

Poetry

“Poetry is very like string. Its comparative thinness and quickness enables it to reach the parts that prose cannot, leaping straight to the heart of the matter, whether anguish or joy. Poetry is an exploration of our deepest and most intimate experiences, thoughts, feelings, ideas and insights”

(Bolton, 1999, p. 98-99)

Poetry or free verse can be much simpler to create than it might initially seem, particularly if the expectation that it rhymes or follows a particular pattern is removed.

Try encouraging children to pick words and phrases which express what they think and feel and which are important to them. Some children want the worker to be involved here, perhaps getting them to write down what they say. Others may want some quiet time during your meeting to write, or even to write on their own between meetings, but to bring you their initial outpourings.

With all forms of creative writing this first stage of creation can be particularly powerful and important. It is an opportunity for children’s inner thoughts and feelings to be given space, and for their identity to emerge.

There will then be the stage of selecting what is important and putting things into sequence so that it becomes a poem or a story etc. Again, the level of involvement you have will depend on the child. They may need a lot of support or just want you to hear a poem once written.

Crafting and redrafting is the next stage. This can be very therapeutic as the poem is the container for the thoughts and feelings expressed within it. It enables some safe distance for exploration and consideration of experience and for new understandings and narratives to be formed.

Top tips

- You may not need to do anything more than give children some help and guidance. The quality of your relationship and the uninterrupted time you have for this will be key.
- Remember that the purpose is not to produce a ‘good’ poem or story but to enable children to explore and process their experience.
- As with all artistic and creative work by children, their writing should be honoured and treated with care and respect.

Case Example

Jostein was supporting Warren following the sudden death of his father from an accidental drugs overdose. Warren felt overwhelmed with shock at what had occurred. His feelings seemed 'all frozen inside'. He told Jostein he had always feared something bad happening, knowing the extent to which his father used heroin.

Warren wanted the people coming to the funeral to know his dad had been a good dad to him, that his drug taking had been just one part of him. He decided he wanted to make a tribute to his father at the funeral.

Jostein supported him in writing a poem. Warren was dubious about this at first, as he had only ever written a poem at school for homework. He feared people would be embarrassed at it if it were 'rubbish'. Jostein persuaded Warren that poems came in all sorts of shapes and sizes and showed him several examples of contemporary poems that were very powerful but did not rhyme or follow a particular metre.

Jostein encouraged Warren to write down lots of good memories of his father between their meetings. She looked at them with him when they met again and helped him to decide on the most important bits to put in. Eventually the poem came together as a few verses, each saying about something Warren's father had said or done for him which felt special.

At the funeral Warren felt nervous about reading his poem out but felt supported in doing so by the knowledge he was helping people learn more about his dad and was honouring him. Afterwards he cried for the first time. He told Jostein that reading out the poem had helped 'defrost' his feelings.

Further Reading

Bolton, G. (1999) *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.