

Stories

Using a story as an illustration can be a way of giving information and explanations to children who are too young or distressed to make sense of what they have been told. Exploring characters and situations from stories can also help children work through difficult feelings and not feel so alone with their experiences.

This approach can allow complex feelings and motivations to be explored at the safe distance of a fictional character. Children might feel much safer with this than referring directly to their own situation. Their subconscious or unconscious emotions and thoughts can also be accessed.

Story lines and characters from films, soaps or computer games are a good source, as well as books, particularly with teenagers. Either choose something which you think might be helpful or draw on what the child is already reading or watching

Using **story books written about specific issues** or behaviours allows children's internal worlds to do their own symbolic work. Such stories can also facilitate conversations as some children begin to make connections with their own experiences.

Fairy stories are another good source of characters and situations which are metaphors for many universal aspects of human experience. Children find it easy to empathise or identify with, or express negative feelings towards, polarised archetypal characters (e.g. hero/villain, fairy godmother/witch).

Read the child a story or get them to read it. Start a conversation around the story:

- What did they think of the story
- How did it make them feel
- Who did they like/dislike most?
- How would they have responded to some of the situations?

You might find it helpful to write a simple **personalised story** to help explain or explore a situation when you have not been able to find a pre-written story which matches their experiences. It can also help children feel very special when they have a story written just for them.

- Write it in a format which can be kept safely and feels engaging and special.
- You can illustrate it with drawings or photos to make it feel more special and personalised
- Read the story through with the child and explore the themes in the ways we have discussed in the other sections.

Diversity

Remember that children from different backgrounds to you may not know exactly the same stories as you although the basic plots are familiar in many cultures. It will be important for you to learn about similar stories from their primary culture.

Case Example

Hendry (1988) turned the reason for why two very young children had to move placements into a story. It was presented to them as a book which could be read to the children. It was illustrated with drawings and pictures which made it more appealing visually. The story was told to them in the third person, i.e. 'he said', 'she felt' rather than 'you' or 'I'. This meant the children could engage gradually with the story and make their own connections when they were ready. This made it less threatening to them.

When the children later came to move placements the story book was supplemented with play materials, such as small figures and dolls house furniture, to illustrate what would be happening when they moved. The children could move the figures and objects around. This enabled them to be actively involved in the story and for changes to be incorporated as they happened.

Hendry, E. (1988). A case study of play-based work with very young children. *Journal of Social Work Practice* 3: 1-9.