The Narrative Model for Communicating with children about challenging issues

Entry into the care system is a challenging experience for children and young people:
- They have to leave their home and family
- Sometimes they are placed separately from their siblings
- They have to get to know their new carers and others who live in the household
- They also have to become familiar with the rules and routines in the new household
- They can be unclear about the reasons for coming into care and whether or not they will be returning to the care of their parents
- It can be puzzling for them to know what to say about it to: parents, siblings, carers, professionals, school and indeed friends.

We, who are involved in their care, need to work together to help them with this challenge so they are not alone. When we work together, it helps children settle into their new placement, they are better prepared for contact with their kin, and they are more likely to engage with help offered by professionals. The Narrative model can help us work more closely together and communicate in a more open way with children about their entry to care.

1. Caregiver Network
The caregiving network comprises the important adults in the child’s life, including their carers, statutory link workers/social workers, and their parents if available. Meetings focus on what the child needs to know right now in order to help them adjust to being in care.

2. Use of Narratives
A narrative is like a story or script that the caregiving network develop about the child’s experiences. It acknowledges the reality of the child’s situation but does so in an age appropriate way. A Narrative gives the child and adults a common language for talking about entry to care. It is best if the narrative is written down and the child has a copy.

3. Delivering the Narrative to the child
The delivery of the Narrative needs to be well planned in advance and the social worker needs to take time to share the narrative with the child. It is best if this can be done in the placement and if possible, the carer can be present.

4. Responding to the child’s emotions
This can be a powerful experience for the child and they may have different feelings. The most helpful thing for adults to do in the moment is to accept the child’s emotional response, allow space for them to express it and give lots of empathy.

5. Responding to the child’s questions
Adults should praise the child for any curiosity about their narrative or other aspects of their life-story. Carers can join the child in their curiosity by becoming a co-investigator and capturing questions in a book or box. As questions arise, these are shared with the social worker so that children can gain answers to their questions in a timely manner.

6. Broadcasting the Narrative to significant others
The social worker and child agree on the other people the narrative should also be shared with - for example others in the household or a school teacher. At the next contact with the birth parent(s) the social worker attends, and either they or the parent(s) will share the narrative again with the child. Sharing the narrative between the child and important people in their life will ensure the child knows that everyone has the same understanding.

7. Building on the Narrative
Attend to how the child responds to the Narrative as this indicates what they need help with next:
- Help talking indirectly or directly with their parents about their pre-care experiences
- Stories (real or fictional) of other children in care to help them adjust
- Another narrative about a particular aspect of their lives
- Lifestory work to help fill some of the gaps in their knowledge base
- Therapeutic support adjusting to the experiences they have had