sharing client stories when consent is supplied, consider whether it would be helpful to discuss the fit-for-purpose nature of these policies with your manager.

⁵ McDonald, M., Rosier, K. (2011). *Interagency collaboration: Part A. What is it, what does it look like, when is it needed and what supports it?* ARFC Briefing No. 21. Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁶ McDonald, M., Rosier, K. (2011). *Interagency collaboration: Part A. What is it, what does it look like, when is it needed and what supports it?* ARFC Briefing No. 21. Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies.