**Implementation of Storylinks for Children in Care by Kirklees Educational Psychology Service**

**Introduction**

Following a successful pilot in 2018, the 10 week StoryLinks intervention has been offered to all primary schools in Kirklees with concerns for the SEMH needs of Children in Care. By delivering the intervention an emphasis can be placed on the emotional experiences of the child, and the quality of the ‘time-in’ with adults at home and in school to meet the specific needs of children who have experienced trauma and significant loss. Due to the intervention being well-received by the children, social workers, school staff, foster carers and parents, the cohort of eligible children was expanded to include children who had previously been in care, those who are adopted and those on special guardian orders (SGOs).

To date, 23 children have taken part in the StoryLinks intervention. In all cases, there were SEMH concerns. To enable these children to access the intervention and for the adult group to be able to think fully about any themes and difficulties, children needed to be in a settled point in their lives – stable home placement, school placement, and with no other agencies (CAMHS etc) supporting the child with any significant concerns. Additionally, it was decided to use weekly positive comments from teachers to further enhance the experience. To support children with the ending, each child was given 10 small pictures to colour in. This offered a ‘countdown’ and could be commented on when the end was approaching.

The StoryLinks facilitators were Children in Care Inclusion Workers supervised by Educational Psychologists. This meant that a thorough Plan-Do-Review cycle could be achieved for each child. All key professionals – social workers, class teachers, SENCO, Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) – were invited to attend a planning meeting prior to the intervention as well as a follow up review. Reviews took place prior to the ending of the intervention so that a supportive and well-thought out ending could be provided to children who are likely to have had difficult endings and losses in the past. Careful discussions were held with social workers, school and carers to highlight any significant areas of difficulty that may need to be handled with care including specific emotions, the gender of characters and specific scenarios that may trigger difficult reactions.

Due to the significant trauma and loss that children in care have experienced meant that difficult emotions and themes were explored in the stories. To enable these themes to be explored safely, the structure of the session was carefully maintained to provide all members of the group with a containing framework – same day and time each week, same room, sitting in the same seats, regular routine in each session. In addition to this, the learning support assistant was invited to the post-session debrief so that any difficulties could be thought about and reflected on promptly. Within the Educational Psychology Service, the Inclusion Workers facilitating the session met regularly for reflective peer supervision as well as being supervised by each school’s Educational Psychologist.

Children received two copies of each story; one to keep at school in their scrapbook, and one to take home to share with their carers. Reading both at home and school was encouraged. This encouragement was kept gentle with the emphasis being on the ‘time-in’; this meant that there was more flexibility with both who was reading the stories, and with how the stories were shared – reading, discussion, drawings, simple noticing. Children were also encouraged to add illustrations to their drawings, those who didn’t want to draw were encouraged to play with toys, model with playdoh, or build with lego. At times there were no illustrations, but the child had spent the time talking about the stories. There were no reprimands or sanctions for missed illustrations or reading times – the emphasis was on sharing, gentle encouragement, wondering and thoughtful dialog.

**Impact of Covid-19**

A number of children were part-way through their 10-week intervention when schools closed for Covid-19. This meant decisions needed to be made whether to postpone or find alternative ways to complete the sessions. There were difficulties and decisions to be made with this dependent on whether the child was remaining at home or attending school. It was felt that the continuation of the stories could provide children with a sense of being held in mind. Additionally, the children were experiencing a previously unthought-of of situation which may have heightened SEMH difficulties. The stories enabled the children to explore their feelings around the uncertainty and unpredictability of Covid-19 in a safe and contained way.

**Two children continued their intervention**

One child remained at home and the story-writing continued using video calling via WhatsApp. This meant that the LSA involved in the sessions was also able to join in with the call. We decided to extend the 10 week intervention to write an additional 5 stories. This provided the child with support, transition and an appropriate ending to the sessions. The stories changed significantly from those that had been written at school.

A second child, who was attending school was able to join in sessions using Skype video calling. In this case we were unable to include the child’s carer. Again, this provided an appropriate ending to the intervention. These stories remained similar to those written in school. In this case, it was the continuation of the ‘time-in’ with both the StoryLinks facilitator and the LSA that was important.

**Feedback from StoryLinks groups:**

***Carers:***

*“With X’s attachment issues it’s provided some quality time for him/her with other adults ... It’s a very gentle way to discuss issues … Building stories as a small team that have significance to that individual child, and working together with the child to build short gentle stories has helped X reflect on and work through issues … When we’d finished it was interesting to reflect back on the stories and see change and development”*

*“Writing the stories gives you lots of insights. I didn’t expect to learn what I did about X”*

*“You notice factors that you’re not always aware of”*

*“X was trying out arguments in a safe way and found their voice within the stories. I don’t hear X talk as much as he/she does here!”*

***Children:***

*“I liked my carer coming into school to spend time with me”*

*“I liked drawing the pictures”*

*“It was good fun. I liked making it tricky for Grandma’s bit!”*

***School Staff:***

*“It’s a very clever way to do something for children which gets them to think. We’re going into the child’s thoughts and the story gives answers to some of that thinking. It makes sense, like a jigsaw putting everything in place.”*

*“Children will feel comfortable doing it when we have concerns about their thoughts, feelings. Very comfortable setting, comfortable way of drawing out children’s thoughts. If we asked them straight then we’d a false answer – what they think we want to hear.”*

*“Children have ownership – it gives them a way to express thoughts and feelings. The stories are theirs so they’re naturally geared towards the child. I’ve learned a lot from my StoryLinks facilitator and how to help children.”*

*“My StoryLinks facilitator was a good leader who maintained calmness and structure. We maintained this flow during Covid-19 so it didn’t feel detached.”*

*“Storylinks helped X to discuss other issues in school. There is a new calmness in X’s face, he/she is now able to explain his feelings and worries more easily.”*

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