

How to Guide: Words and Pictures



What are Words and Pictures, and when would you use them?

Words and Pictures help us to explain to children and young people what is happening and why. They are developed together with the family, and presented to the child by the family with the network and worker present.

There are two main times you would use words and pictures:

- To explain what has happened, why professionals are involved, and what will happen next (**words and pictures explanations**)
- To explain what the child's plan is once we know it works (**words and pictures plans**)

Words and pictures explanations mean that:

- Children and young people have a **clear explanation** about the things that have caused worry and upset in their family that they can refer back to at any time when they need to
- Children and young people **know that other people know** about and understand the problem, and that it's **ok to talk about it**
- **Parents/ carers and network people are given a way to talk about difficult issues** with the child or young person and each other that is non-blaming and is more safe and comfortable
- **Network people are fully informed** so they can spot the warning signs and act to help the family
- The secrecy, shame and blame from the situation is removed

Words and pictures plans mean that:

- **Everyone knows what needs to happen** to keep the child/ young person safe and well.
- The child/ young person knows what should be happening and is **empowered to tell others if it is not**.
- The **family and the network are making a commitment to the child/** young person by saying this is what they will do.

How to create Words and Pictures

Discuss: Explain to everyone involved why completing words and pictures is important. Agree who will be participating in creating this and agreeing to the final storyboard.

Question: To complete a words and pictures explanation, you'll need the specifics about the worry – what happened, where, who was there, where was the child/ young person, what did people say – what words do the family use to talk about it? Think about what the child/ young person has already been told about the worry. If there have heard different things from different people it's important to show this. You'll also need information on the good things in the family, as these need to be included as well. It's good practice to get these questions ready before speaking to the family.

Draft: Start with a simple draft narrative based on what you have found out from all those involved, then share this with parents; once the story line is agreed, you add the illustrations.

Agree: The participating adults need to formally agree the full content before the Words and Pictures are shown to the children.

Present: The parent(s)/ carers share the completed version with the child/ young person and their network with the support of professionals. Carefully check the child's understanding having discussions during the reading. Children can then be encouraged to add their own recollections and details to the Words and Pictures.

Tip: the key messages for the child will be:

- *What have people been worried about?*
- *Events: things that went right as well as those that went wrong*
- *Who's helping things to get better?*
- *It's ok to tell people about your worries*
- *People are working hard to keep you safe in future*

Structure

1. Words *always come first*

- ✓ Establish the child's knowledge and their understanding of 'what happened'.
- ✓ Use precise language that the family recognises without using slang – narrative text of short sentences, plain language in the child's first language.
- ✓ Parents and other carers need an idea of what the minimum information for the Words and Pictures is needed to satisfy the lead agencies.
- ✓ Ask key family members and other significant adults for their view of the concerns without seeking to apportion blame or obtain admissions of culpability – use factual data, not opinion, **no judgements**.
- ✓ Maintain curiosity, being wary of 'knowing too quickly' what might have happened; this allows time to process information and opens up the possibility of the 'not yet said'.
- ✓ The narrative can be long but, keep it simple as children only need the highlights that represent the whole story; further discussions around the storyboard are to be expected.

2. Pictures *bring the text to life*

- ✓ Use simple black and white line drawings (e.g. stick people) to make the story accessible to all ages; the child can colour the illustrations later if they wish.
- ✓ Use speech bubbles, lines and arrows to indicate action and reaction; include emotions, body language and expression; depict relationships and environmental context where possible.
- ✓ Avoid drawing traumatic incidents, e.g. show a parent shouting and wielding a knife, but not physically attacking and someone getting hurt

Tip: *Include the professionals involved, what they said and how they responded.*

Sequence

- ✓ Always give a positive message at the beginning and again at the end
- ✓ Use a logical narrative that shows what everyone is worried about, including their responses and then explain what people are going to do to help make things better.
- ✓ If there are more than one, intersperse difficult episodes with positive events in the child's life to add balance
- ✓ Keep the story line relevant to the child's experience – what have *they* seen or heard?
- ✓ Parents should be encouraged to 'agree to disagree' where their views differ – **include both versions of events** as the child is likely to experience this in reality.