

Our Ways of Writing

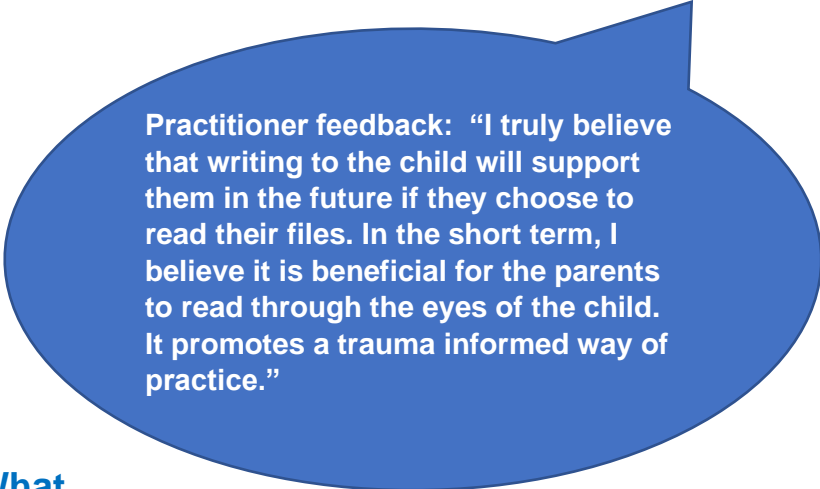
Guidance, July 2022

This approach directly links to 'The Wiltshire Way' Children's Social Care approach to practice: working in a trauma aware way, strengths based and restorative in nature.

This guidance has been written following an evaluation of our new ways of writing, informed by staff and parent feedback. Our Child and Voice Team are conducting a piece of work with children and young people which will inform any future guidance changes.

Benefits:

- This style ensures a narrative for the reasons social care have been involved in the child or young person's life
- It is a sensitive, linear and factual account of the young person's story
- Captures personal and quality details in writing which helps to fill potential gaps in a child's memory
- Is a tool to support change in a family because the impact upon the child is written to the child, which everyone in the family can read



Practitioner feedback: "I truly believe that writing to the child will support them in the future if they choose to read their files. In the short term, I believe it is beneficial for the parents to read through the eyes of the child. It promotes a trauma informed way of practice."

What

Ways of writing means that we write to the child/young person rather than writing about them. Some practitioners describe it as writing "in the moment". Some of the features of writing successfully include:

- Writing consistently to the child/young person
- The writing is empathic, sensitive and respectful
- The positives in the child/young person's lives are captured
- Written communication is described beyond behaviours, in a sensitive trauma aware approach
- The ongoing thread of the child's life is captured

- The writing is jargon free
- The writing is free from generalisations
- We write multi agency professional's names with job titles alongside to help a child's memory
- The child comes alive on the page because of detail and being in the moment
- Reasons for social care involvement are clear and factually written
- Concerns and impact on child/young person are clear and sensitively written
- Writing details which help children/young people to understand their story

When

We write to the child in the below circumstances. As a general guide, the information our families and our children are given copies of, we will write in this style:

- Planning
- Reviewing
- Single Assessments
- Manager comments/authorisations in assessing, planning, reviewing
- Visiting
- Foster carer notes/incidents
- Panel papers
- Professional's meetings
- Later life letters
- Life story books (when therapeutically suitable)
- Panel requests

The areas we currently do not write to the child are:

- Court work and Mental Capacity assessments
- Viability and parenting assessments
- Adoption
- Fostering Form F assessments

Optional areas:

Supervision/audit: Writing to the young person in your supervision notes and audit is optional. We have seen really good examples of supervision and audit written to the child; however supervision notes and audits are not part of the information which is shared with a young person, upon request for files, therefore this is an optional approach. You might prefer to write to the person you are supervising or auditing with, rather than writing to the child. The same applies to fostering assessments and reviews which can be written to the foster carer.

How

How (1) It is likely that the young person will dip in and out of reading their assessments as they transition through various stages of development. In all probability, it might be adulthood when the young person might want to request and read their files. Therefore, we should write in a style which is passionate, includes detail of the moment, but refrains from

writing in a style that might be read by a very young child, such as using terms like “Mummy” and “Daddy.” Either ask the child what names they use to call their parents or write “Mum”, “Dad” or “parents/carers” if you do not know.

How (2) We need to balance a fair factual, clear account of our concerns around their childhood, so they are fully aware of reasoning, rationale and decision making. This style does not diminish concerns, risks or safety but gives an opportunity to write in sensitive, non-jargonistic, clear, detailed language.

Practitioner feedback: “New ways of writing could be a barrier to being explicit about risk and abuse, some people might feel afraid to name things for what they are.”

Practitioner feedback: “... I wrote a pre-birth single assessment, addressed to the unborn baby. I read this aloud with the parents and they commented how powerful it was to hear the worries written as if explaining them to the child. Parents seemed to appreciate it and were able to show insight and understanding of the worries due to the way it had been written.”

Practice example 1:

“Your mum is experiencing some health problems as a result of her drinking and is undergoing tests regarding her liver, as this was damaged when your mum used to previously drink. Your mum was sober for a number of years and knows she can do this again and she wants to and has motivation to make these changes. My worry is that your mum needs ongoing support after becoming sober to be able to deal with daily struggles...your mum can deal with difficult things, but it is when your mum’s mental health is impacted as well, that your mum doesn’t always choose the best ways of managing.”

Practice example 2:

“...I needed to see your mum and look at your garden with her to explore what work needs to be done to make it a safer place for you both to play, as this is an action on your current child protection plan. The garden is untidy and, in parts, unsafe. There are several roof tiles that have fallen down and cracked on the floor, overgrown thorns and bushes, broken garden furniture, an old door and the trampoline is broken. In my opinion, the main part of your garden/grass area, is safe enough for you to play out in. The back gate locks which also increases the safety...”

How (3) Whilst we know that analysis should not be descriptive, in the context of ways of writing, we can be, to bring the situation alive. We add particular details so that we are supporting a child to complete gaps in their narrative story. Using sensory ‘stories’ help children and young people recall memories, such as favourite toys, snacks, meals, clothes.

Practice example 1:

"I picked you from your ...and we went for a meal at the garden centre in..... You were so happy and excited. You were eager to leave the house and you were jumping up and down in excitement."

Practice example 2 (of helping to trigger childhood memories):

"Your favourite things are all things 'dinosaur', playing games on your I-pad, and food. Your favourite drink is Kubus, a Polish brand of carrot and fruit juice, which you get through loads of. You have a favourite flavour of Walkers crisps, Paprika, which can be difficult to find, and you like soft ripened bananas (that are almost brown!) too. Your favourite song is Devils Don't Fly, from Gacha Life, one of your favourite I-pad games."

How (4) We can record stories and special moments from family time, or stories family members have told us to ensure the child/young person has those stories written down. We can capture successes, to help keep important early memories alive for the young person.

Practice example 1:

"... Your room was clean, tidy, clean sheets, no rubbish that needed emptying. Keep it up!!"

Practice example 2:

Foster carer: "You went trampolining after school. We went to Cloverfield School for a visit, getting ready for you starting next year. You made a microwave cake in the cooking room, coloured some of a big mural in the art room and played some maths games on an IPad in maths."

Practice example 3:

Foster carer: "You had your 2nd COVID jab today-you were very brave. We went into Bath afterwards on the park and ride bus. You loved sitting at the front at the top."

How (5) Avoid using 'social care terms' which do not actually say anything, such as "appropriate needs being met".

Practice example 1:

"Your room was so messy. You had clothes all over the floor."

Practitioner feedback:

"By writing to the child it keeps the child the centre of the writing/assessment/analysis. By writing to the child it enables the parents/family and professionals to mentalise and have a greater understanding of the child's journey and experience. From a later in life (access to file) point of view, it allowed the child/YP/adult to understand the observations made at the time of writing. It prevents the author from using unnecessary jargon, maintaining a sense of child and the demographic our service is targeting."

How (6) By including parent and family views of decisions that are being made around their children, we are being highly trauma informed. A child/young person reading back on the views of their parents is so important and may well help to alleviate children's feelings such as anger, guilt, confusion.

Practice example 1:

“Although your mum was not happy with the idea of you learning the language and culture, due to her own experience of it, she understands that you would want to keep in contact with your brother. She is happy that you will be living with J, and will be talking English.”

Practitioner feedback:

“I gave the case notes to a mum, whose baby had been removed. Mum really liked reading about the positivity and warmth she gave to her baby and found comfort in knowing that her baby might one day read such positive, personal, warm, loving case notes, full of all their love and attention. She thought their child would feel loved by her when older as a result.”

How (7) Writing about a child/young person's behaviour that goes beyond describing, helps us to understand our children/young people as well as others to understand.

Practice example 1:

“Shyon, you report feeling that you were out of your depth and things spiralled quickly out of control. You said you did not know how to get out of the situation and seemed to misunderstand the severity of actions taking place. Shyon, you really want to have friends and to 'fit in'. This makes you easily impressionable and vulnerable. You take things personally and can become embroiled in situations that shouldn't involve you as you want to be seen as a good friend. Shyon, you have a good understanding of right and wrong and what you want to achieve and do well, but this can be overridden by the desire to belong and to have friends.”

Practice example 2:

“Benzion, how you presented made me think you were struggling with me being there. Rani and Neeraj we are worried about this as you always seem to struggle when I'm there and Neeraj in particular, didn't understand why that was. I wondered if, as I'm a social worker, I trigger some bad memories for you as you've moved so many times in your short life. Social workers coming to see you have often meant change and moves. I wondered if you believed us when we said you were staying here permanently, when in the past, you've been told this, but it hasn't been true. Rani and Neeraj were initially confident that you did know you were staying here, as they'd told you many times. Neeraj then asked you to come and talk to him and he asked if you knew...”

Practice example 3:

“The death of your great grandmother, your mother’s mother, has had a significant impact on you and your mum. You have spoken of having vivid dreams of her body being next to you while you slept, and it is clear that her loss, and being present when she died, continues to impact upon you. Such feelings of grief are natural, however, I worry that you and your mother may be overwhelmed, and that you are both finding it difficult to find a way to move on.”

Practice example 4:

Foster carer notes: “You are doing really well at school although sometimes you don’t want to go. We have agreed you will go through main reception when you feel worried about school in the morning.”

How (8) Respectful language is important because the language we use in writing will impact on the way we treat others.

Practice example 1:

“It is also fair to say that your mum has a history of mistrust with services and professionals, and it is to her credit that she has maintained a relationship with me. I hope she will see that services are there to help and not judge, but equally she has to take her responsibilities seriously.”

Practice example 2:

“Tomic and Gabriella, your mum has expressed to me that she finds it difficult to make new friends in the playground or in other social settings due to feeling anxious and judged in group situations with new people. Your mum was finding it difficult to take you both into school at first as she found the playground intimidating. However, your mum has been doing well with taking you both to school/nursery and your mum has made friends with at least 1 other mum who has a child in your school/nursery.”

Practice example 3:

Foster carer notes: Day 1 *“Simran, it is my birthday tomorrow and you find other people’s birthdays really hard. I asked you to remember to not lose your temper.*

Day 2 *You gave me some lovely presents today. We went out for a meal with Rishi, Usha and Delilah for tea. Although you nearly got cross once you remembered what we had talked about and you calmed down-thank you.”*

How (9) Describing the impact of abuse on children is crucial and this style of writing does not diminish this importance.

Practice example 1:

“Research tells us that - ‘During infancy, chronic exposure to aggressive, hostile or neglectful parenting has particularly detrimental consequences for brain development, and these can continue throughout the life course and result in long-term cognitive, behavioural, emotional, social, and physiologically impeded development’ (Perry (2002)). We know that research on

child development and the consequences of abuse shows that the longer children are left inadequately protected from all forms of maltreatment, the greater the chance that their long-term wellbeing will be compromised. I am very conscious that you have experienced considerable trauma over all of your lives and that this will be ongoing with the potential to cause further, significant emotional harm. For this reason, I am recommending that your situation be escalated to a level that will ensure your potential long term outcomes are kept front and centre of all decisions made. Initially this will be at a Child in Need level and it is hoped that all the adults who are involved in your care work together to prevent the need for a high level of risk management that we term “child protection.”

How (10) This way of writing helps us to capture the child/young person’s voice; to understand what is happening for them and their life at that moment.

Practitioner feedback:

“I capture the child’s feelings and emotions. I don’t think we did this as much when writing in the 3rd person.”

Practice example 1: from single assessment:

“Willow, you can become overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety; this can impede your concentration and mood. You have good self-awareness about your emotions, and you are open with those who you trust to articulately express how you are feeling in order to seek the help you may need. You respond well to nurturing, reassurance and clarity with information. At times, you like to have time on your own and you are able to express this yourself.”

Practice example 2:

“We spoke about school and you expressed that you want to move to Tetbury school and have gotten back in contact with a friend who goes there. She has offered you support, meeting her friends and with lifts to the school. You shared that you feel motivated to move school at the moment and regardless of friends this is something that you wanted to do. I told you I would speak to Mr Abioye about getting this sorted and support you with the application.”

How (11) Our writing needs to be consistent and seeing work which is consistently written in this style is coherent and not confusing for the reader. Management notes written in this style add to our consistency.

Manager example 1:

“Xavier, I agree with your social worker and view that you do need a child in need plan. We are involved because of a domestic abuse incident between your mum and dad. Your parents have had an on/off relationship that has not been positive. Whilst there is no evidence that you are currently being significantly exposed to this, I am worried that this has been an ongoing feature in their lives. During this assessment it is clear that your mother has significant long-standing problems with alcohol use and is currently alcohol dependent. She is starting to make reductions but cannot stop immediately because of health risks. Whilst you are not being seriously harmed by your mother’s drinking and are overall doing well and

have good family support, I view you do need support as a child in need. I am worried your mother's drinking has impacted on her ability to secure a stable home for you and I also view that we need to ensure the support is there for your mother to help her reduce her drinking safely. I agree with you having a child in need plan.”

Manager example 2:

Carlos and Aldo I agree with your social worker's recommendations and agree that you are at risk of significant harm at home and view that an initial child protection conference is needed. I can see that you both have some additional needs and sometimes you struggle with your behaviour at home. I do empathise with your mother that she finds the parenting of you hard. However, I view that how you are currently being parented is not okay. I view that it is emotionally abusive. I view that you are being shouted and screamed at excessively and that you are also being told horrible things by your mum and step-father. I think your mother blames you for this, when I think how she responds to you, it is harmful and makes things worse.

We have tried to work with your mother and step-father, initially through a family keyworker and then through a social worker at child in need level. This has not helped, and I can see that things are still not good at home. I view that unfortunately this is more than just a parent struggling with children with additional needs. Instead, I view that the parenting you are receiving now is actually harmful to you. It is not okay for you to hear that your mother is feeling suicidal, or that she blames you, or that you will go into care. Sadly, parents do get over stressed with parenting, more so if children have additional needs, and say hurtful things to their children that they then regret. Things like this as one-offs do not constitute significant harm. However, for you this seems to be constant, and I feel that cumulatively what you are experiencing at home does add up to significant emotional harm and needs to change.”

Appendices:

1. Below is a Dictionary of words which has been compiled by our Wiltshire children. These may assist you when explaining or writing certain terms:



Dictionary-of-Words
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2. Below is a record of child's views from a piece of work conducted by the Principal Social Worker (PSW) and Voice representative, Cameron Strawson, as part of feedback around our practice. The attached may assist you when working with children:



Children's views
2020.docx

3. Exemplars on our Academy pages regarding our writing:
<https://wiltshirecouncil.sharepoint.com/sites/HRDirect/SitePages/New-ways-of-writing.aspx>