



Storysharing™

Communicating life experiences with people who have severe and profound communication difficulties

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Storysharing™: communicating life experiences with people who have severe and profound disabilities

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Cover photo: Mandisa tells us she went on a boat



Storysharing™

A basic guide to support the
gathering and sharing of life
experiences

Nicola Grove

What is Storysharing™?

It's a way to have a conversation with people who have severe difficulties in communication

It is centred around small stories of events in our lives that we share with other people to:-

- Remember together
- Entertain
- Make links with other people
- Make sense of what has happened
- Create meanings
- Create a shared history of our community
- Develop our identity

It is very simple to do—you spend time with a person remembering something interesting that happened, and help them to join in as you tell the story as you would to a friend, colleague or family member

- It's not about reading a book to people (*though that's good too!*)
- It is about sitting and chatting—with individuals and with groups

Why do it?

People with severe communication difficulties get excluded a lot

Their conversations are usually about

- Wants and needs
- Planning
- Basic social exchanges – saying hello, making jokes, compliments
- Managing behaviour and expressing feelings

Of course we all need these conversations. But we spend a lot of time with friends and family TELLING STORIES

Making Friends

When we tell someone a story, they listen to us and respond to us. This helps us to feel part of a community of others who have felt the same way in the same situation. This is the way we make friends

- sharing an experience and then
- remembering it together.

The background

Storysharing developed through watching and listening to ordinary people telling stories—and noticing that this rarely happened with people who had severe and profound disabilities.

Why don't people tell stories?

It's not just about impairments!

Of course, memory and communication skills play a part. But actually there are other reasons:-

- Daily lives are often so routine that nothing much goes on to remember
- Even when interesting things happen, they may not be noticed
- People have limited opportunities to make things happen themselves
- Carers may be worried about upsetting or overexciting someone, or reinforcing a bad memory
- Carers are not sure how to do it—they tell the anecdotes to each other, but how do you start with people who can't speak or attend well?

We started running groups in a day centre, using a simple communication aid, a few props and lots of animated talk, with pauses and prompting, and loads of repetition. These were very successful—and the techniques of Storysharing have now been developed through courses run over time in residential homes, and in staff training.

Evidence base

Staff and families report that Storysharing helps people with severe communication difficulties to remember events, to respond to each other as well as to staff, and to have fun.

The techniques described in this booklet have been developed over the past 10 years through:-

- Experiences running many storytelling groups with people who have severe communication difficulties
- Observations of informal narratives by friends and families (*try this: take a notebook out with you and listen to how people ACTUALLY share anecdotes*)
- Research into narrative and communication practices in different settings

Further reading

Grove, N. (2010) *The big book of Storysharing: At home, in school*. London: SENJIT/Institute of Education.

Grove, N. et. al. (2010) Sharing stories of everyday life with adults and children who have severe/profound intellectual disabilities. In V. Prasher, (ed) *Contemporary Issues in Intellectual disabilities*. NY: Nova

Grove, N. (2007) Exploring the absence of high points in story reminiscence with carers of people with profound disabilities *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 4, 252-259

Grove, N. & Harwood, J. (2007) How storytelling contributes to quality of life for people with learning disabilities *SLD Experience* 48, 27-30

How do we start ?

Find a story

- What happened?

The event needs to stand out in some way from the everyday routine. There must be something a bit different, unexpected. Stories build up to a high point or climax, and then calm down. Just describing going shopping does not make a story. But losing your keys, or finding your favourite chocolate when you thought there was none on the shelves... that makes a story

Key point: Be guided by the tiny anecdotes you store up to tell a friend

- How did it feel?

The strong feelings at the roots of the story are positive and negative:-

pleasure, excitement, surprise, love, joy, pride, courage, funny-pain, anger, fear, fed up, sad, shocked

Key points

We find the best stories are sparked off by what is funny, scary, annoying, surprising, lovely.

We always try to pair negative feelings with a positive feeling so we don't leave people feeling upset.

How do we tell it?

Put the story together to tell WITH the person who has the disability as your partner. You start the story off, and make a space for the partner to join in.

Your partner does not need to talk—he or she can:-

Make a noise or sound

Use their eyes

Show a facial expression

Make a movement

Show a prop

Use a simple communication aid

Some good ways of starting off

You'll never guess! It was so funny/annoying.... We've just seen the most amazing thing" We're feeling so excited/fed up/sad/

Things to put in the story

- What people said and did
- What you saw, heard, felt, tasted, smelled (use a simple prop if appropriate)
- If you use props and objects, keep them very simple, or else all the attention will go to the objects, rather than your voice and the interaction.

How to support

The basic technique is about keeping the story going, like a balloon moving between you.

DO

Use sentence prompts – start the sentence and let the person complete it by joining in.

We went to the ... (press communication aid to say CAFÉ)... Bob felt very (Bob demonstrates HUNGRY; you show him by rubbing his tummy if necessary)

He found a (Bob shows a five pound note) on the floor

The man in the café said (press communication aid YOU HAVE IT)

He bought the biggest cake! (demonstrate opening mouth wide and showing “big” with your hands)

Allow time for the person to join in

Hand over to the person regularly using links and pauses:
And then.... So.... But... Like....

Encourage lots of imitation

A BigMack communication aid is a really great help

Repeat the story as often you can.

We tell and retell anecdotes, and the more we tell them the more practised they become. People with severe communication difficulties need lots of repetition. They may not realise what is going on at first, and it might take up to 5/6 goes for a response

For people with autism and very short attention spans, start quietly and rhythmically and just tell the most important bit. Gradually you can introduce more of the story.

How to listen

Good tellers need good listeners. Help to develop a culture of empathetic, enjoyable sharing by showing how to listen

Create an intimate **telling space** by sitting in a circle or semi-circle, close enough to hear easily

Demonstrate the following and encourage the other residents or tenants to copy you

- Lean forward
- Echo what the teller says – repeat words or phrases as a response – *in the pond! You dropped it!*
- Echo the gestures and body movements used by the person
- Respond with exclamations: *oh no! wow! really?*
- Let listeners record these on a BigMack and use them at the right point



Keeping a record

It's important to keep a record of the stories, if possible in a form that the person can own

- A story box with cards with the basic information
- A story scrapbook with a cover made by the person
- A talking photo album (records messages on a button)

You can get BigMacks and talking photo albums from

<http://www.liberator.co.uk/>

Have special sessions where people share their best stories—reviewing the week is good

You can use Storysharing™ for tenants' meetings

But also... keep going over the story with individuals in quiet times together—waiting for transport, personal care, at bedtime

Writing up the story

The story

When and where; *in the café, Friday Nov 20*

What happened? *Bob found a £5 note on the table. We asked around. The café owner told Bob to spend it. He bought a BIG cake*

Who was there? *Bob, Mary, Joe and Sushila*

The best or worst bit; *when he said you can have it
Choosing the cake*

(this is the bit you will build up to and emphasise)

How you felt: *excited, happy*

What people said. *We said Whose is this? The café owner said
You have it! We said, wow*

What can the person do in the story.

*Open his mouth, allow me to put my hand on his tummy to show
hungry, shout with excitement, laugh, hold up the note*

The object for this story is..... *a pretend £5 note
(stick it onto the card, or tie it on to the book)*

Your notes

Your notes

Telling stories to each other is a basic human skill

Many children and adults with severe communication difficulties find it difficult to recall the things that happen in everyday life, and to share them with other people.

Storysharing™ is a simple strategy for helping people to tell their stories. It has been shown to develop communication and social relationships

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