

Telling Your Story with a Purpose Facilitator Guide and Curriculum

Center for Children with Special Needs, Seattle Children's Hospital
Washington State Department of Health,
Children with Special Health Care Needs Program

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with Special Needs
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Guidelines for Using These Training Materials

This training was developed by the Center for Children with Special Needs at Seattle Children's Hospital with funding from the Washington State Department of Health Children with Special Health Care Needs Program.

1. You may use our training materials, but we ask that you do not charge people to attend the training (or charge only to cover your expenses).
2. For each training you give, please email us with the following information:
 - Date of training
 - Number of attendees
 - Copies of evaluations of the training
 - Any suggested modifications to the training

Email: cshcn@seattlechildrens.org or mail:
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General purpose of the training:

This 4-hour session is a basic training for parents and caregivers who would like to advocate for policy or systems-level change for children with health conditions, behavioral or mental health conditions, or disabilities. It covers what it means to advocate for change; how to define an issue that can be addressed with policy or systems changes; and how to draw on personal experiences as examples to make a point effectively and memorably. While some information is provided, the focus of most of the time in the training is on developing a 2- to 3-minute presentation (without any visual aids) that could be delivered to an individual decision-maker or a group of decision-makers, eg. legislators, a school board, or a city council. This training is designed to benefit parents and caregivers who are new to advocacy and those who have an intermediate level of experience.

Training Outline

1. Welcome

- A. Overview of agenda
- B. Guidelines for group
- C. Meeting logistics (breaks, bathroom, cell phones)

2. Participant introductions

- A. Participants and facilitators introduce themselves

3. What makes a good story?

4. Defining your issue

- A. Choosing an issue that affects your family and other families
- B. Determining the audience you will address – who has the power to make a change?

Lunch

5. Preparing your story

6. Practicing your story

7. Wrap-up and evaluation

Materials needed for the training

Set up the room to facilitate easy conversation and note taking. Having a table or tables to write on is helpful.

You will need:

- Name tags
- Sign-in sheet
- Training folder at each place (optional)
- Pens
- Copy of the surveys and worksheets for each participant (see next page)
- 1 flip chart if possible
- Pre-filled flip chart pages (see list on next page)
- Markers
- Signs to help people find the room
- Light snacks and water

Handouts

Pre and Post Evaluations:

Evaluation surveys to complete before and after the training, (We suggest stapling them together so that you can keep track of how the knowledge reported by the participants changed as a result of the training).

Handouts:

1. Self-disclosure
2. Questions to ask
3. Advice for Your Dinner Party Stories: Keep It Familiar

Worksheets:

1. Defining your issue worksheet
2. Preparing your story worksheet

Flip Chart Pages

Prepare the following flip chart pages ahead of time:

1. Introductions:

- Your name
- Child's name, age, diagnosis
- One thing you have learned about yourself since becoming a parent (or through your work with children and families with special needs if participants are not parents)

2. Agenda for today:

- List activities on the agenda with the times

3. Proposed group guidelines:

- Speak only for yourself
- Listen respectfully
- Share the airtime
- Honor confidentiality

4. Defining Your Issue Worksheet

- Challenge or problem?
- How are others affected?
- What needs to change?
- Who has the power?

Note: Use of italics throughout the curriculum indicates general guidance for the leader.

As participants arrive, ask them to create nametags and complete the pre-training survey.

Section 1: Welcome 15 min

Purpose: *Introduce the training, gives participants an overview and sets context and tone.*

Post the day's schedule, including lunch and breaks where everyone can see it.

Materials you need for this section:

- Flip chart and markers
- Pre-filled flip chart page (agenda)
- Pre-training survey

Welcome attendees:

- Recognize the effort it takes for parents and caregivers to take time away from all their other responsibilities to come to the training.
- Provide brief introduction of facilitators – names, organizational affiliation, experience with advocacy and telling your story, and why this training is of interest to you.
- The purpose of this training is help you (parents and caregivers) learn how to prepare and share an effective story based on your experiences with your child. We will do this with worksheets to help prepare your story, practice rounds and coaching feedback. Each of you brings experiences that are unique, important and valuable and we look forward to working with you to develop your stories. When we do this training, we usually find that parents and caregivers in the room have expertise that is valuable for others, and we will encourage you to provide input and coach each other as you work on developing your stories.

Review agenda – refer to flip chart

A. Today's agenda:

1. Welcome
2. Introductions
3. What makes a good story
4. Defining your issue
- Lunch**
5. Preparing your story
6. Practice and self-evaluation
7. Sharing with the group
8. Training wrap up and evaluation

B. Group guidelines

- Our goal is to create a relaxed, but focused atmosphere.
- There are bound to be a lot of stories and interests shared today. We ask that you share the “air time” and that you keep what you hear here today confidential.
- To move through the agenda, we have clearly defined times when we’ll need to move on to the next item. This means we may need to end great conversations at times.
- We all have different strengths and experience with speaking in front of people, and the great thing about a group like this you are in a room full of parents who are rooting for you! The best way to practice for the first time is with people who are on your side and want you to succeed.

C. Meeting logistics:

- Thank you so much to our host!
- Cell phones
- Please ask questions when you need to and feel free to get up and get coffee or go to the bathroom when needed.
- Privacy
- Has everyone completed the pre-survey?

Section 2- Introductions 20 minutes

Leaders: One co-facilitator leads the introductions and the other writes down the responses to iii on a flip chart for the group to refer back to during the wrap up.

*Then tell the group that they will introduce themselves by **very briefly** sharing their:*

- *Name*
- *Family/child/diagnosis*
- *What is one thing you want to learn from this training?*

How many of you have advocated for your child (i.e. at school).

How many of you have advocated for change in terms of policy or system like schools or the hospital or legislature?

Section 3 – What makes a good story? 30 minutes

What is a story?

For today's training, when we use the term "story" we mean a short, succinct presentation (or document) that conveys an experience, feedback, request or suggestion that you are sharing.

This could be for:

- Making a change in a system, process or practice,
- Influencing a policy or law,
- Asking for funding for a new program, or to preserve an existing program.

Examples of how people share their stories include:

- Presenting at a hearing or forum
- Presenting at a meeting
- Sitting on a panel presentation
- Asking for funding
- Presenting at a PTA meeting

Why share a story for advocacy?

- Listening to an argument or statistics makes us a critic (look for ways to poke holes); listening to a story makes us a participant and invites receptivity. We associate with the experience rather than critique it or defend against it.
- There's an empathic connection when you see yourself in the other.
- The listener can realize they have things in common with you.
- It's an effective way to cross cultural barriers.

Show video clip and then lead discussion.

Discussion questions:

#1. What made Adana's presentation effective? (*One leader leads brainstorm and other writes on flip chart*)

Examples to mention if they don't come up in discussion:

- Balancing positive experiences with opportunities for improvement
- Avoiding putting people on the defensive**
- Introduces you and your family.
- Focuses on one thing**
- Explains your situation
- Has enough details to make it interesting
- Includes only information that relates to the situation or your goal**

- Reminds the policymaker or decision-maker that you are a constituent
- Captures your emotion and passion for an issue
- Asks for a specific action to address the situation

#2. What action was Adana asking for? Does anyone have a different interpretation of what she was asking for?

Make the point that there was a clear action item. Use mechanic story to illustrate concept. *Let's say I take my car into the mechanic. I explain that my car is not working. I am frustrated because it is making me miss work, I couldn't take my kids to school today and had to call my neighbor to take them and I don't have the money to repair it right now because I just had to pay medical bills for my child and I just don't know what is wrong with it. So, this story could probably elicit some empathy and support from the mechanic which is nice but it really doesn't get me what I need nor tell her what I want. If instead I say "I have been having trouble getting my car to keep running. It stops after it has been running for about 5 minutes. I have tried different gas and checking all the hoses. Would you have time to look at it and get me an idea of what it might need along with an estimate for time and cost by noon today? Now this is something that the mechanic can act on. It also gives you both a starting point. She now knows what you are asking her to do.*

The point is you are speaking because you want your listener to do something not just support you.

#4. How did she balance her personal story about what her child needs with what is important for other children in her community and the greater good?

#5. She is making the point that there is a problem with our parks right now. What strategies did you see her use to say there was a problem, yet not come across as attacking or complaining?

#6. If you could give her suggestions for improvement, what would they be?

Section 4-Defining Your Issue 45 minutes

Intro to section: This activity will help you decide what problem or issue you want to focus on today.

We will be using a worksheet to help you develop your issue and walk through how to use it with you. Then you will start to fill it out and then we will break for lunch. We aren't going to take a break, but there will be some time when you all can work individually on your worksheet, and that would be a good time to go to the restroom if you need to.

Let's talk about what it looks like to advocate for your child vs. advocating for children with health conditions or special needs in general.

Let's say instead of asking for changes to all playgrounds in the city, Adana was asking for an aide to be with her son at recess to keep him from running off. That would be an example of personal advocacy for her own child.

This is an important point to make because our training today, and advocacy in general, is about making changes to benefit all children and families, not just to fix something specific for your child. This is the difference between personal advocacy and systems-level advocacy where you are looking for changes to a whole system.

One way to check if your focus is on systems-level advocacy is when you get to a point where you are asking yourself, "Why are things this way? There ought to be a law against this!" or "There ought to be a law to protect these rights or make something in particular happen."

You can certainly use today's materials to help you clarify your issue and needs for an issue impacting only your child, but that isn't our focus today.

We are going to have you fill out a worksheet, but before you do, we want to talk about Adana's example using the worksheet.

Have four flip chart sheets pre-titled with:

- Challenge or problem?
- How are others affected?
- What needs to change?
- Who has the power?

1. What is the challenge or problem that Adana, her child, and other children are facing? Please use 1-2 sentences.

2. How does this challenge affect other children or families?

3. What does Adana say about what changes need to happen?

4. Who has the power to make a change?

Things to consider as you start your own worksheet:

- Is it likely that this problem or challenge matters to other people?
- Are there possible solutions for this issue or is it “too big” to address?
For example, if Adana was asking for a change in all national parks, that would require a very different strategy and advocacy would be needed at the national level, probably involving multiple organizations representing different people, to make a change.
- Are you asking for more than just “support” or “awareness?”

Teaching points:

Some of the things you could potentially ask for include:

- A change in policy or practice
- A change in a law (or related to a specific piece of legislation under discussion)
- Funding for a new program or to continue an existing program

#1 Does anyone have any other examples of things they want to advocate for?

It’s important to avoid asking for something vague like “support for families of children with health conditions or disabilities” or to say you want to “raise awareness” about a topic. It is very difficult for a policymaker or decision-maker to take action in that case and you may end up with nothing more than a pat on the shoulder!

Provide handout about self-disclosure and what to consider. Before you fill out your worksheet, there are a few more things to consider:

- Do **you** feel comfortable sharing your personal experience and information about your child in public when talking about this topic?
- Do **you** have so much emotion about this topic that it would be hard for you to talk about it in public?
 - This emotion could be sadness or anger or any other strong emotion that either makes it hard for you to talk or could keep you from being effective.

- Would **your child and/or family** feel comfortable with you speaking about this topic in public?
 - It's important to think about older children or adults in particular and how they will feel about what you plan to say.
 - You may want to consider if they should have a say in what you plan to say.
 - Or you may want to consider how you can make the story you share be very focused on you as a parent and less focused on your child or family member's life and experiences.

If you feel uncertain about any of these questions, you may want to work on a different issue today.

Or, if you think you have a lot of emotion but you want to go ahead, then you may want to practice a lot ahead of time. It can be very helpful to practice with another person before you share it publicly.

Before you all go ahead with your worksheets, we would like to have several people (*popcorn style*) who already have an idea about a problem or challenge share them so we can discuss it as an example. This is #1 on your worksheet. We suggest that you consider writing one sentence about families in general and one sentence about your own family.

For example: Families of children with developmental delays have many more medical and therapy appointments than other children and need Medicaid to continue to be fully funded to help with this financial burden. In my case, we have physical therapy and speech therapy every week and we have to see 3 different specialists at the hospital a couple times a year and we count on having Medicaid insurance.

Discuss the example problem statements

Hand out worksheet and review instructions

#2 Who is affected by this issue or who would benefit from it being addressed? Is it other children? Other families?

Teaching points:

- If the problem you were thinking about working on today doesn't affect other children or families, we would ask that you think of another problem to work on. You could still use the worksheet to help you plan for talking to someone about a personal issue, but

our goal today is to focus on advocacy for changes that will benefit other children and families.

- It is important to pick a problem that other people care about too. Otherwise it will be difficult to convince legislators or decision-makers to take action.

#3 What needs to change?

- What needs to be done? Changed? Improved? Done differently? Discontinued?
- The more specific you can be the better.

Think about if you are asking for:

- A change in a policy or practice
- A change in a law (or related to a specific piece of legislation under discussion)
- Funding for a new program or to continue funding for an existing program
- Other?

#4 Who has the power to make the change?

It is important to have an idea of a possible solution, and then to bring your issue to a policymaker or decision-maker who can actually address the issue. If you bring a problem to somebody and it's outside the scope of their job or elected office, then it's going to be frustrating for both you and the person you are talking to. For example, you don't want to go to the doctor rather than the mechanic when you have a problem with your car!

It's also important to think about the chain of command.

To give an example that many of us can relate to in our personal lives, if you have a problem with your child's teacher you always want to start with the teacher first, and then you might go to the special education director and finally to the superintendent of public instruction. You wouldn't start with the superintendent of public instruction because they will just send you to the teacher – and the teacher could be very upset that you went over their head.

If you're having trouble thinking about who would have the power, think about what part of your child's life is affected by the problem. Is it a school problem, a health care problem, a health insurance problem? Who is in charge of the system where you are experiencing this problem? Is the person in charge likely to be willing to make a change or is legislation or legal action needed?

For example, if you are fighting an insurance company and not making progress, you might need to do some research on what the laws or regulations are that apply to insurance companies and consider if a change needs to be made at that level.)

You may not know exactly who this will be just yet. We can help you today if we know or we can just make the assumption that a particular agency would have the power, and then we can reach out to the Arc or other organizations later to confirm. Let us know if you would like us to do that.

It's also fine to come up with a fictional decision-maker who you want to bring your issue to, just for the workshop today. What you practice today will still be helpful even if you have to figure out who to share your issue with later.

Lunch: 30 minutes

Facilitator cues second Adana video.

Section 5- Preparing your story**45 minutes**

Explain that the next step is to work on your story – what you will actually say to a policymaker.

Play the second video of Adana. Invite any comments about the second video.

Play the NPR clip “Advice for your dinner party stories: Keep it Familiar”

Discussion: brainstorm – “What are some characteristics of a good story?”

This discussion will be similar to the discussion about what made Adama’s story effective but it will serve as a refresher right before they start writing their own stories.

Then provide instructions about steps 1-3 on the worksheet – tell the participants to only look at side 1 of the handout.

- The first step is to transfer your one-sentence issue into #3 on this worksheet. It may feel more natural to start with your issue or problem, but that is #3 on this worksheet because when you are talking to a policymaker or decision-maker you need to start with your name and what you are asking them to do – like voting for a piece of legislation or providing funding for a program.
- Instructions for #2 – what do you want your listener to DO? Be specific and state this request in one sentence; examples “I am asking you to vote for...” or “I am here because I want you to change this policy.” When possible, it’s great to thank your listener for something they have done in the past that you appreciate, like voting in favor of legislation.

Allow the participants time to work on their request and then invite everyone to share their request (#2) and their problem (#3). Discuss as a group and brainstorm about revisions to the request and problem if necessary.

Continue with instructions.

For #4, try to share a specific story that will help your listener relate to you and your family. If possible, share a positive example of where things went well and why you want others to have a similar experience, rather than a negative example. It is more effective to inspire your listener than to criticize them. Be very careful about how you talk about problems that you have faced. If you are going to share a negative experience, make sure it doesn’t sound like you are accusing your listener of being responsible for the problem.

You may find that #5 is already covered in what you wrote for #4, and if so you don't need to write more for #5. It's important to make sure to include not only why the problem is significant and how it affects people, but also why the solution you propose would make a difference.

Try to frame your comments about the results that could be achieved in terms of something that your listener will value – for example, Adana explained how her suggestion of evaluating the true accessibility of parks with stakeholders and implementing solutions to improve accessibility would result in benefits for children with disabilities in terms of them developing and maximizing their potential and also for typically developing children who would learn about inclusion and respect for others in their community. She also explained that play is a right for children because it is “their work” as Mr. Rogers said - not a privilege.

#5 is providing the final reasons why it is important for your listener to take action. This is the beginning of the end of your conversation, so you need to think about how it will lead into a final statement about why the action you are requesting is needed.

It may seem like #6 is easy, but you do need to give some thought to how you will connect everything you just said in #4 and #5 back to the action you are requesting. For example, Adana used a transition phrase “With all this in mind, I would like to ask you to...”

Incorporate a pause after 10 minutes: Does anyone have any questions to ask now? Discuss as group and then keep working

Section 6-Practice with a partner and make revisions 15 minutes

Now you should have a good first draft of your story. We are going to practice in pairs. Each person will have 2-3 minutes to present their story to the other. You will both complete the evaluation sheet to help provide effective feedback – the person sharing the story will do it as a self-evaluation. Then switch. Make notes about anything you would like to do differently in the next practice round.

Announce halfway point to let attendees know it is time to do self-evaluation and switch who is speaking.

Section 7- Sharing in the whole group - 40 minutes

Invite volunteers to give their sample presentations. Refer back to the flip chart from the morning with ideas about what makes a presentation effective and ask the group to provide suggestions or comments based on that list about what makes a presentation effective.

Section 8-Wrap-up and evaluations- 20 minutes

Group discussion: We started by asking everyone for one thing they wanted to learn today, and now we'd like to ask each of you to share one thing you learned today. (Scribe what people learned and keep for training data)

Please complete evaluations before you go. This will help us improve the training in the future. You will also see that we are asking some personal questions about your age, your race/ethnicity, whether you are a mom or a dad, and so on. The reason why we are asking is because we want to keep track of whether we are including parents with different situations and characteristics in these discussions. It's helpful to us to keep track of the characteristics of participants, but it's OK to skip them if you don't want to answer them.

Pre and Post Evaluations

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Pre-Training Evaluation: Telling Your Story with a Purpose

The Department of Health and Seattle Children's Center for Children with Special Needs designed this training to support parents and caregivers of children with special needs who would like to participate in advocacy activities to share the perspective of families of children with special needs.

Your feedback on this anonymous survey will help us improve the training for future participants. We ask questions about your background because our goal is to provide training to parents and caregivers of different ages, backgrounds and levels of advocacy experience.

Please complete the first page before the training.

1. Please share how much you agree or disagree with these statements. *(For each statement, circle the number that best describes your opinion.)*

	Not confident	Not very confident	Somewhat confident	Very confident
I know what points to include when sharing a personal story or experience in public to advocate for changes in policies or systems.	1	2	3	4
I can explain effectively to my listeners why they should take action on what I propose.	1	2	3	4
I feel well-equipped to make decisions about what to share in public while respecting the privacy of my child and my family.	1	2	3	4
I can identify at least one personal story that I would like to share to advocate for changes in policies or systems.	1	2	3	4
If I wanted to go out and share my story to advocate for changes in policies or systems, I have ideas about what I could say.	1	2	3	4
I have tools to provide negative feedback or share negative experiences in a way that will help others be open to my ideas.	1	2	3	4

Post-Training Evaluation: Telling Your Story with a Purpose

Please complete the next pages after the training.

1. Please share how much you agree or disagree with these statements. *(For each statement, circle the number that best describes your opinion.)*

	Not confident	Not very confident	Somewhat confident	Very confident
I know what points to include when sharing a personal story or experience in public to advocate for changes in policies or systems.	1	2	3	4
I can explain effectively to my listeners why they should take action on what I propose.	1	2	3	4
I feel well-equipped to make decisions about what to share in public while respecting the privacy of my child and my family.	1	2	3	4
I can identify at least one personal story that I would like to share to advocate for changes in policies or systems.	1	2	3	4
If I wanted to go out and share my story to advocate for changes in policies or systems, I have ideas about what I could say.	1	2	3	4
I have tools to provide negative feedback or share negative experiences in a way that will help others be open to my ideas.	1	2	3	4

2. Please share how much you agree or disagree with these statements about today's training. *(Circle one number for each statement.)*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I felt comfortable sharing ideas.	1	2	3	4
I felt comfortable asking questions.	1	2	3	4
The group had open discussions about the material.	1	2	3	4
The information provided was useful to me.	1	2	3	4

3. What was the best part of the training?

4. What suggestions do you have for improving the training?

5. What other leadership training topics are of interest to you? *(Please check all that apply.)*

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advocating with your story | <input type="checkbox"/> Managing conflict |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitating supportive conversations | <input type="checkbox"/> Discovering your advocacy skills and strengths |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advocating with local or state government | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing advocacy strategies to address community issues |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working collaboratively in teams | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding different styles of learning, working and leading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Building partnerships or coalitions | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leading an effective meeting | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Negotiation | |

6. Have you ever participated in advocacy activities (eg. meetings, committees) where you were representing the perspective of families of children with special needs in general (**excluding** activities for your own child, like your child's Individualized Education Program [IEP] meeting or doctor's appointment)?

- Yes
 No → Go to question 8

7. **If Yes:** How many times have you participated in this kind of advocacy activity in the past year?

- 1 time
 2-5 times
 More than 5 times

8. Is it likely you will participate in advocacy events, meetings, or activities in the future?

- Yes, very likely
 Yes, somewhat likely
 No, not very likely
 No, not at all likely

9. What is your relationship to a child with a special need?

- Mother Father Other family member Other

10. How old are you?

- 18 to 25 25 to 35 35 to 45 45 to 55 55 or older

11. What is your race/ethnicity? *(Please check all that apply.)*

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> African American/Black | <input type="checkbox"/> Latino/Hispanic | <input type="checkbox"/> Caucasian/White |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian | <input type="checkbox"/> Native American | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to identify |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pacific Islander | <input type="checkbox"/> Native Alaskan | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

12. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Junior high High school Some college College Graduate degree

Handouts

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Telling Your Story with a Purpose

Questions to ask when you are invited to tell your story

Gather information to help prepare and know what to expect:

- What's the purpose of the meeting or event?
- What part of my story do they want to hear?
- Is there a message you want me to leave the audience with?
- When, where, how long do you want me to speak?
- What's the format of the meeting?
- Who is the audience? How many people will be there?
- Will there be other parents there?
- What's important for me to know about this group?
- What kinds of things should I prepare or think about beforehand?
- How long will I have to talk or share my story?
- Is there a stipend or payment to cover my costs?

Questions to ask yourself

- What am I willing to share?
- What do I feel is too private to share?
- What does my family (or child) not want me to talk about?
- What will my story teach those listening?
- Have I had a negative experience that is still bothering me that will be difficult to share in a constructive way?
- Do I have the time for this?
- Does my story match the topic?
- Do I want to do this?

Planning information to check on:

- Who is my contact?
- What should I wear?
- What is the meeting room number?
- Where do I park?
- If this is a panel presentation, make sure there is a time to hear the other parent's stories **before** the panel. Anticipate Q & A's and practice answers as a panel.

After the meeting or activity:

Connect with the person who invited you to the event or meeting. Check in with them and let them know how it went and any issues that came up or questions you had.

Telling Your Story with a Purpose

Things to think about when deciding if you want to share your story

1. You have some distance and perspective on your experience vs. being in the midst of it or still actively working through it.
2. The story has benefit for others. It's not about your personal agenda, frustration or current issue.
3. You feel ready to share it. Trust your instincts. Share parts of the experience that you are ready for now—you don't need to tell it all.
4. You are relatively comfortable talking about your experience. It's not at your expense—you don't feel overly vulnerable, exposed or shamed.

Guidelines for self-disclosure when presenting

1. Stay with the focus of your message—less is usually more.
2. Protect the privacy of others.

Advice for Your Dinner Party Stories: Keep It Familiar

From NPR Morning Edition

There's a difference between the stories we tell and the stories we like to hear. New social science research finds most of us like to listen to stories about familiar things.

David Green: Host

OK, I want you to think about the last time when you were at a dinner party and you were telling a story to your friends. Maybe you were talking about that exotic vacation you just got back from, maybe a brand new movie you saw that no one else had seen. Well, there's some new social science research suggesting that you might be better off talking about experiences that your audience also has had. And to understand why this is, we are joined by NPR's social science correspondent, Shankar Vedantam. Hey, Shankar.

Shankar Vedantam: Hey David

Greene: So what's wrong with talking about a movie you've seen that no one else has seen? Is that a problem?

Vedantam: Well, it kind of is a problem, David, because what happens very often when you do that is that you leave your audience with blank stares. I was talking with psychologist Dan Gilbert at Harvard...

Greene: And you don't want that. You never want a table full of blank stares (laughter).

Vedantam: (Laughter) Gilbert told me that people who tell you about a movie that they've seen that you haven't seen often end up confusing you.

Dan Gilbert: They say, oh, there's this guy. He's a detective, and he lives in New York. And he's got this girlfriend. And then they go to this place. And you're just thinking, what, what, who? So we get lost very quickly when other people are speaking because most people are not particularly talented at telling stories.

Greene: OK, I got totally confused when he was describing that movie. So is this a problem because I, as a listener, am sort of just totally left out?

Vedantam: That's right. Now, it's also possible that envy may be a part of this. If you tell me, David, that you're off to Maui tomorrow, I might end up feeling envious of you. And so that earlier research has actually shown that one reason that stories about experiences we haven't

had are less satisfying to us is that they can leave us feeling left out. But what Gilbert and his colleagues Gus Cooney and Timothy Wilson are finding here is a different phenomenon. A common assumption that both storytellers and listeners are making turns out to be wrong.

Gilbert: Speakers tend to think that listeners will most enjoy hearing novel stories - that is, stories about experiences the listeners haven't had. And that makes perfectly good sense. We think of communication as an attempt to tell people things they don't already know. But what our experiments revealed was that listeners actually far preferred to hear stories about experiences they had already had.

Greene: Shankar, how did Gilbert do experiments here? Did he hang out at hundreds of dinner parties or what?

Vedantam: (Laughter). Well, he did something much easier but less interesting, David. He and his colleagues exposed people to stories about novel and familiar experiences. And what they found is that stories about familiar experiences were enjoyed much more than stories about novel experiences. Now, it's not that people don't want to hear about new stories. You know, we go to movies. We read books. The reason we don't enjoy such stories told by our friends is that storytelling is really hard, and most people we meet aren't great storytellers.

Gilbert: Most of us, when we tell stories, leave all sorts of things out. As a result, if our listeners aren't already familiar with the topic we're talking about, they get lost really, really quickly.

Vedantam: One of the things that Gilbert recommends, David, is that at your next dinner party you should spend less time talking about experiences that only you've had and more time talking about experiences that your listeners have also had. So when you talk about a movie that your friend has also seen, your friend is going to compensate for your weaknesses as a storyteller by remembering context and atmosphere and all the things that made the movie memorable in the first place.

To put it another way, Gilbert says we tend to think of stories as if they are fruit. We think old stories are rotten and should be avoided. He says it's better to think of stories as if they are wine. They get better with age.

Self-evaluation: preparing your story

	Yes, I remembered and rocked!	Oops, I forgot! OR I could improve.
I introduced myself.		
I stated the action that I wanted my listener to take.		
My listener has the power to take action on this issue.		
I gave a personal example of why this is important to me.		
I explained how other children or families are affected by this problem.		
I provided at least one positive example or story.		
I didn't make comments that could make my listener or audience feel criticized or responsible for the problem.		
I explained how other families or the community would benefit from what I'm asking for.		
I repeated my request at the end.		
I thanked my listener for their time.		

One thing I want to do differently next time:

One thing that worked well:

Peer evaluation: preparing your story

	Yes, my partner remembered and rocked!	Oops, my partner forgot OR could improve.
Introduced herself/himself		
Stated the action that they wanted the listener to take.		
Listener has the power to take action on this issue.		
Gave a personal example of why this is important to me.		
Explained how other children or families are affected by this problem.		
Provided at least one positive example or story.		
Didn't make comments that could make my listener or audience feel criticized or responsible for the problem.		
Explained how other families or the community would benefit from what I'm asking for.		
Repeated request at the end.		
Thanked listener for their time.		

One thing to consider doing differently next time:

One thing that worked well:

Worksheets

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Telling Your Story with a Purpose
Defining your issue

- 1. What is the challenge or problem that you, your child or your family is facing? Think of a problem that affects other children and families too. Consider writing one sentence about families in general and one sentence about your own family.**

For example: Families of children with developmental delays have many more medical and therapy appointments than other children have and need Medicaid to continue to be fully funded to help with this financial burden. In my case, we have physical therapy and speech therapy every week and we have to see 3 different specialists at the hospital a couple times a year and we count on having Medicaid insurance.

- 2. How does this challenge affect others? (Or how could it affect others if nothing is done to address it?)**

- 3. What needs to change? (Or what can be done to improve the situation?)**

- 4. Who has the power to make a change?**

Telling Your Story with a Purpose Preparing Your Story

1. Who are you?

Name:

City or town you live in:

Name, ages and diagnosis of people in your story (optional):

2. What do you want your listener to DO? (What needs to be done to address your issue?)

- Be specific and state this request in 1 sentence - aim for 30 words or less. Don't just ask for "support;" provide a clear action item.
- Examples: "I am asking you to vote for..." or "I am here because I want you to change this policy..." or "I want you to provide funding for a program that..."
- When possible, you may want to start by thanking the listener for something they have done in the past that you appreciate (like voting for a bill or supporting funding for a program).

3. What is the challenge or problem that you, your child or your family is facing? (You can simply copy your response from #1 on the "Defining Your Issue" worksheet here.)

4. Why is it important to you and other families?

Tell a short story (in 4-5 sentences) about how this issue has affected you and your family. If possible, use a positive example – a situation where things went well and why you want others to have a similar experience – instead of a negative example.

Stop and check: Review your answers for comments that could make the listener or audience feel criticized or responsible for problems you have faced.

5. How could other families or the community benefit from what you are asking for? What results could be achieved?**5. End by restating your request and thanking them for their time.**

When possible, this is a good time to thank your listener for something they have done in the past that you appreciate (like voting for a bill or supporting funding for a program).