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Title: Understanding a child's journey and keeping the child at the centre of decision making

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You are watching a webinar about the PACE programme from the delivery team in CELCIS, at the University of Strathclyde. PACE is a Quality Improvement programme aiming to reduce drift and delay in permanence planning for looked after children. These webinars were recorded in the spring of 2020, so please be aware that key changes in legislation, guidance and practice may have occurred since this time.

(LD) Hello, everyone. My name is Linda Davidson, and I'm one of the PACE consultants in CELCIS. Along with my colleague Micky Anderson, who's a data analyst at CELCIS.

Today's webinar is about understanding a child's journey and keeping the child at the centre of decision making.

It's not easy, often, to keep a child at the centre of decision making and in the PACE programme, we have explored some of the barriers to this. There are often competing demands of children and parents needs, and a tendency at times to focus on parents' issues and their support needs.

The huge amounts of paperwork that are required sometimes for the system to operate; with a focus on process, often, rather than the child; the requirement to maintain a chronology, the multi-agency demands of different report formats; and through the PACE programme, we offered local authorities a time for reflection, and to consider is there a better way.
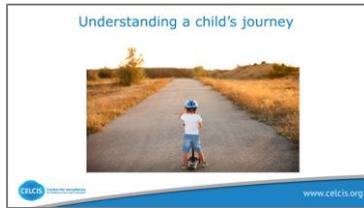
Understanding a child's journey, and the impact of that journey on them is often very difficult. I attended chronology training in 2014 and felt through the whole presentation that there was something missing - what was missing was that I couldn't see the child. The time that passed between each event in the chronology and the meaning of this for the individual child was missing. So within the team I used to work in, we used a visual timeline, first with a mother of two young boys, to try and help her understand and connect with their journey. Many of the parents we work with have literacy difficulties, and feel quite overwhelmed with the amount of written paperwork that they're given in relation to their family circumstances and their child's needs. We don't always capture easily the experience of the child in terms of number of moves, and what this might have meant for them, and what happened to them at each stage of their journey.

We've worked with local authorities through the PACE programme, trying to explore case examples, and feel it's so important for everyone involved to find a way to connect with the child's experience and put themselves in the child's shoes, including and most importantly, parents.

Harriet Ward, who's written many research articles, has written a document called "Decision making within a child's timeframe". She states in that document that we "write so much, and yet understand so little".

Children have a legal right to be heard; this is a principle enshrined in the [Children (Scotland) Act 1995](). So how can we best ensure children remain at the centre of decision making?

In order to do that, we first have to acknowledge that not all children have a voice. Our youngest children, children with additional needs are often considered to belong to a parent rather than being an individual in their own right. A child who feels safe will feel safe to speak, a child who feels unsafe in their circumstances might not be able to. So we mustn't lose sight of the fact that all behaviour is communication. It doesn't have to be the child's voice that we're listening to.

So how do we hear the child and put ourselves in the child's shoes and make the best decision we can based on their needs. In the PACE programme, we've questioned at times whether paperwork and reports help or hinder this process. Is there something we could do to make the child's journey easily available to all those involved, including the child's parents and family. So with my data colleague Micky, we're going to talk about how we might use data to help us see the child and how it might support early intervention and decision making for children.
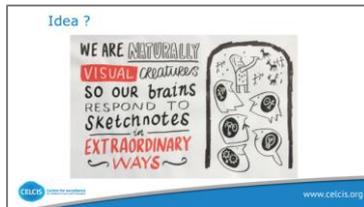
We are inherently visual learners. I carried out a little bit of a search into research to look at the use of visuals; what I found from the research is that we remember images and learn from visual representation more than we do the written word. So going back to Harriet Ward's quote, why do we write so much and understand so little? We considered "can we make the child's journey visual?"

We know that holding and maintaining a chronology of life events for the child is considered a vital component of our understanding, and analysis. But a visual timeline, we feel, brings the child's journey to the forefront. The chronology provides the detail, but often this can be confused with a focus on behaviours and not necessarily the child's experience. The information we gather on the child is often complex, consisting of a lot of information collated over a long period of time and that makes it quite inaccessible as a format. Case histories and chronologies can be lengthy, confusing and overwhelming for those working with families, making it really difficult to work in a clear and systematic fashion. So Micky and I considered - can we turn a chronology into a visual timeline?
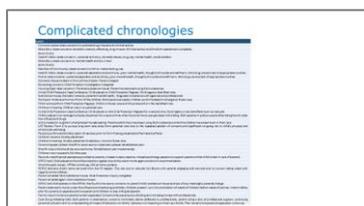
This is what just a small section of an anonymised chronology can look like. There are more references in this chronology to the process being undertaken, and the parents' behaviour and very little that tells us or gives us any indication of the child's journey. We know that chronologies can now run into many pages, which makes it difficult to analyse the information and consider the best next steps.
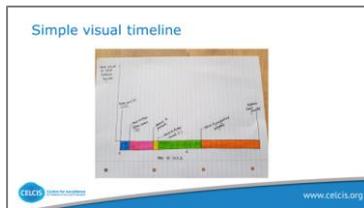
We are now going to look at how complex chronologies can be simplified, as in this hand drawn version. This shows us the child's placement history in coloured blocks, and underneath that, the age of the child at every move. It's very simple, but now we're looking at the child's journey without any of the additional detail. I'm now going to hand over to my colleague Micky to explain how he took this simple idea and developed it into something quite significant.
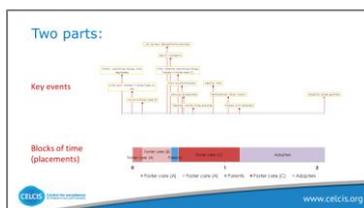
(MA) Thanks, Linda. Can I just start by saying it's been a privilege to work with you on the further development of timelines to show the experience of babies, infants, children and young people who go through our care system.

Using visualisations to tell the story behind data is a particular interest of mine and we've found timelines to be a really practical way to do this. Now, we didn't want practitioners to be spending all their time drawing and colouring in, however much fun they may find that to be, so we looked at how we could use Excel charts to create digital versions of timelines, that would be a bit less onerous to produce.

Now, I would stress that, although we're using Excel, they are still a bit hand knitted, as it isn't the ideal tool to use. But we'll show you what we've been able to do within Excel over the next few slides.

So starting with this one. If you think of the slide we saw just now, the hand drawn example, here I've separated the two elements that make up a timeline. So on the top, we've got key events, which we want to draw attention to, and at the bottom, we have blocks of time, showing how long the child or young person lived with different carers. It's really a placement history at the bottom. These are colour coded to highlight different types of placements.
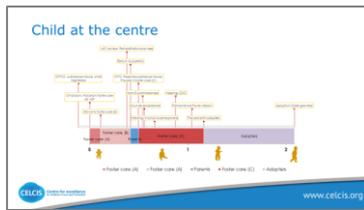
On this slide, I've now put those two sets of information together to create the timeline. You'll see that below the blocks of placements, I've introduced a series of silhouettes, little graphics, to show how rapidly a child grows and develops. We know the importance of attachments and relationships for the emotional development of a child. So it's important that what we're trying to do here is bring everything back to the age and stage of the child and show all these events and placement changes in relation to that.

So you'll see just above those little silhouettes, the axis for the placement history shows the child's age as well. So what I'm going to ask you to do now is take a second just to look at the story that's in front of you, this visual story shown in the timeline, and see what you can pick out from it.

So for me, the first thing that stands out is the small amount of time that this particular child spent with their parents. That's the little blue block that you can see in the placement history there when the child is just under six months old. I can see also that this child experienced four placement moves, before the age of one, and then a further placement move when they were one to their adoptive placement. You can see as well that that adoptive placement was secured for the child when they were just over two years old.

So we've got quite a lot of detail there in the placement history for the child at the bottom. But let's look up above now at some of the key events to see what they tell us. The first thing I'd draw attention to is that we're showing pre-birth activity for this child too. So in this case, we can see that there was parental substance misuse, and the child had a child protection case conference, pre-birth, and was registered. We can see also that when the child went into that first foster care placement, at birth, that was done on a voluntary basis. Then the child moved to further foster care placement, where there was a plan for rehabilitation home. You can see that, because there's a LAC review with a rehabilitation plan marked as a key event.

I can also see that when the child came back into care after having spent time with the parents, there was a process of moving down the permanence away from home route there with a Form E commissioned and a permanence panel match. I can also see children's hearing activity where kinship was asked to be explored, and the child moved on to compulsory supervision as well.

So what I'm hoping you've picked up from that is that there's quite a lot of information there, showing that child's entire journey from birth through to the adoption order being granted at just over age two, presented quite simply, and in one view.

In relation to key events, can I sound a note of caution; it can be very tempting to cram an awful lot of information into the key events, because so many things are important in the child's life. For visual impact, it's really important that you filter these down as much as you can. If you think about it, different events might be relevant to different audiences. So again, that's something to consider. Very often less is more when it comes to key events.


Moving on to look at the journey of another child. This one shows a more complex journey. For the sake of clarity, and because it's quite a complex journey, I've actually left off key events from this, but we'll come back to consider how those could add to the information that we can see here.

Again, have a quick look at this placement history for this child - who is 11 at the end of the process - and see what would you can interpret yourself from the visual is displayed here.

So looking at this one, it is indeed a complex journey for the child, ending up in secure care at age ten. We can see that the child became looked after when they were about six months old, looked after at home initially, and that there were two further periods of rehabilitation at home attempted, which were ultimately unsuccessful. The child experienced fifteen placement changes, six of which happened before the child was five. We can see that the longest period of stability for that child was between when the child was five through to eight being in foster care. Now after that placement ended, the child had very short period in foster care then moved into residential care, where they appear to have bounced about between placements before ultimately ending up in secure care.

When we look at a journey like that, coming back to key events, you'd be looking for some explanation perhaps as to why some of those changes happen for the child. Why did that period of foster care, that was that was quite a long one, break down? And perhaps you may want to look at why that period at home, that second attempt at rehabilitation home, failed.

Looking at a journey like this tells us a lot about that individual child. But it can also tell us a bit about how our systems are functioning. This is particularly the case when we look at the journeys of more than one child, and we'll come on to consider that a bit later. But just bear that point in mind.
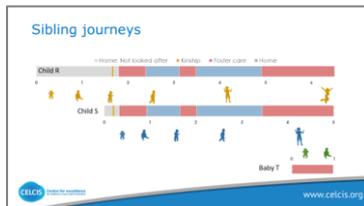
Now in this slide, what I want to show you is that we can also look at sibling journeys together. So in this case, if we have a look at three children, three siblings, look at Baby T at the bottom here. The child is under one years old and is in a foster care placement. If we look above, we can see that they have two older siblings. They have had a short period in the care of a relative when they were younger, before returning home and then coming into foster care placement with two further attempts at rehabilitation home.

So although the circumstances and needs of Baby T would be considered individually, the inability of the parents to keep the older siblings with them, would certainly be something that you would want to consider when looking at the prospect of rehabilitation for Baby T.
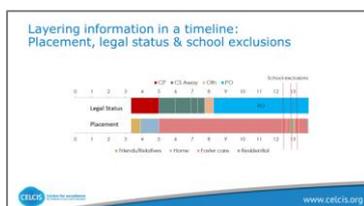

What I want to look at on this slide is the concept of a bringing together further information about a child and layering that information. So in previous slides we looked at blocks of time, which were basically placement histories. So I've shown that here on the bottom, and I've added to that another layer. The top block shows the child's legal-status history, we can see that this child was in care with a relative before returning home for a year. Then they moved into foster care placement, which was legally secured with a permanence order when the child was eight. We can see that permanence order in the legal-status blocks of time above.

Unfortunately, for this child, that wasn't the end of the care journey. As the placement ended when the child was 12. The child experienced further moves, including a spell in residential care. I've overlaid a bit of further information on this one, which shows three incidents of school exclusion, and you can see those over to the right hand side of the visual. Note those periods of school exclusion may be perhaps explained by some of the other

changes in that child's life. Looking at the information all together certainly gives greater context.

I'm hoping you'll pick up from this, that by layering information, it tells us more about the child's story and their experience of being in care.
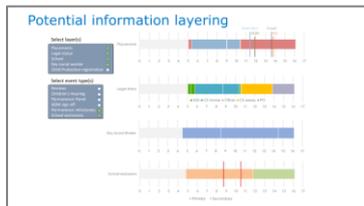
Carrying on that theme of layering information. I put together this slide originally to show how an imaginary social work information system could visually display information about a child.

So we've picked up things that information systems would usually hold - such as placement history and legal-status history, and key social worker allocations - and we've added in a couple of things that maybe wouldn't necessarily be held in the information system. The idea is, though, that you could select different layers of blocks of time or key events, and bring those together visually against the age of the child to give a more complete picture of experience.

Now in England, local authorities report on placement, social worker and school changes for each child in what's known as the stability index. This is an attempt to bring those elements together, along with the legal status information. If you can imagine having social work information systems that could display information in this way. Also, you could pick and choose which types of information you're bringing together, depending on how you would want to look at the information, and what your purpose of showing information in the screen would be.
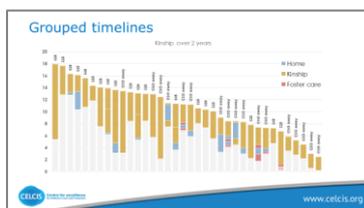
If you remember earlier, I mentioned that timelines can also be used to look at how systems are working. So in this example, what I've done is bring together timelines for individual children, and they're now shown vertically. What we've done here is select all children in a particular area that were in kinship placements for more than two years.

So looking at this, the children are arranged from oldest to youngest and we can see that quite a few of those children have been in kinship

placements for a substantial length of time. Now just above each column, which is an individual child, I've included the legal status, the last legal status, for each child as well. We can see that then quite a few of those children are looked after on a voluntary basis, which is Section 25, and a number as well on compulsory supervision away from home. So in this particular area, it's really interesting to see that a lot of children are looked after for substantial periods of time in kinship placements on a voluntary basis. This is what I mean about understanding how systems are working by bringing together other information on a group of children.

I'm now going to hand you back to Linda to consider how timelines can be used with different audiences.

(LD) How might the timeline be used?

A visual timeline, crucially, can be used with parents to help them be actively involved in both adding details to the timeline, and to support parents to maintain a focus on their child. I found it can really motivate parents to be more actively involved in decision making, and to assist them in understanding the importance of timescales for the children and understanding their child's age and stage of development.

Timelines can be used with carers and extended family; for example, when a child moves to a new care setting, a visual timeline can assist the new carers to very quickly understand the child's experience to date, without having to pore over lengthy reports.

With decision makers, timelines can be incredibly useful attached to social workers reports; so that in reviews or children's hearings, and even in court, a visual timeline can support the analysis and the recommendation being made. It can be a very useful addition to other reports shared in assisting those involved in making a recommendation to keep the child's needs at the centre of that decision making. The timeline highlights the time a child has been looked after and the implications of further delay. It can assist decision makers to see the child as a person, no matter how young.

Within supervision, a timeline can support reflective practice, and assist workers in developing their understanding of a child's development. Given that many children have more than one social worker, when a new worker

is allocated an existing case, a timeline can clearly assist them in understanding the child's journey prior to them becoming involved.

We've also used visual timelines with children young people themselves, and find it can really facilitate and support a child's understanding of their own life story, and can help to enable a conversation about what happened to them, and what age they were at each point and what this might have meant for them.
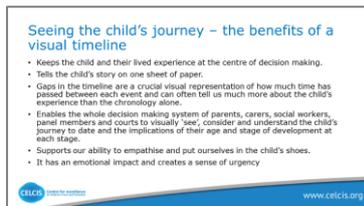
So seeing the child's journey, and the benefits of developing a visual timeline. First and foremost, it keeps the child and their lived experience right at the centre of decision making. It can tell a child's story on just one sheet of A4 paper. Gaps in the timeline are a crucial visual representation of how much time has passed for the child between each event, and can often tell us so much more about the child's experience than the chronology alone.

Timelines enable the whole decision making system - parents, carers, social workers, panel members, and courts - to visually see, consider and understand the child's journey to date and the implications that journey has had on their age and stage of development.

We've found in PACE areas it clearly supports the ability to empathise and put ourselves in the child's shoes. It has a definite emotional impact on those looking at the timeline, and therefore creates a sense of urgency for that child. It's a powerful tool in making child centred decisions about the future of a child. We hold complex and detailed information on all our looked after children, but it may take a timeline to properly see them and realise what's in their best interests. I'm now going to pass back to my colleague Micky. Thank you for listening.

(MA) Thanks again, Linda. I just want to finish off by pointing out that if any of you are interested in finding out a bit more about timelines, and in particular, how we put them together in the way that we've shown you here, a further how-to webinar, which my colleague Carol Ann Anderson has put together, will show you how we've approached it and how we've done it. This webinar is also available via the CELCIS website. So if you're interested, please take the time to go and look at that. Thanks very much for your time and attention and I hope you found it interesting.

Linked resources

CELCIS Knowledge Bank:
https://www.celcis.org/knowledge-bank/

Independent Care Review and The Promise:
https://www.carereview.scot/

Children (Scotland) Act 1995:
https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-children-children-scotland-act-1995-regulations-guidance-volume-1-support-protection-children-families/pages/1/