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11

STORY LINKS

Using Therapeutic Storywriting with Parents and Pupils Who Are at Risk of Exclusion

Trisha Waters

This chapter will explore how the Story Links model of intervention can engage parents in supporting pupils at risk of exclusion because of behaviors related to attachment anxiety. A pilot 3-day Story Links training was delivered (Story Links, n.d.), with the support of the South-East Region Special Educational Needs Partnership (SERSEN), to 12 educational professionals drawn from four local authorities (LAs) in the South of England. As originator of the model I was involved in piloting the model in five schools in the south of England in order to refine and develop the training program. This paper will draw on my work with a parent and 8-year old pupil, who for the purpose of this paper I will call Owen. I will first explore some of the general theoretical underpinnings of the Story Links model and then use the case study to further illustrate these theoretical points. Parental consent has been given for the use of material included and all names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE MODEL

Story Links uses the principles of Therapeutic Storywriting (Waters, 2004a) to engage parents in supporting children who are at risk of exclusion from school because of their behavior. While it is the child's behavior that will trigger school exclusion, these pupils often

also have severe underlying emotional difficulties. Therapeutic Storywriting uses story metaphor to address emotional issues that might be overwhelming for the child, and possibly for the parent, if addressed directly.

The intervention particularly targets primary age pupils exhibiting behaviors associated with attachment anxiety and who also have below average reading skills. The emotional preoccupation of pupils with poor attachment experience means that they are often unable to engage with educational tasks, with the consequence that they are likely to have not only behavioral, emotional, and social difficulties (BESDs) but also poor literacy skills. The Story Links program therefore addresses the needs of some of the most vulnerable students in our primary schools. By including parents in sessions, Story Links aims to nurture more positive attachment patterns between parent and child while engaged in the twofold task of (1) developing the child's reading skills and (2) improving his or her behavior in school. Working with the parents of these vulnerable children can itself present challenges, given that they often have a poor history of positive engagement with the school. Thus, the model has been developed to be both non-threatening and emotionally containing for parents who may themselves feel vulnerable within the school environment.

DEVELOPMENT OF STORY LINKS AS A WAVE 3 INTERVENTION

Story Links grew out of the now established Therapeutic Storywriting Groups (Waters, 2004a), also developed by the author with the support of SERSEN, which were designed for small groups of pupils and which have now been introduced into many schools in England. The groups are a wave 2 intervention and target pupils who are typically at School Action (SA) or School Action Plus (SA+), on the Special Educational Needs (SEN) register because of BESDs that require more support than can be provided in the whole class group. The

evaluation study, *Writing Stories with Feeling* (Waters, 2004b), which was commissioned by SERSEN, showed that Therapeutic Storywriting Groups develop students' emotional literacy and social skills as well as increasing their motivation to write.

The Story Links model to be discussed here, however, is a wave 3 intervention in that it provides support for those individual pupils whose BESDs are giving the school particularly serious cause for concern both in terms of the children's inclusion in the classroom and their progress in learning. These pupils will be on the SEN register at either SA+ or statement level for BESDs, indicating that their needs require a more specialist support than is normally provided by the school. As parental participation is central to the Story Links model, the curriculum area chosen as the context for the intervention is not writing, as in the Therapeutic Storywriting Groups, but reading because this is an area of learning in which most parents traditionally expect to play a role.

A THERAPEUTIC TEACHING APPROACH

Story Links is a therapeutic teaching model that uses the educational curriculum as a therapeutic context. It does not require educational professionals to become therapists but rather aims to bring psychological mindedness to their work in supporting pupils with severe behavioral, emotional, and social difficulties. By focusing on this interface between education and mental health, Story Links is very much in line with the current UK SEN policy for supporting pupils emotional wellbeing as outlined in Promoting Children and Young Peoples' Emotional Health and Wellbeing (Public Health England, 2015). This document stresses the need for educational professionals to become more aware of pupils' mental health issues; to explore new ways of using the curriculum to support emotional literacy; and to find ways to include parents in the education of their child..

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The Story Links model draws on psychodynamic thinking and in particular the concepts of attachment, emotional containment, and creating a "potential space" (Winnicott, 1971/1999) where parent and child can meet in a mutually enjoyable activity. It also aims to integrate this psychodynamic perspective of behavior with the positive behavioral perspective which usually informs schools' behavior policies and practice.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Attachment Theory, Behavior, and Learning

Attachment theory was developed by Bowlby (1988/1997) in the 1950s and highlights the central importance of the parent-child relationship for the child's healthy psychological development, particularly in the first 2 to 3 years of life. While this is now taken for granted by most child professionals, it was a radical departure from the then established developmental models, most of which considered developmental stages as being entirely located within the child. What Bowlby did was to emphasize that a child's development can only be considered within the context of his or her relationship with a primary carer. When Ainsworth (1979) published the results of her Strange Situation clinical experiment, showing that healthy attachment patterns along with three anxious forms of attachment—avoidant, ambivalent, and confused—can be identified at one year of age, attachment theory began to receive widespread acceptance and even to change social policy particularly in relation to parental contact for hospitalized children.

While attachment theory has informed health policy for many years, it has had a much lower profile in educational policy. However, with the growing body of research evidence that poor attachment patterns have a strong correlation not only with BESDS but with poor

educational achievement (Sroufe, Egeland, & Weinfeld, 2000), this is slowly starting to change. This development has also been supported by the publication of some excellent books by informed practioners such as Geddes (2006) and Bomber (2016) and projects such as the Attachment Aware Schools initiative at Bath Spa University (2016). A consequence of this increased attachment awareness means that attachment anxiety is now frequently mentioned on pupils' individualized education plans (IEPs).

Children bring into school behavioral patterns from the relational dynamic established with their primary carer and these will affect the quality of their relationships with both peers and adults. Behaviors associated with poor attachment patterns that are exhibited in the classroom may include: poor concentration, constant talking, ignoring instructions in class, getting into trouble between classes, refusing to be helped with work, presenting explosive reactions, exhibiting a sudden deterioration in behavior when making mistakes (Geddes, 2006). These are clearly behaviors that can seriously challenge a class teacher and it is easy to see why these pupils are often at risk of exclusion.

THE CHALLENGE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The view that the quality of the child–parent relationship affects educational achievement throughout the primary phase of schooling is supported by the findings of the influential Desforges and Abouchaar report (2003) which reviewed the latest international research on the effects of parental involvement on pupil achievement (see Table 11.1).

Table 11.1 from Sacker et al. (2002, cited by Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003) shows that right up to the age of 11 years, parents continue to have more influence on their child's achievement than does the school. Therefore, in addressing the needs of poorly performing pupils with BESDs, parental involvement is crucial.

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Table 11.1 The Challenge of Parental Involvement

	Effect of Parent on Pupil Achievement	**Effect of School on Pupil Achievement**
Age 7	0.29	0.05
Age 11	0.27	0.21
Age 16	0.14	0.51
From Sacker et al., 2002, cited in Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003.		

However, parents of pupils at risk of exclusion are often the group of parents who are hardest to engage in school partnership. This can be due to the defensiveness engendered by having to continually come into the school to hear about their child's poor behavior, by the triggering of uncomfortable memories of their own schooling, or it may be due to the fact that they are themselves under stress and struggling to cope with day-to-day matters.

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So how do we go about engaging such parents in school? The Story Links program uses a solution-focused approach by inviting them to come into school to support their child's reading rather than asking them to come in to discuss behavior difficulties. Parents of pupils at risk of exclusion may be defensive, disengaged, and even aggressive toward the school but in my experience they always want their children to learn to read. So here is an assured point

of mutual interest where parent and school can meet.

OUTLINE OF A STORY LINKS SESSION

The Story Links program runs over 10 weeks and is led by an educational professional who has attended a 3-day training course. The facilitating professional can be a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), SEN support teacher, educational counselor, learning mentor, or inclusion manager (for ease of writing, the term *teacher* will be used to refer to this group of professionals). Sessions with the parent and child last 30 minutes with a further 30 minutes required by the teacher for writing up, printing, and distributing the story. A teaching assistant (TA), ideally one attached to the pupil's class, also joins in the sessions and implements two 20 minute school-based follow-up sessions using the written text to develop the child's reading skills during the week. As the model has an open systemic structure other professionals such as a learning mentor, home–school liaison officer, or a social worker engaged in supporting the child can also be invited to attend sessions. There is an initial session with the parent and child to tell them about the program, deal with any concerns, and ensure commitment to the program of 10 sessions.

The main sessions begin with the teacher having a few minutes with the parent to review how things have been at home with their child during the week and in particular to ask about the success or otherwise of joint reading activities. They are then joined by the TA and the pupil who will bring some feedback from his or her classroom teacher on the child's behavior during the week in class which is shared with the parent. There follows a "feelings check-in" during which the teacher uses active listening skills (empathic verbal reflection) to reflect and contain the feelings expressed by the parent and pupil. The child then reads the previous week's story to the group with support from the teacher or the parent. This then leads into the

central activity of joint story making. The teacher gives the story opening, which will have emerged from the discussion with the parent about the child's current emotional issues. For instance, if the parent says the child has had angry outbursts it might be, "Leslie the lion roared. He was furious." Beginning with the child and followed by the parent, each person present then takes a turn to continue the story, with the teacher making notes. The teacher takes responsibility for completing each week's story and then retells the newly created story to the group. The child leaves the room with the TA and the teacher encourages the parent to reflect on the metaphor/imagery in the newly created story and to think about what metaphors might be included in the next week's story. Once the parent has left, the teacher types up the story at the appropriate reading level for the child. This is not done as a verbatim report but the core story line is maintained with an effort made to include the actual phrases used by the parent and child. A copy then goes home with the child to be read with the parent at home and a copy goes to the teaching assistant for work on the two 20 minute reading skills sessions during the week.

USE OF STORY AS AN ATTACHMENT OBJECT

Attachment anxiety occurs when the primary carer has been unable to provide appropriate emotional containment for the child, so the Story Links model is based on the premise that for such pupils, attachment anxieties in school may be reduced if a way can be found to bring the parent into a positive relationship with the child within the educational environment.

Healthy attachment occurs when the parent and child are engaged in a mutually enjoyable activity. When the parent of an infant engages in games such as peek-a-boo he or she is not thinking "I'd better do this so that I form a good bond with my child"; they are doing it because they're enjoying it; because it gives them, as well as the baby, pleasure. By engaging

the parent in the creative process of spontaneous story making, Story Links sessions aim to provide a mutually enjoyable educational activity. The idea is that the cocreated story can become a positive attachment object for the child by enabling him or her to hold a reminder of the parent while the child is in school and a reminder of a positive shared school-based experience while the child is home.

In discussing the home learning program the parent is encouraged to reflect on whether the reading activity was something that they also enjoyed. Parents and children can easily become embattled over homework activities, particularly with this group of children. So at the beginning of each session the teacher asks the parent open questions about the home reading activity: Was it a relaxing time for them? Was their child relaxed? Where did they sit? Were they snuggled up together on the sofa or under a duvet? Did they both enjoy it?

A CASE STUDY

Identifying Attachment Anxiety

Owen was an 8-year-old boy who had initially been referred to a Therapeutic Storywriting Group that I was running in a school where I was modeling the intervention for a group of staff I was training. The school was in the local authority's most socially deprived area and there were concerns about both the school's poor attainment levels and the high number of exclusions.

Although the least able in the group, with his writing and reading still at level 1, Owen worked well in the group sessions when he was present. However, he was often absent due to the fact that he was excluded on four separate occasions during the school term when the Therapeutic Storywriting group was running, with one of his exclusions being for 5 days. The

reasons for his exclusion were challenging behaviors that included running out of class, violent outbursts in class, and in particular, physically attacking other children. According to his classroom teacher, while he often seemed to "kick off" for no apparent reason, his anger could also be easily triggered by some of the other children making a disparaging comment about his mother. He had been referred for diagnosis of ADHD but this had not been confirmed.

The head teacher described Owen as one of the most troubled and troubling pupils in the school. He also said that Owen's mother usually came "gunning" for him on a daily basis; he then added, "and often not once but twice a day." It seemed that Owen's mother was as much of a concern to the school as Owen himself! In fact when I spoke to a number of staff about how we might best support Owen, I was told by more than one person that his problems came from his home situation. When I suggested that we might invite his mother to participate in a Story Links program I was told, again by more than one member of staff, that she was unreliable and that she was unlikely to attend sessions. Despite Owen's challenging behavior, all of the staff who had contact with him appeared to also have a soft spot for him—they particularly mentioned his honesty as a redemptive characteristic (i.e., he always admitted what he had done). There was a feeling that he somehow couldn't help himself when he "kicked off" and blame was generally placed on the mother's parenting rather than on Owen.

I spoke to the SENCO and found out a bit more about Owen. She told me that he, along with his younger brother, had been taken into care for 2 years when he was 3 years old because of child protection concerns. Certainly, Owen's behavior seemed consistent with a child with confused attachment: hyperactivity, rescuing the parent, "kicking off" for no apparent reason (Barrett & Trevitt, 1991; Geddes, 2006). This hypothesis was confirmed by a short piece of writing he had produced in the Therapeutic Storywriting Group.

I had given the group the opening "Dino the dragon lay outside his cave. Never before

had he felt so lonely. . . . "I wrote this opening in Owen's book to help him get started. After 10 minutes of concentrated effort he managed to write "because he didn't have anyone who wanted to play with him. So he burnt his Mum's plants" (spelling corrected).

I then used active listening skills and reflected back to Owen, "I imagine Dino was upset because he didn't have any friends, but I wonder why he burned his Mum's plants?"

He then replied, that Dino "wanted to tell his Mum how miserable he felt and he had called her 17 times but she didn't come. So Dino just walked off into the dark shadows." I typed out his story, including his reply, in italic and pasted it into his book.

Engaging the Parent

Owen's mother was invited in to meet me by the SENCO at the school. When she arrived she accepted my offer of a cup of coffee, and I then explained the outline of the Story Links program, focusing first on the school's concern over Owen's poor reading skills and pointing out that as the most important person in his life it might make a difference to his achievement if we could work together to support his reading for a period of time. I also said that we would use the stories to address emotional issues that Owen might be having difficulty with in order to help him feel happier in school.

Mother listened but seemed rather noncommittal until I showed her Owen's book from the group. I took what felt like a calculated emotional risk and read her Owen's story about Dino's mum not coming despite his calling her 17 times. Owen's mother then seemed to become engaged for the first time in our meeting. She looked me directly in the eye and asked, "Do you think children just write stories or are they writing about themselves?" Using my best active listening skills I replied, "What do you think?" She then said, "I think this story is about him. I think it's because I don't give him any time. I give all my attention to his

younger brother who's still my baby even though he's only a year younger than Owen." She then said that she thought she should come into the sessions in order to give some time to her older son. She mentioned how she found his behavior hard to manage at times though she also mentioned how he seemed to think he was "the man of the house" and would "have a go" at his younger brother if his brother was "horrible" to her.

Owen's mother then spoke about how the children had been taken into care but that they had been returned to her 3 years ago and that she was now trying to get her life back on track . She also asked if her trusted social worker would be able to come along to sessions with her. As the Story Links sessions have an open systemic format I said this would be no problem. I later contacted the social worker who was pleased to have a chance to be involved with a school-based project. Mother was also concerned about her own poor literacy skills and described herself as being dyslexic. I reassured her that this wouldn't be a problem. With the support of the social worker, Owen's mother managed to attend 8 out of the 10 sessions, with one missed because of a hospital appointment and one missed without any explanation.

The Stories

In all of the spontaneously created stories, most of the story elements introduced by Owen related to dangerous and fear-provoking situations; these included a boy being imprisoned in a jar; the badger's hillside being burned; fox cubs not being fed by their family; two little monkeys being attacked by a snake; and two hound-dogs being attacked by wasps. My role as the facilitator in all of these stories was to aid the exploration of feelings that were pertinent for Owen and also to contain the fearful emotions within the structure of the story by bringing each story to some point of resolution. For as Bettelheim points out: "For a story to truly hold the child's attention, it must . . . be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full

recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him" (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 5).

I will now share a story created in the sixth week of the course of sessions to illustrate the process.

The Wasps and the Two Hound-Dogs

Owen: One day there was a wasps' nest and two hound-dogs. But the wasps weren't just any wasps—they were dangerous wasps and the hound-dogs were stung by them.

Mum: The wasps' nest was really close to a children's playground and the children kept getting stung by the wasps.

TA: So somebody reported the wasps' nest to the council.

Social worker: The men from the council came in their protective suits and took the whole nest away.

Jo: But the two hound-dogs saw one wasp that had got away and was up in a tree.

TA: So the hound-dogs hid in some bushes at the end of the garden.

Mum: The wasp met another normal wasp and got married.

Jo: But the normal wasp then turned poisonous and they had lots of baby wasps who had extra long stings that could go through protective suits.

Social Worker: So the men at the council got some extra thick protective suits and came again. They took the wasps away.

TA: This time they took all the stings out of the wasps and then let the wasps go free.

Me: The wasps never stung anybody again. The two hound-dogs came out of their hiding place and played in the garden. The End.

Owen: There's one more thing: The two hound-dogs both had a prickle on their nose to remind them of the wasps.

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DISCUSSION OF SESSIONS IN THE LIGHT OF UNDERPINNING THEORY

Story Imagery as an Expression of the Unconscious

The process of creative story-making involves the use of imagery which often arises out of the unconscious as do images that arise in art or play therapy. In the above story, 8-yearold Owen certainly did not consciously plan, nor do I think his mother did, that we would make up a story about child protection issues, as one might interpret that this story is about. The spontaneous nature of the story-making activity precluded the possibility of such a conscious approach to the story line. Bruner describes this as the "narrative mode of thinking" which is associated with right-brain activity, and he emphasizes that this is different from the more analytical logical mode of thinking but equally valid in conveying meaning.

Story as a Medium for Attachment

Schore (2000), whose work bridges the fields of neuroscience and psychology, discusses the role of dyadic engagement in right-brain activity as fostering attachment relationships. This was evident in the sessions particularly with respect to Owen's mother whose body language would often reflect a depressive and isolationist state of mind. However, each week her face lit up as we began the story. She listened attentively, particularly to her son, and she appeared enlivened as she made her contribution. There was often laughter in the group as the story lines emerged, which provided a joint experience of attachment-promoting fun for parent and child.

By taking the story home with them, Owen and his mother were reminded of this positive

shared experience that had taken place in school. And in working with the story in school with the TA, Owen had a reminder of his mother's presence in a supportive context. The TA mentioned that he was always interested to point out which part of the story was his contribution and which was his mother's. Thus, the actual story text could be considered as a positive attachment object linking mother, child, and the school.

Close physical proximity and comfort is important in fostering attachment, so Owen was seated next to his mother and encouraged to give his mother a hug at the beginning and end of each session, which he did. His mother was also encouraged to think about how the reading activity at home could be a time for the two of them to be close. This required some thought as she said that the younger brother would often push Owen away if he snuggled up with her at home. We talked this through, and she decided to make some time for Owen after his younger brother was in bed. She had difficulty keeping to a regular schedule but mostly managed this once or twice a week.

Interpretation of the Story Metaphor and Encouraging Parental Reflection

While the above story can be interpreted as reflecting Owen and his brother's experience of feeling unsafe and of the central role that social services has had in providing child protection, it is not the place of the facilitator to make these interpretations to the mother or to other professionals. A key point made in the training course is that any interpretations by the teacher should be held tentatively and reflective comments kept within the context of the story. This is a key distinction between implementing therapeutic teaching and therapy as such. Hence, at no time did I attempt to give an analysis of the above story to the parent or other professionals.

However, key to the intervention is to involve the mother in reflecting on the story herself

and to encourage her to think about what might be useful to include in future stories. Using the medium of story gives parents the opportunity to think about their child's internal world and to express empathy within the emotional safety of the story metaphor. That Owen's mother was capable of doing this was reflected in her comment on the initial Dino the dragon story. There is also an attempt by the mother within the above story to provide some normality for the two hound-dogs when she says: "The wasp met another normal wasp and got married."

It was clear from Owen's behavior in defending his mother both at home and school that he was acting at times as the parentified child. As mentioned above, this is typical of children with confused attachment where there has been inconsistent care giving.

According to Piaget and Inhelder (1969/1979), it is only around the time of adolescence that children begin to develop the capacity for abstract or metacognitive thinking. The interpretation of metaphor, the meaning of which is to transfer something from one level or place to another, is itself a metacognitive skill. This is why a child will accept a story at face value, operating as he does at what Piaget calls the "concrete-operational level," while as adults we have the ability to intuitively read it on another level. The basic activity of thinking in the metaphor is an adult skill. Thus by supporting Owen's mother to reflect on the stories and imagery that might be used in future stories, she was encouraged to take on the parent/adult position in relation to her son.

Empowering the Parent to Support the Child's Learning

The sessions were also used to encourage the mother to support her son's reading. Although she described herself as dyslexic, it turned out that she could easily recognize high frequency words and could certainly read better than her son. In the first couple of sessions, myself or

the TA would support Owen when he read last week's story at the beginning of the session—helping him to sound out the letters and recognize familiar patterns. In the third week his mother began to join in supporting his reading of the text. The TA and I now stepped out of the supporting role as Owen sat closer to his mother, looking to her for help. Occasionally when Owen's mother would give an inappropriate reading clue (e.g. asking him to think what color the sky was in order to decode the word *blue),* I would mention afterwards when Owen had returned to class that it might be helpful to get him to sound out and blend the first two letters so that he could then use this strategy with other words. As the weeks went on mother became increasingly confident in supporting Owen with his reading in the sessions, again enabling her to be in the position of enabling parent and Owen to be the young child that he was.

Interestingly mother mentioned her own parents on more than one occasion in the sessions. A couple of stories had been shared with the paternal grandparents at home and in one story the main character finds safety in the grandparents' actual garden. Adult attachment interview research (Main & Goldwyn, 1995) shows 70 to 80% correspondence between parents' early experience and their own parenting style. Mother was clearly proud of the work she was doing in supporting Owen and was keen to show this to her own parents. It seemed that her own inner child was being put into the appropriate relational context (i.e., with her own parents), as she stepped into a more adult role with her own son.

This also reminded me of the importance of the whole family network in supporting the child's learning and emotional well-being. In Story Links sessions with other parents and pupils, the story has sometimes been taken by the child to read to the parent who has left the family home, thus providing a link between members of the extended or separated family.

Therapeutic Storywriting as a Process-Oriented Activity

While it is useful for the parent to begin to reflect on the story metaphor in relation to her child's internal world, the story making process itself provides an opportunity for parent and child to process unresolved emotional issues. To quote Bettelheim (1976/1991) who spent much of his life using stories to support children with severe emotional difficulties,

> When unconscious material is to some degree permitted to come to awareness and worked through in imagination, its potential for causing harm—to ourselves or others—is much reduced; some of its forces can then be made to serve positive purposes. (p. 7)

It is not about getting a clever or the "right" interpretation but rather about providing a safe or potential space where unresolved issues can be explored, played with, and re-storied within the world of the imaginary. It is this process that is so engaging for the parent and child, particularly as their jointly created story will contain images projected from their own internal imaginary worlds. It is this resonance with their internal worlds that gives parent and child ownership of the jointly created stories and the reason why Owen and his mother were so very proud of them; Owen asked his teacher to read them to his classmates and mother shared them with her own parents.

Providing Emotional Containment in Order for Thinking to Take Place

Bion (1963/1984) made extensive clinical observations of mother–child interactions and focused particularly on the relationship between cognitive and emotional development. The theory of thinking that he developed states that containment of emotional anxiety is required for thinking to take place. Owen clearly was far too emotionally preoccupied to focus on

educational tasks in the classroom and it seemed from the family history that mother was also too emotionally preoccupied with her worries to provide sufficient emotional containment for her children. It was of utmost importance, therefore, that the sessions would be emotionally containing (i.e., that both parent and pupil experienced the room and session as a safe place and that the activity did not leave them feeling emotionally vulnerable at the end of the session). This was achieved by attending to beginnings and endings both of individual sessions and the whole course; by ensuring time boundaries were kept; giving time for everyone to share how they were feeling; keeping a consistent session structure; using the same room with a set seating arrangement; and by employing active listening skills. Thus the session provided parent and child with what Winnicott (1971/1999) terms a *potential space;* that is, an emotionally containing place where there is the possibility for the parent and child to engage in a relaxed manner in shared playful activity.

Maintaining Time Boundaries

Maintaining time boundaries was a challenge at first with Owen's mother as she would often turn up 10 or 15 minutes late and then want to keep talking about other issues at the end of the session. I responded to this by ensuring a cup of coffee was ready at the time the session was due to start and saying before we began when I would need to finish. I tried not to get drawn into tangential discussions on other matters to do with school by referring her on to other professionals in the school. Fortunately her social worker was able to pick up issues related to health and housing. As mother became more familiar with the routine structure of the sessions the time boundaries were tested less.

Reframing the Parental Thinking about Behavior

Occasionally, behavioral incidents would be mentioned by the mother in the few minutes before Owen joined the session. One time near the beginning of the term mother referred to an incident in the previous term when Owen had hit a child who had said something rude about her. Mother's response was supportive of Owen saying that "Of course he's going to hit out—I don't expect him to just take that sitting down." There was a few minutes discussion with myself and the social worker pointing out that the outcome to Owen's response was often exclusion which then created problems for him and her. Clearly mother thought about this because a couple of weeks later when Owen mentioned a conflict incident with another child in the feelings check-in she said, "You remember what your uncle said: 'It's a bigger man who can walk away."' This felt like a significant shift in her thinking and the messages that she gave to Owen about how he should respond in a conflict situation.

Linking to the School's Behavior Policy

The school's behavior policy used a point system for rewarding pupil effort in relation to both behavior and learning. The weekly sessions were a valuable point of contact between the school and home, and I arranged with the classroom teacher that he would give Owen a score out of 10 for meeting a set behavior target chosen by the teacher as the behavior that would most support his learning. The teacher decided this should be that Owen did not hit any other children in the classroom. Rather than provide a reward in the classroom I suggested that Owen's mother could reward him if he met his target. Each week Owen brought his score, drew it on a bar chart, set his target for the coming week, and negotiated a reward with his mother. I facilitated this negotiation to ensure that mother was not bamboozled by Owen's demands and that she felt confident about delivering the reward, which I stressed need not

involve expense. The first reward negotiated was to go lizard hunting together—something that turned out to be of interest to both Owen and his mother and thus functioned as an attachment-promoting activity. I discouraged discussion of events that had influenced any loss points but the bar chart gave the parent a visual picture of how her son had done over the week. This seemed reassuring for her because she had complained in the past that it was only when she was informed that Owen was to be excluded that she was told that things were not going well for him in school. This bar chart also meant that Owen's classroom teacher although not present was able to input into the sessions.

A Convergent Personalized Systemic Approach

It is very easy for the support networks put in place to support vulnerable pupils to mirror the fragmentation that has occurred in the child's home life where there may have been, as in Owen's case, lack of contact with a parent, separation, frequent house moves, and general inconsistency. While a multiagency approach is essential, care needs to be taken to ensure that support does not get divergent and distant from the child when assessments are made and reports are written. Story Links sessions have a systemic structure in that they can include different professionals while engaging in a task with the child and parent. While there can be several adults in the room with the child, and in Owen's case there were four, sessions are democratic in that everyone present has a chance to initially share how he or she is feeling and then contribute to the story, thus avoiding the child feeling overwhelmed by too much attention. However, all of the adults will be holding the individual child's particular needs in mind, thus providing an intervention that is focused or convergent on the child and one that is personalized to meet the child's needs at the time.

Waters, T. (2018). Story Links: Using Therapeutic Storywriting with Parents and Pupils at Risk of Exclusion. Chapter in: Ficksman, M. and Adelizzi, J. (eds) *The Clinical Practice of Educational Therapy* 2nd edition. New York: Routledge. p221-234.

OUTCOMES OF STORY LINKS COURSE

The Story Links program was evaluated using pre- and post-semi-structured interviews with Owen, his mother, Owen's classroom teacher, and the school principal. The TA who supported Owen was also asked to evaluate the work she had done with Owen at the end of the course. Owen was not excluded once during the term when the Story Links program ran, compared to his four exclusions in the previous term. The school principal also reported that his mother's attitude toward the school had dramatically changed and that she had even mentioned running a stall with books made by children for the Xmas fair. In reality this didn't happen but it was interesting to note how her attitude had changed. The TA reported that Owen, who she had supported before the course of Story Links, was now generally keener to read than he had been before. Owen himself thought his reading had improved and also said, "It's good when my mum's there—it makes me feel more supported and it helps me to calm down."

The social worker who attended the sessions mentioned how it was a new experience for her to work collaboratively in the school situation and found the structure of the sessions provided a good framework for her contact with the family.

Owen's mother gave a positive evaluation of the program in relation to Owen's behavior and his reading. She said that, "He does walk away from conflict sometimes now—he has more patience even with his brother at home." She also said that Owen was now looking at writing in shops and added: "I thought it was going to be difficult but it has helped me to realize a few things, especially about 0. It's taught me how to help Owen with reading and also helped me with my reading."

While the evaluation showed that Owen's engagement with reading had improved the study did not include a standardized assessment of his reading progress. It is planned to build

this into future case study evaluations. One issue that had arisen over the term, however, was that Owen's younger brother had started to present more challenging behavior at school and also at home and this was proving to be a concern.

CONCLUSION

The above case study illustrates the positive effect that the engagement of a parent in creative story-making with her child had in reducing his risk of exclusion. The pupil who had been excluded four times in the previous term had no exclusions during the term the parent engaged in the Story Links program. The emotional containment provided by the regularity of the sessions, the use of active listening, and the structure of the stories themselves created a potential space where a parent with a previously hostile attitude to the school could begin to collaborate with the school in supporting her son's learning. The sense of fun and shared laughter meant that the parent and child found mutual enjoyment in the shared story-making activity, an essential factor in promoting more positive attachment patterns.

By supporting the parent to think about her child within the story metaphor and to become more confident about her ability to support him in developing his reading skills, she was able to take a more authoritative parental position, hence alleviating the child's need to parent his mother.

While largely drawing on psychodynamic theory, the Story Links program was also integrated with the school's positive behavioral policy and the educational curriculum. Sessions incorporated feedback from the teacher on the pupil's behavior during the week and the finished stories were used by the TA in the classroom to support the child develop his reading skills. The created stories became a positive reminder for the child of the voice of his mother and when using the stories as his reading text in his work with his classroom TA, he

became eager to read whereas before he had been a very reluctant reader.

Later research

The findings of the above case study were supported by a later eighteen month research project at the University of Chichester. Funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the UK Teaching and Development Agency for Schools, the evaluation found that Story Links:

Improved parental engagement with their child's learning

Improved pupils' engagement with reading

Reduced pupils' exclusion from the classroom

Increased pupils' emotional wellbeing.

The full report can be viewed at http://storylinkstraining.co.uk/evidence-base/

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