

This paper was originally published in The Narrative Forum

The League Against Upsets after Divorce or Family Change

By Lindsey Hampson and Dale*

This article takes the form of a newsletter and evolved from some conversations I have held with Dale* who came to me with concerns following his parents' divorce. The newsletter was inspired by narrative practices that involve circulating alternative stories to known audiences and 'communities of concern'.

In their book 'Playful Approaches to Serious Problems' (1997), Freeman, Epston and Lobovits suggest that 'for an alternative story to take firm hold in a child and family's life, it is often helpful to catch those beyond the immediate circle of therapy up on changes'(p. 125). They acknowledge that the process of gathering information with the intention of sharing skills, competencies and expertise with others further enriches the narrative and thickens a counterplot which suits the young person's preferences for living ('consulting your consultants'). These new meanings are documented in a 'tangible and durable' record for the family and may assist them in reclaiming their lives further from the influence of the problem. This approach is also consistent with ideas in the 'Kids' Skills' solution focused approach (Furman, 2002) whereby a young person connects with their knowledges and competencies further when they teach or share a 'skill' that they have used to free themselves from a problem. Freeman, Epston and Lobovits (1997) cite O' Hanlon (1994) who notes that the disclosure of such information places the person in a 'protagonist's role' in their preferred story where they emerge as a hero and they are often happy for that heroism to be acknowledged.

I was also influenced by conversations that I have had with individuals who felt 'alone' in dealing with their parents' separation. Dale and I wanted to use the newsletter to invite others to link up, support and normalise their experiences to decrease this sense of isolation as well as validating their own stories and competencies.

The newsletter is written for young people and their families and includes some of the questions I have found helpful in supporting young people to connect with the skills and knowledges they have bought to bear when faced with tricky situations in their lives. Dale and I would be interested to receive thoughts and reflections about the newsletter and our conversations on the e-mail address below.

References

Freeman, J., Epston, D., Lobovits, D. (1997). *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems: Narrative Therapy for Children and Their Families*, Norton, New York.

Furman, B. (2002). *Kids' Skills Parents' Manual*, Helsinki Brief Therapy Institute.

The League Against Upsets after Divorce or Family Change



Hello there! My name is Lindsey Hampson, I'm a clinical psychologist who works with young people and their families.

One of the young people I was working with, Dale, who was 14, had been talking about how upset and angry feelings had come into his life after his mum and dad split up. These upset and angry feelings had been getting Dale into trouble with his mum sometimes, as they would invite him to damage property and they would sometimes stop him listening in class. Dale was finding he was slipping back in his schoolwork and this did not suit him at all.

Dale and I met eight times and I was pretty impressed by how Dale coped and asked him if he would share his thoughts with other young people who may be going through a similar experience. He was aware that other young people might be experiencing the same or similar difficulties to him and was happy to share his ideas. Dale and I talked about starting a newsletter sharing such ideas that each person who read it could add to.

I know through speaking to people that have been through their parents separating that they wish that they could have read such a newsletter to help them through a difficult time. Dale and I imagined that the newsletter could be sent out with updated comments, as more and more people add their own thoughts to it, and so this is the start of what we plan to do.

This newsletter has probably found its way to you as someone who knows you, knows you may be having a tough time after your parents splitting, or they may think you have coped well and want you to share your experiences with other young people. As you can see, the newsletter hasn't got a very snappy title as yet, so any ideas for the title would be warmly welcomed. I hope you enjoy the newsletter and add your own comments to help other young people. You or the person you are working with can e-mail me at lindsey.hampson@southportandformbypct.nhs.uk and I will add your thoughts. Also, the newsletter is going to be put up on the Centre for Narrative Practice website, www.narrativepractice.com, and unless you request me not to I will pass on your comments to be added on the website. Please be assured that any information that may identify you or others will be removed.

Warmest wishes

Dale and Dr. Lindsey Hampson

Lindsey: *Dale, of all the things that worked for you, what are some of your favourite ideas for dealing with the upset and angry feelings after your parents divorce?*

Dale: *Drawing a family tree and naming all the people in my family. It made me realise that they are still my family even though my parents had split up. I also thought putting a mark to show how I was doing helped [each time we met, Dale and I would put a mark on a scale of 0 to 10 about how he was doing at the time]. I could see that things were improving and that made me happy. Also talking about things with my mum helped. It made me feel better as I sometimes kept it inside.*

L: *Dale, what policies would you advise another young person to adopt if he or she intended to take back as much of their life as you have from the upset and angry feelings?*

D: *Just talk about it. Let it out what you want to say because it makes you feel better. Map out your family tree and see that they are still your family even though your mum and dad have split up. Put a mark from 0 to 10 as to how you are feeling each week so you can see that things are getting better.*

L: *When the upset and angry feelings had your life all to themselves, how miserable did it make you?*

D: *I couldn't be bothered doing anything. I couldn't be bothered going out. I wanted to be on my own. I know parents splitting affects people differently. My mate said it made him go off food, but it made me want to eat. After I talked about my parents splitting up, I got back on track. It also helped to talk to my mate [whose parents had split up] as he knows what it feels like. He said it can make you feel horrible and it does. But, there can be good things. On Christmas day I had a good time. I got two sets of presents and I have also got two new families! My Mum's boyfriend, Pete* I get on with great, and if my mum and dad hadn't have split I would never have met him. We talk about football, he lets me talk when I want to and we watch DVDs together. Also, my Dad's happy, which makes me happy.*

L: *What sort of future did the upset and angry feelings have in store for you?*

D: *They wanted me to end up in a bad boys' home because of my temper, or they wanted me to get into trouble with the police.*

L: *Does that plan suit you?*

D: *No. I don't see the point in that. You get a name for yourself and then you can't get a job. Getting a job means stuff to me because I want to have a family and I want to be able to support them.*

L: *Did these feelings try to interfere with your relationships with your parents?*

D: *Yes, they made me argue with my mum and dad.*

L: *Did that suit you?*

D: *No because I don't want to get on the bad side of them. I prefer getting on with them. When they are not angry, you can have a good time with them. I found that*

punching a pillow, reading magazines and playing on my PC and concentrating on something else helped me calm down.

L: What personal qualities and abilities have you brought to bear on these feelings that they can't stand?

D: I'm strong.

L: Looking back now on how you got a fair bit of your life back from these feelings, what would you tell other people to inspire and give them hope?

D: Well, I'd say do something that you like, play football, watch films, just do anything that makes you feel good. Go and ask your relatives about it. Ask your parents why they split up. This helps as sometimes you feel that it's your fault and then you can find out it's not.

L: Thank you Dale.

Dale's mum also worked very hard to help Dale manage after her divorce, and this is the advice she gave to other parents:

- ✳ Listen to your kids and talk things through
- ✳ Be patient and honest
- ✳ Don't call your ex names in front to your kids as this upsets and confuses them more.
- ✳ Try to spend quality time together with kids.
- ✳ Share and reflect on the happy times and making sure good and happy times will continue.
- ✳ The kids must have contact with your ex (if your children want to).

Now over to you...

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* Lindsey and Dale have agreed that although this is not his real name, Dale would prefer to be known as Dale in the context of this newsletter.