

What triggered that?

“The blue flashing lights on a police car freak me out”, said a victim of a major rail crash several years after the event: “I flip into panic mode instantly if I see any flashing blue lights. It could be while walking along the road or sitting in my front room.”

She explained that while the rail carriage had been sliding along on its side after the derailment inside a tunnel, the darkness was broken by blue sparks as an electricity cable intermittently touched the rails. This illuminated the carnage around her; a series of still shots of an ongoing event. This is a technique used by film makers to grip audiences (remember the last episode of *Blackadder Goes Forth* as they went over the top of the trenches? — a powerful image).

The woman had been traumatised by the experience and the images haunted her. Blue flashing lights instantly took her back to the rail disaster and caused enormous anxiety and fear. The visual trigger of the flashing blue light connected to her implicit memory and caused the unconscious emotional outburst. This is another example of PTSD.

In the *Adoption Today* June 2007 article (‘What the **** was that about?’), I explained how our knowledge of neuroscience explains the link between the unconscious mind, memory, triggers and behaviour. This article focuses on how this knowledge can and should be used by adults to assist traumatised children develop a more coherent narrative and understand themselves better. Whilst this article focuses on traumatised children, the principles apply to us as adults too. We also operate using our conscious and unconscious mind, our implicit and explicit memories etc.

What really happened?

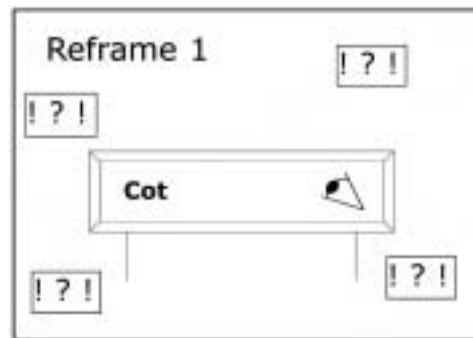
Imagine the scenario. A neighbour has reported another loud, violent fight and items are being thrown. Adults are shouting, screaming “I’ll kill you”, children are crying, dogs howling. This family has been known to the police and social services for years. The children are on the ‘at risk’ register, and had odd periods in respite foster care. It is decided by police and social services that these children need to be ‘rescued’ from their alcohol abusing parents immediately. (Prospective adopters may be shocked – regrettably this is an all too common situation).

Through the baby’s eyes

The baby is in his cot, hearing the screaming, his mother sounding terrified, an enormous crash, his father raging again, he smells his own sweat and faeces, the stale urine, feels the yellow blanket, crinkled and crackly with stale milk, bites his finger nails – the metallic taste of blood somehow

reassuring. In the shadows through the bars, he sees the urine soaked mattresses, the intermittent blue lights outside throw strange scary shadows on the wall. He hears the thumping of someone running up the stairs, light pours in as the door opens, a big man looks down at him, disgust on his face. The baby smells a strong scent.

Reframe 1 represents this experience.

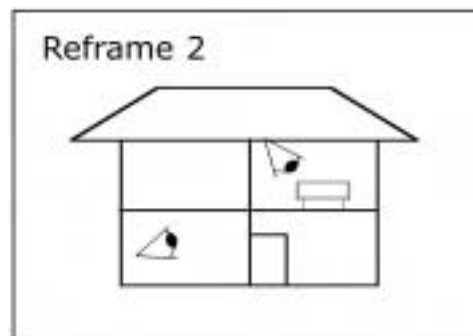


Through the policeman’s eyes

The rugby playing policeman fresh out of training has never seen such squalor before. He has a nephew the age of this baby, but his nephew is not covered in sores, lying in own excrement. The room has three putrid mattresses, dog dirt, is bereft of toys or clothes, yet at least four children sleep here. He gags as he picks up this soiled infant. With outstretched arms he carries

the stinking baby downstairs into the raucous chaos of strong drunken parents being arrested, pinned to the floor by his colleagues. The same colleagues who earlier teased him about his overly enthusiastic use of Calvin Klein aftershave.

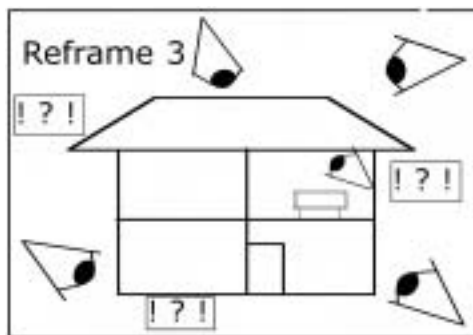
Reframe 2 represents this experience.



Through the social worker’s eyes

As the duty social worker, Clare never quite knew what her shift would involve. Police breaking down a door and bringing out four children under five after their parents had been taken away was more challenging than usual. The helicopter focusing its search light on the house was useful, but had also attracted spectators and the press. A local reporter was demanding to speak to her. Clare didn’t know how to handle them or what she would do with four filthy hysterical infants at 2am on a cold, wet November night.

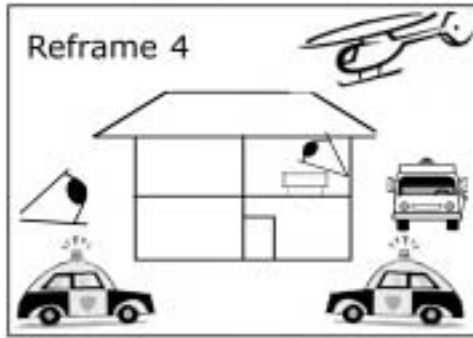
Reframe 3 represents this experience.



Through the neighbour’s eyes

Mr and Mrs Average were both relieved and concerned by the night’s events. Living next to that family had been like

walking on egg shells. When sober they were fine, but drunk and there was no reasoning with them and no peace. The Averages felt so sorry for the children, which is why they called the



police, but feared revenge from the drunks later. They often felt guilty about ignoring the children's cries – their grandchildren were the same age, but what else could they do. The helicopter and armed police seemed well coordinated – there were so many of them. The ambulance crew were treating a policewoman and one of the parents. It made the TV dramas seem quite tame.

Reframe 4 represents this experience.

Perspectives

Each of the participants had a different perspective, experience and memory of this event. For the baby it was sensory. So many sensory triggers would be associated with that traumatic removal. The smell of Calvin Klein aftershave, blue flashing police lights, a look of disgust (interpreted as I am bad). Biting fingers till they bleed gives comfort, stale urine is familiar.

In the baby's file or Form F, this episode would be recorded on a chronology as something like "emergency removal from home". A single line, maybe two. Nothing to record the emotional impact of the event. So ten years later when this boy's behaviour is aggressive and his adoptive parents are trying to get some therapeutic input, this event is just one of many. Its impact on him is unknown by all. He has no conscious, explicit memory of it – yet the unconscious, implicit memory of it haunts him and drives his current behaviour.

Information is power

We know that life story books are thought to be "a good thing" for helping a child make sense of their past. I'd argue they need to reflect the truth, balancing the good and bad. After all, if there wasn't any bad the child would still be with his birth parents. The child needs the bad bits too; it's the only way to form a coherent narrative, and to make sense of the feelings experienced in the body. Children need help making sense of their past so they don't have to drag it into their future.

Many adopters have children who unconsciously recreate their birth family home in their bedrooms – hoarded rotting food, clothes, toys, hair gels, computer bits, wee soaked underwear, books etc, either hidden or scattered around the room, often within minutes of it being tidied. These kids are unconsciously recreating the chaos of their birth family, because it feels comfortable and familiar.

I know of one family where access to social services files detailing the rubbish bags in bedrooms, dog poo etc had a profound impact on a teenager. She started cleaning and clearing her room. She put tops back on bottles. She took her dirty clothes, in a basket, to the kitchen for her mother to wash. That was the impact of "disclosure work". For this child she was able to use her explicit memory to build the early events into a more useful and more accurate view of her past.

How could it be different?

Take photographs

Today we all carry mobile phones. These could be used to record all sorts of things. One picture is worth a thousand words. That's why we take photos of happy events, and that's why we should take photos of sad and tragic events in a child's life, so they can make sense of their experiences. In the above scenario the police and social services could have taken photos which could go on file for the children, and be used in court proceedings. They could then be used in life story work.

Record different perspectives

At a Family Appreciation Day, adults who have been involved with a child get together and share events, memories, stories, items etc. It needs good facilitation, and good record keeping (a tape recorder would be perfect – then the child can listen at a later date). In our scenario the policeman could say how horrified he was by the environment and the compassion he felt for the baby. Mr and Mrs Average could recall that night events and their motivation for calling the police. They could talk about the birth parents being nice when sober, how the kids played on the swings with their grandchildren, and bring photos to share. Foster carers, nursery teachers, aunts, grandparents could also be involved. The list will be different for each child.

The power of reframing

In NLP, reframing literally means putting a new or different frame around an image or experience.

In this scenario, with reframing the angry ten year old could see that he was helpless as a baby, he needed protecting. He was not bad, not worthless. Actually he was so important and special that others stepped in to protect him when his birth family couldn't. The flashing blue lights that scared him were the signal that help had arrived. So the intention behind the police forced entry was to rescue him. If the boy can see 'Reframe 4' as a positively intentioned action he has a fresh way of viewing the experience. He starts to shift from "I am bad" (because I generated disgust in another) to worth protecting and therefore important – "I am special". That is change at a core, identity level.

A new interpretation of an old event can drastically change our perceptions and beliefs. That's why re-enactment in drama therapy is so powerful. Seeing an event from another's shoes can help too. (*Mocasin Technique* in the 'Why don't they hear me' article *Adoption Today*, June 2006 tells you how).

Sometimes a mere word or phrase can give a different slant. As Bertrand Russell said, "I am firm; you are obstinate; he is a pig headed fool." Borrowing that formula Dilts and DeLozier said, "I made a genuine mistake; you twisted the facts; he is a damned liar".

My version is, "I borrowed the money; you are light fingered; he is a thief".

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Helen Oakwater is an adoptive parent, NLP Coach and Trainer. She adopted a sibling group in the early 1990s and has first hand experience of living with 'the child who hurts'. Her knowledge and perspectives are borne from this, as well as research, numerous training courses, other adopters and her own personal journey.

*Her adoption and NLP credentials are listed on her website (www.helenoakwater.com), where there are previous articles published in *Adoption Today* and further useful links.*