

Strengthening families | Protecting children
Framework for Practice

The Immediate Story

*A process to help children understand
child protection interventions*

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The 'Immediate Story'

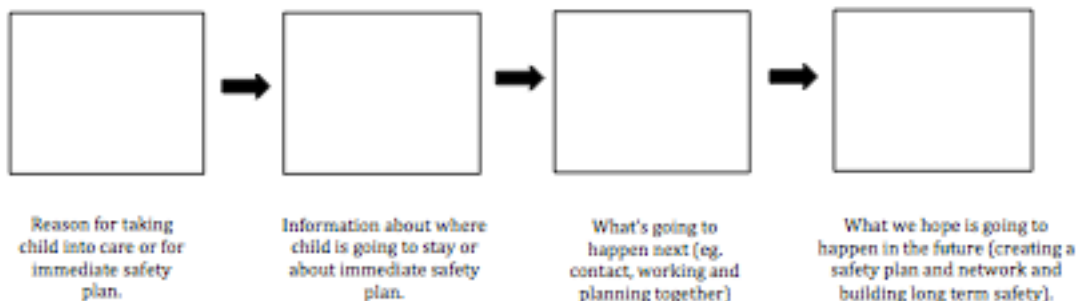
The 'Immediate Story' is a clear, simply worded story that is developed by the child protection agency and provided to the child at the point when the child is removed from the parents' care (or as soon as possible afterwards), or when the agency starts working with the family to create an immediate safety plan. The 'Immediate Story' provides a simple explanation to the child about the reason for the child protection intervention, about what is happening now or has just happened (for example, the child being removed from their parents' care and going to stay with other family members or foster carers, or Dad is going to stay somewhere else and maternal grandmother is going to move in), and what is going to happen next in the collaborative planning process.

The 'Immediate Story' method has been developed by Sonja Parker as part of her work with Arianne Struik¹, in developing trauma-informed safety planning. Even with the best of intentions, our child protection processes (particularly when they involve the removal of a child or the threat of removal of a child) can be shocking and potentially traumatising for children (and parents), so a clear and simple explanation is essential to help mitigate any unintended harm or trauma from our interventions. A shocking event doesn't have to be traumatising if you are able to understand what is going on and you are able to receive comfort from someone who understands (Struik, 2014). The 'Immediate Story' provides a clear and immediate explanation to children and parents that helps to minimise the traumatic impact of statutory intervention. The story also provides an immediate explanation to parents, foster carers and family members so that they are able to reinforce this explanation and provide informed comfort and support to the child.

Structure of the 'Immediate Story'

The 'Immediate Story' has four components:

1. Who made the decision that the child can't live with their parents at the moment or that an immediate safety plan is needed, and a simple explanation about why this decision was made.
2. Where the child is going to be living in the short/medium term, or a summary of the immediate safety plan.
3. What's going to happen next (in the short term) eg. establishing contact, planning together.
4. What we hope is going to happen long term (creating a safety plan and strengthening the family's support and safety network and building long term safety within a case plan so that the child can return home or the family can live together again).



1 Arianne Struik: <http://www.ariannestruik.com>

The first part of the 'Immediate Story' contains a clear explanation from the child protection agency about the reason for the child protection intervention. Children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect will often think that they are to blame for what is happening and that they are not able to stay with their parents (or that a parent has to go and live somewhere else) because they are a 'bad child' (Struik, 2014). This simple explanation, provided early in the process, helps to counter any belief the child may develop that somehow it is all their fault. While this message to the child would be more powerful if it was coming from the parents, at this early stage in the child protection intervention it is usually not possible to develop a more detailed explanation in collaboration with the parents. This part of the story can be built on later as parents are invited to contribute to the Immediate Story and this can also be built upon within the collaboratively developed 'Words and Pictures' process (see Turnell and Essex, 2006).

The second part of the 'Immediate Story' provides a brief explanation about where the child is going to stay (if they are being removed from the parents' care) or about the most important details of the immediate safety plan (eg. if a parent is going to stay somewhere else and maternal grandmother is moving in). Particularly when a child is being removed from their family's care, the situation will often be extremely distressing, frightening and confusing for a child, so simple information about where they are going to stay and who they will be staying with, can help to minimise any further trauma. Alongside the 'Immediate Story', a foster carer profile² may be provided to the child, with simple information about the carers, their family and their home.

Including information about the foster carers within the 'Immediate Story' and then showing this story to the parents, also begins to build a relationship between the parents and the carers. One of the obstacles to successful reunification is a lack of communication and collaboration between parents and foster carers. While building this relationship is a complex and at times challenging process, the simple act of providing parents with some information about the people who are caring for their child can start the process of building a collaborative working relationship. This also opens up the possibility of the parents being willing to create their own profile³, which can be provided to the foster carers or other professionals involved in working with the family, to assist in building a working relationship and to minimise any negative judgement of the parents.

The third part of the 'Immediate Story' reassures the child that they will be having contact with their parents and provides an explanation about when the planning for contact will happen. When a child is removed from the care of their parents, or when a parent moves out of the home as part of an immediate safety plan, establishing safe and meaningful contact between the children and their family is one of the most critical and immediate issues that the child protection agency must deal with. It is also usually one of the first issues that a child and parents want to focus on. Reconnecting and establishing safe visits for a child with their parents (and other significant family members) so that the child can receive comfort from their attachment figures, needs to happen as quickly as possible to minimise any additional trauma for the child. The child's primary attachments with his or her parents (or significant caregivers) also need to be upheld for the child to be able to develop healthy attachments with other caregivers and in future relationships (Struik, 2014).

The fourth part of the 'Immediate Story' provides parents, children, network members and other professionals (including carers) with an overview of the collaborative planning process and initial information about the most important non-negotiables of the collaborative planning process (such as the need for a safety and support network, that safety needs to be demonstrated, and that everyone will need to work together to develop a comprehensive safety/case plan that leaves everyone confident that the child will be safe in the parents' care in the future).

2 Jill Devlin, from Open Home Foundation in New Zealand, developed the idea of creating profiles for foster carers (Te Whanau Nei). For some wonderful examples of foster carer profiles, please see Sonja's website.

3 Sonja has developed a parent profile template. An example and template is available from her website: www.spconsultancy.com.au/resources.html

While more detailed information about the collaborative planning process will need to be provided over time (when people are not as distressed and are able to process more detailed information), it is important to provide at least an overview of the collaborative planning process at this point so that children and parents are able to begin to participate in the collaborative planning process and are able to hold on to some hope that it will be possible for the child to return to the parents' care or for the family to live together again. The 'Immediate Story' connects the past, present and future in a way that helps people to retain a sense of hope about the future and not become stuck in the pain of the present or the past.

So, in summary, the purpose of the 'Immediate Story' is to:

- Minimise any unintended trauma to children caused by child protection interventions, by providing a clear explanation about what is happening and why. This explanation also helps parents and foster carers provide informed comfort to the child.
- Create a focus on future safety from day one, by providing a simple and clear overview of the collaborative planning process that helps parents and children retain a sense of hope about future reunification and assists them in understanding and then participating in safety and case planning, including the development of a safety and support network.
- Bring an immediate focus to the importance of establishing contact visits and collaborative planning for regular, frequent and safe contact.
- Start to build a relationship between parents and foster carers (in situations of out of home care) that can help to minimise trauma for the child, contribute to the child's healing and increase the likelihood of successful reunification.
- Create a bridge to the development of a more detailed and collaboratively developed 'Words and Pictures' story, which is both a necessary foundation for collaborative planning and contributes to healing for the child (and often for the parents).

'Immediate Story' templates

The casework that is required when a child is removed from their parents' care or an immediate safety plan is being developed can be incredibly taxing for caseworkers (in both time and emotion). Sonja has developed a number of 'Immediate Story' templates so that an 'Immediate Story' can be developed for a family with a minimum amount of work. These templates can be tailored to suit each family by changing a few details or adding personal information.

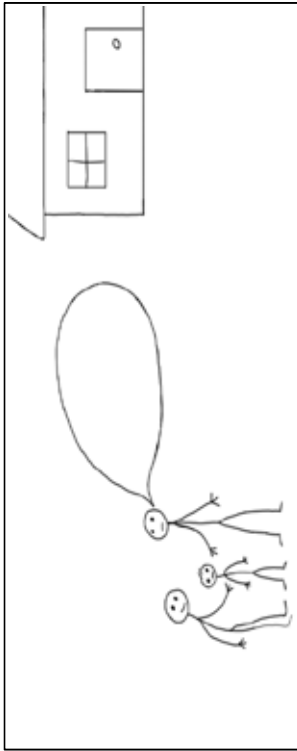
Templates have been developed for a number of scenarios:

- When a child is being removed from their parents' care and going to stay with foster carers.
- When a child is being removed from their parents' care and going to stay with kinship carers.
- When an immediate safety plan has been developed that leads to significant changes in the family (eg. one parent moving out, another family member moving in, etc).

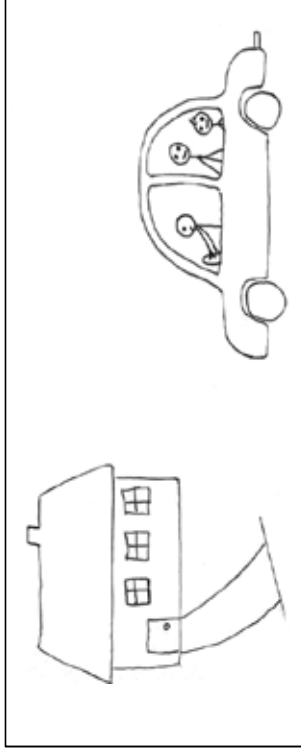
These templates can be downloaded from Sonja's website, at: www.spconsultancy.com.au/resources.html

Case Example (for a 5 year old child who is being taken into care)

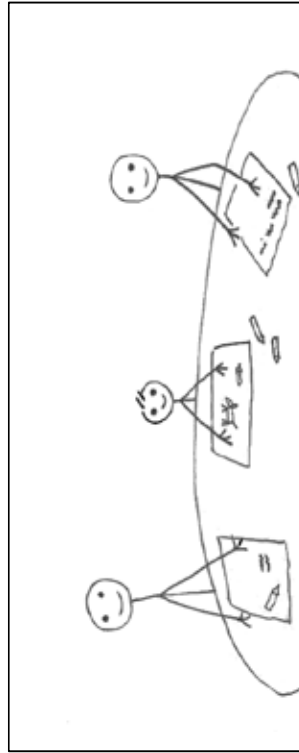
Immediate Story for Caitlin



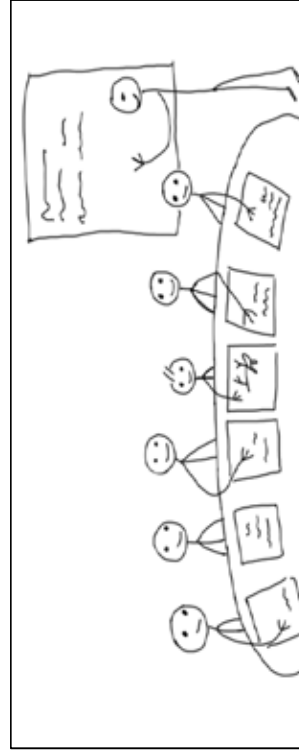
My name is Sonja and I work for Child Safety. Our job is to help parents and families look after their children and keep them safe. Mum has got some big problems at the moment and my boss and I are worried that you might get hurt again if you are living with Mum. So we have decided that you will need to stay with someone else until Mum gets some help to fix up those problems.



We have special people who look after children when they can't stay with their Mum or Dad or someone else in their family, and they are called foster carers. I am taking you to stay with two of our foster carers, who are called David and Tracy. We know that this might be scary for you, so can I show you some pictures of Tracy and David and of their home where you will be staying?



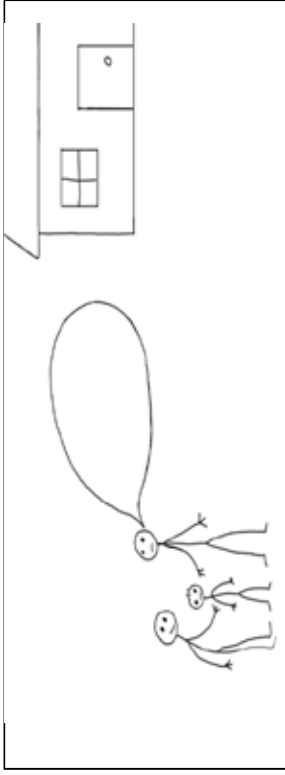
I will come back and see you tomorrow and then we can talk about what is going to happen next. We will make some plans about when you are going to see your Mum and how we can make sure that everything goes well during your visits with Mum.



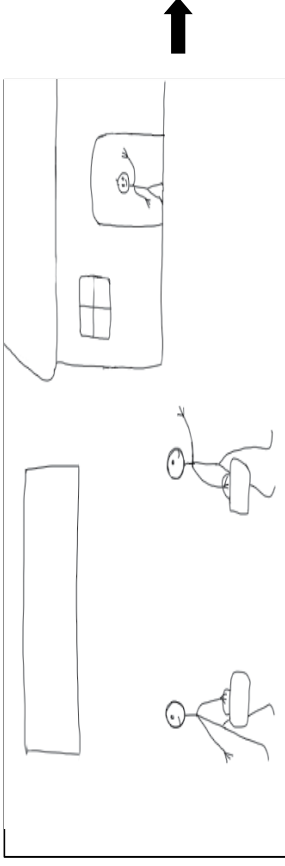
My job is to try to help Mum fix up the problems so that you can go back home to live with her. I will ask Mum to invite other people (like your Nana and Pop and friends) to come and work with us and help us to make a special plan so that the problems can be fixed up and you are able to go back home.

Case Example (for a 6 yr old child, with an immediate safety plan):

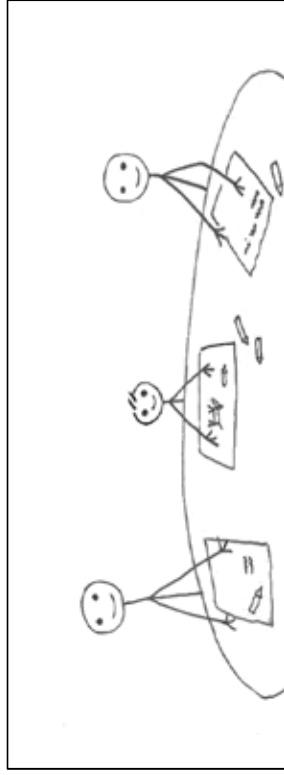
Immediate Story for Kimmy



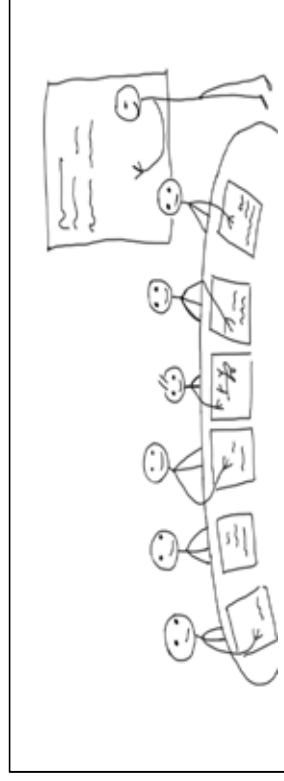
My name is Sonja and I work for Child Safety. Our job is to help parents and families look after their children and keep them safe. Mum and Dad are dealing with some big problems at the moment, which sometimes makes it hard for them to look after you and keep you safe. My boss and I are worried that you might get hurt because of those problems and so we have asked Mum and Dad to make a special plan, called a safety plan, to make sure that you don't get hurt.



The first part of the safety plan says that Dad is going to go and stay with Auntie Kerry and Grandma is going to come and stay at your house. Dad is going to stay at Auntie Kerry's until the big problems get fixed up. Dad can come home to visit, but only when Grandma is there. Mum and Dad are making this plan because they want you to be able to stay at home and be safe.



I will come back and see you tomorrow and we will look at the safety plan together and I will ask you about your ideas. We will also make a plan so that you and Dad can see each other, while he is living at Auntie Kerry's house.



I will keep visiting you and your family to help Mum and Dad keep you safe and to talk with everyone about how to fix up the problems. I am going to ask Mum and Dad to invite other people (like Grandma and Auntie Kerry and other family and friends) to help us to make a really strong plan, so that the problems can be fixed up and Dad can come back home to live.

Process for using the ‘Immediate Story’

1. Preparing the ‘Immediate Story’

The ‘Immediate Story’ templates have been developed to help you prepare the ‘Immediate Story’ as quickly as possible and with a minimum amount of work. You can use the basic information that is contained in the template and modify or add specific details that are relevant for each family. You can use the pictures that are contained in the template or you can draw your own pictures so that they are more relevant to the particular family. Remember that the ‘Immediate Story’ doesn’t need to contain too much information – just enough to help the child and parents understand what is happening and help the caregivers provide informed support to the child. The ‘Immediate Story’ provides the foundation for the collaboratively developed and detailed ‘Words and Pictures’ story, so the family will have a lot of opportunity to contribute to the story over time. It is helpful to put the story inside a folder with plastic inserts, so that the story can be added to as the collaborative planning process continues.

1.1 When a child is being taken into care

Prepare the ‘Immediate Story’ before the child is taken into care (whenever possible) so that the story can be read to the child (if they are old enough) as soon as possible after they have been removed from their parents’ care. A copy of the story can then be left with the child and the foster carers/kinship carers, so that the explanation can be reinforced with the child over time.

1.2 When an immediate safety plan is necessary

In some situations, you will know ahead of time that you are going to be working with the family to develop an immediate safety plan and at other times, it will only be during your assessment work with a family that it will become clear that an immediate safety plan is necessary. If there is time for you to prepare the ‘Immediate Story’, then you will be able to add some information beforehand that is specific to the family and other information (such as the details of the immediate safety plan) will need to be added afterwards. You can use an ipad/tablet to add this information during your visit (in collaboration with the parents), or you can print out the ‘Immediate Story’ with a blank section that can be filled in by hand during your visit and then presented to the child.

In situations where you are not aware ahead of time that you will be working with the family to create an immediate safety plan, then the ‘Immediate Story’ will need to be prepared on your return to the office. If possible, discuss the ‘Immediate Story’ and the importance of the child being presented with this story with the parents (and any safety and support network people who are involved at this point) when you are meeting together to create the immediate safety plan. You can then arrange to bring the ‘Immediate Story’ to the parents and go through it with them, before presenting it to the child.

2. When to present the ‘Immediate Story’

The ‘Immediate Story’ is just that – a story that is introduced to the child (and the parents) as quickly as possible to minimise any possible traumatic impact from our child protection interventions. So the ‘Immediate Story’ process involves presenting this story to the child and parents as close to the time of removal or immediate safety planning as possible.

2.1 When a child is being taken into care

If the removal of the child is being done with the knowledge of the parents or caregivers, then it may be possible to introduce the 'Immediate Story' to the parents beforehand and to present the story to the child before they are taken into care. In situations where the removal of the child is not able to be discussed with the parents and the child beforehand, then it is important to go through the 'Immediate Story' with the child as soon as possible – for example, in the car on the way to the carer's home, in the office before transporting the child to the carer's home. Given that the child may be highly distressed, no situation will be ideal, but try to arrange some time and quiet space to talk with the child and go through the 'Immediate Story' to help them to understand what is happening.

2.2 When an immediate safety plan is necessary

In situations where you are creating an immediate safety plan with a family, the plan may involve significant changes such as the child going to live somewhere else for a period, members of the family moving out of the house or another family member moving in as a safety person. It is important that the 'Immediate Story' is provided to the child as soon as possible after the immediate safety plan is put into place, so that they are able to understand the reason for these significant changes and what will be happening in the future. As discussed in the previous section, you may not be able to present the 'Immediate Story' to the child on the day that the immediate safety plan is put into place, but it is important that this happens as quickly as possible afterwards. The more significant the changes involved in the immediate safety plan, the more important it is that the child is provided with an immediate explanation.

3. Introducing the 'Immediate Story' to the child

Place the story in front of the child and explain to the child that this story is something that you have written (and drawn) to help them understand what is happening. As you are going through the story, read each section carefully to the child and help them to look at the pictures and talk about what is happening in each of the pictures. Older children and teenagers may prefer to read the story themselves and if that is the case, make sure you still go through it with them afterwards.

Some children will want to ask questions in response to the story (see below) and some children will want to add to the pictures and/or to the story. For other children, just hearing the story will be as much participation as they are able to manage at this point.

It is useful to pause as you are going through the 'Immediate Story' to offer the child or young person the opportunity to ask questions. Some children will find it difficult to ask questions and you can help to normalise the process by saying something like:

I've explained a lot of things to you. When I've explained all of this to other kids, some kids have some questions. Do you have any questions? It's okay to ask me questions about anything at all.

And when you've finished going through the story, it's helpful to again offer the child or young person the opportunity to ask questions:

Do you have any other questions? And you can ask me some more questions when I come back to see you tomorrow if you think of anything else.

As you are going through the story, some children or young people will want to add to the story and/or to the pictures. Allow the child or young person to add whatever they want, as this process will help them both to express how they are feeling and also begin to participate in the process of talking with you about their thoughts and feelings. If the child or young person does make changes, take a photo of changes so that you have a copy and leave the original document with them.

If the parents want to be with you as you present the story to the child, then you will need to ensure that the parents understand the importance of the story and that they will support the explanation being provided to the child. The parents don't need to agree with the story, but they need to be willing to allow you to provide this explanation to the child.

4. Presenting the 'Immediate Story' to the parents

Although the 'Immediate Story' has been written at a level that the child can understand, it is also a powerful document to work through with the parents. Given the high level of distress and emotion that is likely to be associated with the removal of the child or immediate safety planning, as well as the other issues that parents may be dealing with, such as substance use, mental health issues, intellectual disability and trauma from earlier experiences, parents may not be able to take in or remember much of what has been talked about. The simplicity of the 'Immediate Story' can significantly help parents to make sense of what is going on and what is going to happen in the future. Leaving a copy with the parents will enable them to revisit the 'Immediate Story' over time and help them make sense of what has happened and then be more able to participate in what needs to happen next to build safety for the child.

4.1 When a child is being taken into care

After the 'Immediate Story' has been presented to the child or young person, you will then need to present the story to the parents as soon as possible and explain that this is the story that you have provided to their child. It is important to explain to parents that we have provided this story to their child as a way of helping the child to understand what is happening. If parents are in a position to be able to hear more detailed information, you can also explain to the parents that this 'Immediate Story' will help to minimise the trauma for their child.

Many parents will be very distressed and/or angry so soon after their child has been removed, so it may not be a conversation that is easy to have, but taking time to try to have this conversation and to go through the 'Immediate Story' with the parents, can help parents understand more about what is happening – even if they don't agree with it - and then feel more able to participate in the collaborative planning process.

Explain to the parents that the collaborative planning process will involve working together to create a more detailed 'Words and Pictures' story for the child and that at this early stage, the 'Immediate Story' is just a brief and simple explanation for the child. Ask parents if there are any important comments or information that they would like to add to the 'Immediate Story'. Explain to the parents that they don't have to agree with the child protection agency's views and that comments from the parents that say that they don't agree can be included. Some parents will want to add their comments and voice to the story, whereas others will not want to do so at this point.

As discussed in point 2 above, if the removal of the child is being done with the full knowledge of the parents, then it may be possible to introduce the 'Immediate Story' to the parents before going through it with the child. If this is the case, parents may be able to suggest changes to the language that will be more appropriate for their child and may want to add to the story.

4.2 When an immediate safety plan is necessary

In situations where an immediate safety plan is being put into place, it will often be possible (and preferable) to talk through the 'Immediate Story' with the parents before it is presented to the child. As discussed above, parents can add their comments to the 'Immediate Story', but for some parents, just going through the 'Immediate Story' with you will be as much as they can manage at this stage. Either way, let parents know that part of the collaborative planning process will involve working together to create a more detailed 'Words and Pictures' story for the child.

5. Presenting the 'Immediate Story' to foster carers and kinship carers

Presenting the 'Immediate Story' to the foster carers or kinship carers will assist the carers to provide informed support to the child. One of the common challenges in child protection work is that there is often not a commonly understood story in the beginning about why the child has come into care or why an immediate safety plan is needed, and so the child receives either different explanations from different people or is given no answer or a partial answer in response to their questions. Foster carers and kinship carers frequently don't know what to say in response to the child's questions or are worried about saying the wrong thing. While the 'Immediate Story' doesn't contain a detailed explanation, it does provide foster carers and kinship carers with a simple explanation that they can reinforce with the child about what is happening and what will be happening next.

If you are introducing the 'Immediate Story' to the child or young person after you arrive at the carer's house, then the foster carer or kinship carer can sit with you and the child as you go through the story. If you have presented the story to the child prior to arriving at the carer's house, then you can go through the story again with the carers and include the child in this if possible. Going through the story with the child and carers together will reinforce the explanation and also communicate to the child that it is okay for them to talk about these issues with their carer and to ask questions.

You will also need to leave a copy of the 'Immediate Story' with the foster carers or kinship carers, so that they are able to go through it again with the child if that is appropriate, or read it again themselves to help them answer questions from the child.

6. Follow up visits with the child

It is important to visit the child again as soon as possible after the child has been placed in care (or an immediate safety plan is in place) to go back over the story with them and also to involve the child in planning what is happening next. The stress of the situation will often mean that the child isn't able to understand or remember the explanation that they were given previously.

Establishing visits for the child with their parents and other significant family members so that the child can receive comfort needs to happen as quickly as possible to minimise any additional trauma for the child. Removing a child from their parents is an extremely stressful situation and can be traumatising for a child, and the child can 'freeze' all feelings. This may also be the case in situations of immediate collaborative planning where the child goes to stay with someone else or one of the parents/family members needs to move out of the house.

To be able to cope with such a stressful experience, children need an attachment figure to regulate that stress for them (Struik, 2014). In child protection situations, allowing the parents to provide comfort to the child may seem contradictory because we are trying to protect the child from the parents' behaviour, but in a lot of cases (not all) the parents are also the most important source of comfort and so establishing safe contact as quickly as possible can allow for this comfort to be provided to the child. For the child to be able to learn to trust and be comforted by the new carers over time, the child's attachment system needs to be activated and it is contact with the biological parents that can activate the child's attachment system and 'defrost' the child.

The Safety House tool can be used with the child to help them participate in planning for safe contact with their parents and other family members. Involving the child in planning for safe contact will help them to understand more about the collaborative planning process and begin to be able to participate in meaningful ways.

As the collaborative planning process with the family continues, make sure you come back to the child at each critical decision making point in working with the family, to help the child understand what is happening and to find out their views on how things are progressing. And working with the child over time will also make it more possible to develop a relationship of trust with the child, which may mean that over time they feel more confident in asking questions and sharing thoughts and information that they may not have been ready to talk about in earlier conversations.

Change of Placement

A version of the 'Immediate Story' can also be used to minimise the confusion and possible trauma for a child as a result of a change of placement.

References

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