

# Play, stop and eject

## Creating film strip stories with bereaved young people



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When a child experiences bereavement it is important that they are able to tell a coherent story of what happened so that they can begin to integrate the experience. Very often simply sitting and talking about a death can feel uncomfortable and many children may not have the words to express what they really mean. Drawing, which forms part of children's everyday play from an early stage, enables a child to express an experience. Particularly after a traumatic bereavement, using a film script technique can help children put their story within a narrative structure so that they can begin to understand the events surrounding a death.

In daily life we commonly use narratives to organise and make sense of our experiences and communicate them to others. Telling our stories, and the way we tell them, help us to develop a coherent sense of self. White and Epston<sup>1</sup> describe the benefits of narrative therapy as encouraging change and development by allowing the individual to gain a new perspective on life events.

Similarly it is important to give bereaved children the opportunity to externalise what has happened to them so that they can see themselves separately from their worries and difficulties. This way, the child is not only defined by their bereavement but as a person who had experiences prior to, and after the death<sup>2</sup>. It can also relieve some of the emotions connected to the events, such as guilt or blame.

Freeman *et al*<sup>3</sup> suggest that when events are externalised, children can begin to gain control over their feelings and behaviour and see alternative ways of coping. If children are not able to tell their story to interested others, they may well 'act out' and present difficulties at home or school.

However, words can often fail to convey the thoughts and feelings a child is experiencing<sup>4</sup>. At Winston's Wish, an organisation that helps

bereaved children and young people to rebuild their lives after a family death<sup>5,6</sup>, we have found that supporting and encouraging children to draw pictures can be a safer way to speak about what has happened. It can also enable them to convey the many different meanings and feelings they may have about the event. Our experience, confirmed by assessing children, shows the need for them initially to tell *their* story, as *they* understand it.

A useful technique for the majority of children who have experienced the death of a family member is to support them while they draw a series of pictures, moving in time through events before, during and after the death, which they are then helped to collate to make a 'film script'. This can give a fuller picture of the child's reality and understanding, and also reveal parts of the story that are particularly significant or difficult for the child to express.

It is important to realise that the story of what happened starts before the actual event. Children are encouraged to draw out their understanding of events frame by frame, to think about what life was like before the person died, what happened the day before the death, to describe the death, what happened during the next day or days, and what life is like now. This

### EDITOR'S NOTE

*The feelings of helplessness and paralysis that usually overwhelm us when a loved one dies suddenly, unexpectedly and horrifically, as in John's story told here, make it difficult to process the sensory perceptions we experience, especially visual ones. The therapists from Winston's Wish, a children's bereavement care organisation that runs camps for bereaved children and publishes literature valuable in helping them to cope with death, here describe a way of moving children on from the helpless feelings by helping them to take control of the traumatic material. However, pre-school children find it difficult to construct a narrative and would need considerable help in using this technique. The authors recognise this and recommend more adult input in this age group. Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)\* – an effective therapeutic technique for treating traumatic intrusive images – also relies on the individual being able to control the pace of recall of the images. DB*

\* Trickey D. EMDR. Addendum to: O'Connor M, Russell A. Working with the legacy of trauma. *Bereavement Care* 2003; **22**(2): 23.

helps the child to see the event in a chronological order and to visualise their experiences and changes in their life, as well as enabling them to acknowledge the future.

We know that for many young

people this bereavement event can be 'replayed' in their mind over and over again. If it is not safely 'ejected' it can be significantly detrimental to their well-being and daily functioning. Talking about difficult experiences to interested others allows the child to reflect on and assimilate events and develop mastery over the telling and the re-playing of the event. The child is encouraged to imagine a video playing in their mind, repeatedly showing the film of the death. We then draw these images, making them into a roll of storyboards as a concrete object, a real film that they can stop from playing by 'pressing the eject button'. We use the analogy of 'renting out' the film' when they want to watch it or share it with someone else, or putting away and forgetting about it should they choose to do so. Consequently, by externalising the events and sharing them with others, the child can successfully gain a sense of control over the images associated with their bereavement experience.

### Traumatic Images

Sometimes we meet children and young people who have experienced a traumatic bereavement in which vivid memories and images can occur as part

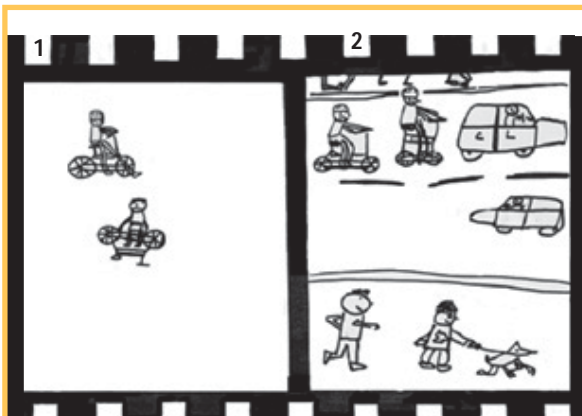
of the child's grief reaction. This is particularly true if the child witnessed the death, or came upon the body, but can also be a result of secondary trauma, with the child creating and visualising what they think might have happened from their imaginations or from people's descriptions. Dyregrov<sup>7</sup> describes how these vivid memories and mind pictures can manifest themselves as repeated intrusive images or as an 'inner video' that plays over and over. In addition to the visual images, they often involve detailed sounds, smells and somatosensory sensations (physical feelings) or thoughts. This repeating of the trauma can be the mind's unsuccessful attempt to assimilate the events. Recreating their memories as something tangible, a drawn film script, is particularly effective for children who are experiencing such intrusive imagery as it can empower them to gain control over their internal 'film' or 'video'.

We worked with John, aged 10, on the film script illustrated here during a six to eight week period after his father died, because he was displaying traumatic responses to what he had witnessed. However this intervention is more often used with children between six months and a year after the death.

### Variations for different age ranges

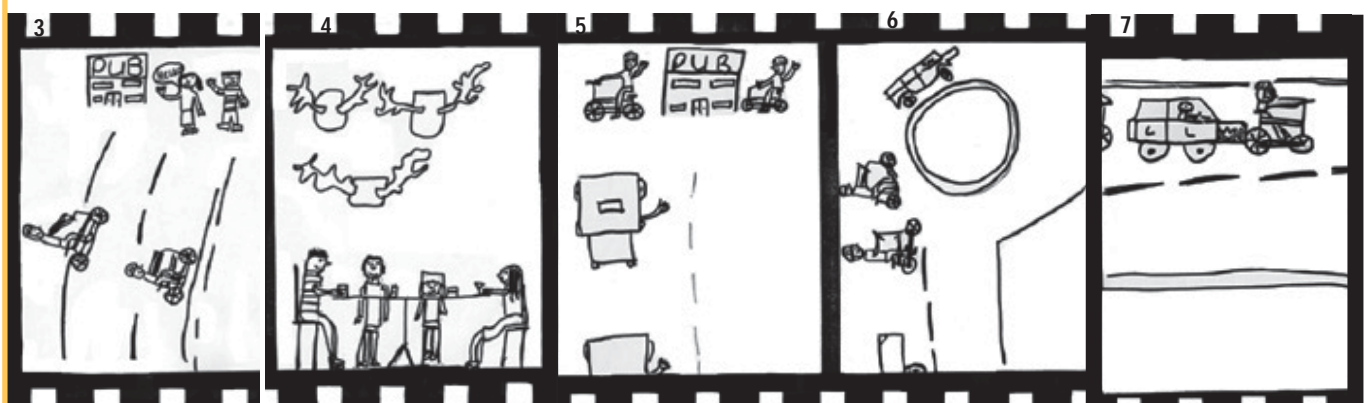
The film script technique can be helpful to children and young people between the ages of 6 – 16 years. However, we find that those aged 13 years and above will often prefer to write in each frame, or record the story in a 'newspaper headline' format, rather than drawing, which they may feel to be too young for them.

We have also used this intervention with pre-school children between three and five years old. With this group, we find the adult will often take the role of the narrator and write the story for the child. The adult needs to be far more active with children of this age, providing more prompts in the form of questions to stimulate their memory of the event. Whilst the child may not have the same level of control over the film script as the children who will be completing it themselves, it can be a very valuable record for the child. As they grow and their understanding develops, the script will be a contemporary record of their interpretation of what happened when their family member died and it can be a helpful addition to a memory store of experiences about the dead person. We have also found that this recording of their understanding of the story can provide



### John's story

- 1 John got a new bike for Christmas but he is waiting for his dad to fix his own bike so they can go out together. He is feeling good inside and looking forward to the ride.
- 2 On their way, John remembers enjoying himself and seeing a couple out walking their dog.
- 3 They meet Mum and Steve, a family friend, at a nearby pub.
- 4 Inside they have a drink and a laugh. They had never been to this pub before and John remembers these weird antlers on its wall.
- 5 They have a good time in the pub. John and Dad are looking forward to cycling home, while Mum and Steve go on ahead to prepare Sunday lunch.



a very useful medium for communication between a child and the remaining parent or carer in their lives. ●

## References:

1. White M, Epston D. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. London: Norton, 1990.
2. Silverman PR. *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000.
3. Freeman J, Epston D, Lobovitis D. *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems: Narrative Therapy with Children and Their Families*. New York: WW Norton, 1997.
4. Sunderland M. Using Story Telling as a Therapeutic Tool with Children. Bicester, Oxon, UK: Winslow Press, 2000.
5. Stokes J. *Winston's Wish*. *Bereavement Care* 1996; 15(3): 33-34.
6. Stokes J. *Then, Now and Always*. Cheltenham, Glos, UK: Portfolio Publishing, 2004.
7. Dyregov A. *Grief in Children*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1991.

## The film script guidelines: a framework for clinicians

This intervention can be used in either individual or group work sessions.

**Introduction** Suggest to the children that this is their time to think about and share their story of what happened in their family when their important person died. You may wish to show an example of a child's story drawn on a film script and then talk through the steps described below. You may need to have a discussion about the words everyone uses to talk about death or injury, including some that may seem 'shocking' because they are not often used openly.

**Step 1** The facilitator invites the child to use the blank pages to draw their story in scenes and create their own film script. The facilitator then introduces the idea that many young people have the story of what happened

when their person died 'playing' in their head like a video. By drawing out their film script they are going to press the eject button and begin to be in charge of their film. Emphasise that they can 'rent out' and watch their video when they want to, and do not need to have it playing on remote control whenever it feels like it.

**Step 2** The facilitator describes the stages that their film will take and invites the child to draw some pictures to represent how life was at each stage.

- What was life like before their important person died?
- What happened when they died? What do they know of the story?
- What happened after they died? What was life like after they died?
- What is life like now?

**Step 3** Once everyone has completed their script, help each child tape the pieces together so it looks like one long roll of film. Then go around the group asking each of them to share what they have drawn with the others in their group. Encourage all of them to talk through their film, expressing the details of their story and what is important to them.

**Step 4** Then ask each child to roll their film up and place an elastic band around it. State very clearly that they have now pressed the eject button, and are now in charge of their video. They can choose to show their film to others who they want to know what happened, and their understanding of it. This film is now no longer in charge of them; they can choose when to rent it out and when to press the play button.

- 6 John manages to negotiate the roundabout properly and Dad tells him how well he's cycling
- 7 A car comes along, passing too close to both John and Dad.
- 8 The car knocks John off his bike on to the grass verge and hits the back of Dad's bike. Dad falls off his bike into the middle of the road and the car drives right over him. John said it happened within seconds but seemed not to be real, almost slow motion. He could not believe what he had just seen was real and happening to his Dad.
- 9 John was able to get up and run to his dad. Dad's eyes were closed and John could see a lot of blood. He felt very scared and a sick feeling in his tummy. He remembers the driver calling an ambulance and crying. John

started to cry too. He still could not believe what had happened and he remembers hoping like crazy that his dad would not die.

- 10 Some other cars stopped to help and they wanted John to wait in their cars so he didn't have to see what was happening. Inside his head John was screaming 'No, no, let me stay with Dad. I want to be with him'. Reluctantly he did what the adults wanted him to do and sat in one of their cars
- 11 When all the police and ambulance people arrive it was quite crazy. The policeman was very kind and offered to take him home in the police car. John quite enjoyed this because he put the siren on.
- 12 When he got home, his mum looked really worried. The policeman told her what had happened.

