Turning Statistics into Stories

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"How do we turn statistics, evaluation and lived experience into stories that make funders stop, listen, and want to be part of creating change?"

Emma Pears
Chief Officer, SELFA Children's Charity

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What do numbers make you feel?

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Over one million children referred for mental healthcare

87%

of children reported improved emotional wellbeing.

868

Sessions of our health and wellbeing programmes

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The Problem with Statistics Alone

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Funders tell us they need evidence:

- ✓Outcomes
- ✓Evaluation
- ✓Reach
- ✓Impact

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The People Behind the Statistic

Every Number Has a Face

At SELFA we might report:

87%

of children reported improved emotional wellbeing

That is important

But then imagine meeting:

Ruby, aged 11

Who hadn't attended school for 6 months because of anxiety

Who spent most days alone in her bedroom

Who now attends weekly groups, has friends, and says:

"I don't feel invisible anymore"

Suddenly 87% means something

Why Stories Matter

Research consistently shows that stories:

- Increase empathy
- Improve memory
- Create connection
- Influence decision making
- Help us understand experiences we have never lived ourselves

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A Word of Caution

Stories Are Powerful. Therefore, We Must Use Them Carefully

The goal is not to extract emotional stories

The goal is to amplify voices

Ask yourself:

- Who benefits from this story?
- Has permission been given?
- Is dignity preserved?
- Would the person recognise themselves positively in the way we are telling it?

Tell stories with people, not about people

SELFA's Approach

Evidence + Voice + Story

Quantitative Data

- Attendance
- Outcomes
- Evaluation scores

Qualitative Evidence

- Feedback
- Observations
- Conversations

Lived Experience

- Youth voice
- Co-production
- Family experiences

Where these overlap, powerful stories emerge





From Activity to Change

What We Count Shapes What We See

It’s easy to count:

- Sessions delivered
- Children attending
- Volunteer hours

Harder to measure:

- A sense of belonging
- Hope for the future
- Feeling safe
- Being heard

The real challenge is demonstrating meaningful change rather than simply activity

Turning Data into Narrative

A Simple Framework

1 What is happening?

The evidence

2 Why does it matter?

The significance

3 Who experienced this?

The human story

Example: *327 children attended programmes*

becomes

327 children walked through our doors. Many come from homes where families are dealing with lots of difficult issues at once. Amina told us: “I felt like I belonged again. I had friends and I wanted to go to school for the first time in years.”

The 5-Minute Story Formula

Six quick steps from first note to finished story

1 Before

What life looked like before SELFA

2 Challenge

What the child was struggling with

3 Support

What SELFA did

4 Change

What happened as a result

5 Voice

A quote from the child or parent

6 Now & Next

Where they're at and what's next

This keeps stories consistent, clear and quick

What Funders Are Really Looking For

Head + Heart

The strongest stories contain both

Head

- Evidence
- Outcomes
- Evaluation
- Confidence

Heart

- Stories
- Voice
- Human experience
- Connection

Neither is enough on its own

The sweet spot is both together

What Funders Actually Want

Authentic, human stories, not perfect ones

They want:

- A clear need: the challenge the child or family faced
- A change: what's different now
- Strong evidence: a quote, behaviour shift, parent's or professional's comments
- The role SELFA played: what we did that helped
- A human story, not a perfect one

They don't expect:

- Novel-length stories (500 words is good)
- Highly polished writing
- Complicated professional language or acronyms

They want authentic, human stories

A Real Example

Before

“95% of young people reported improved social connections.”

Accurate. But forgettable.

After

“95% of young people reported improved social connections. One young person described arriving unable to speak to anyone outside their family and leaving with a group of friends they now meet every week.”

Same outcome. Different impact.

Making Hidden Experiences Visible

Some Experiences Don’t Show Up in Spreadsheets

Data can tell us:

Attendance dropped

Only people can tell us:

- Mum lost her job
- Anxiety was overwhelming
- They couldn’t afford transport
- They were caring for a sibling

Stories help explain the “why” behind the numbers.

Thematic Stories

Telling the Bigger Story

What they are

Stories grouped around a shared theme, challenge or outcome, rather than a single young person.

What to include

- A clear theme linked to our social objectives (e.g. Raising Aspirations from a Uni Trip, Independence – Rail Travel)
- 2–3 short examples that illustrate it
- Evidence: quotes, observations, small wins
- What SELFA did that contributed to the change
- A takeaway for funders: “What this tells us”

Why they’re powerful

- Show patterns, not just isolated examples
- Highlight consistent impact across groups or programmes
- Help funders understand scale and context
- Great for reporting on confidence, social skills, resilience, mental health, transitions and SEN needs

Everyday Evidence You Already Have

The raw material for great stories is already in your work

- Referral forms
- Files, notes and observations on databases and CRM's
- Parents' comments
- Things the child says, writes or draws
- Attendance data
- What their peers say about them
- Emails from school and professionals

Tip: capture things in the moment

Practical Tips You Can Use Tomorrow

Three Things to Do Differently

1

Collect stories intentionally

Don’t wait until you need a funding application

2

Pair every statistic with a person

Ask yourself: whose experience does this represent?

3

Let people speak for themselves

Authentic voices are more powerful than polished marketing

Why This Matters

Without stories:

- People become numbers
- Challenges become percentages
- Lives become data points

When we learn names, hear voices and understand experiences; we begin to see not how different people are from us, but how much we have in common

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Behind Every Number Is A Human Being

- The role of fundraising is not simply to prove need
- It is to help people understand one another
- Not just a case for support, but a reason to care

Closing discussion question:

"What statistic from your organisation has a human story waiting to be told?"

Any questions?

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