

WE DON'T STEAL BABIES

A discussion guide for teams, ASYE groups and students

For the novel by Maisie MacDonald

We Don't Steal Babies is a novel. The children, families and workers in it are invented. It is not practice guidance and it does not replace your procedures, your supervisor or your own judgement. What it offers is a year of ordinary child protection work that a group can look at together without anybody's real case being on the table. People who find it hard to talk about their own practice will often talk freely about Maisie's.

There are six sessions. Each takes about forty-five minutes and stands on its own. Each one names the diary entries to read beforehand, by date and by page in the paperback. On Kindle and in large print the pages are different, so find each entry by its date. The later sessions give away the plot.

How to use it

- Ask people to read the entries before they come. They are short.
- Start with the first question and let the conversation go where it goes. You will not get through all of them.
- Keep real cases out of the room unless your group already has an agreement about that.
- The last item in each session is for one-to-one supervision or a reflective log.

SESSION 1

The file and the child

Read first. Tuesday 15th September, from page 25. Maisie reads Billy's case transfer summary, then meets him.

1. The transfer summary is accurate. What does it leave out, and whose job is it to find that out?
2. "Flight risk." "Challenging behaviours." What do words like these do to the next worker who opens the file?
3. Billy gives Maisie his toy car "so it doesn't leave". What is he testing? What could she have done in that moment that would have failed the test?
4. Think of a child you work with. What would they say their file gets wrong about them?

For supervision. Take a case summary you wrote in the last month. Read it as the child might at eighteen. What would you change?

SESSION 2

The official version

Read first. Tuesday 6th October, from page 55. A supervised contact session, then Maisie's case note, then what she leaves out.

1. Maisie's case note is fair, accurate and fit for court. Is anything wrong with it?
2. "Tyler remained guarded and less verbally responsive." What would it take to record what she saw? Should she?
3. Where is the line between observation and interpretation in your own recording? Who taught you where to put it?
4. Leon turns up on time, every time. How do you record effort without overstating change?

For supervision. Write up one visit twice: once as the case note, once as you would tell it to a colleague you trust. Look at what falls between the two.

SESSION 3

At the child's pace

Read first. Monday 21st September (page 32), Thursday 1st October (page 46), Tuesday 2nd February (page 157) and Thursday 10th March (page 191). Hana.

1. The first safety plan leaves Hana's father in the home and puts a lock on her bedroom door. Maisie thinks it is wrong and says nothing. What would she have needed in order to speak? What would you need?
2. Months pass between Hana's first words and her recorded interview. What are the risks of waiting? What are the risks of not waiting?
3. In the art room Maisie draws alongside Hana, and stops when Hana says she does not want to talk. What else does she do that makes it possible for Hana to speak later?
4. After the interview Hana draws a closed door again. Maisie decides it is not a step backwards. Is she right? How would you explain it to a manager, a parent or a court?
5. Mr Khan says the concerns come from people who "don't understand our culture" (page 34). How does Maisie deal with that? How would you?

For supervision. Think of a child who has not yet told you what you think they need to tell. What are you doing while you wait, and is any of it for your benefit and not theirs?

SESSION 4

Threshold

Read first. Wednesday 9th September (page 17) and Monday 11th April (page 224). Jade.

1. “I never met your threshold. Riley met it in one night.” Is Jade right?
2. Jade was referred at eight, eleven and fourteen, and each time the answer was “threshold not met”. What would help have looked like at each age? Who would have paid for it?
3. Jade says she fell. Maisie is certain she did not, and cannot prove it. What is the difference between a concern and evidence, and what do you do with the gap between them?
4. Jade has heard parts of her own file read out at a meeting. What is it like to be written about by people who have power over you?

For supervision. Bring a case that did not meet threshold and that you still think about. What was decided, what was recorded, and what happened next?

SESSION 5

Boundaries

Read first. Sunday 31st January (page 150), Thursday 11th February (page 169), Wednesday 11th and Friday 13th May (pages 246 and 248), Tuesday 21st June (page 281) and Monday 11th July (page 291).

1. Go back through the year and count the moments where Maisie could have stopped. Which would you have found hardest?
2. “People talked to their partners about work. It wasn’t a breach of anything.” Where is your own line, and who knows where it is?
3. The blog is anonymous. A stranger still works out the region and starts asking which authority it is. What do you post, and who could recognise it?
4. At the fact-finding meeting Maisie is the one being written down. What does she learn from sitting on that side of the table?
5. Her employer concludes that she was deceived, not negligent. Do you agree?

For supervision. Is there anything about your work that you have told someone outside it and would not want read back to you?

SESSION 6

Who looks after you

Read first. Wednesday 28th October (page 78), Tuesday 5th January (page 138) and Wednesday 20th July (page 305).

1. Ray says: “I know what ‘fine’ looks like, and I know what ‘pretending to be fine’ looks like.” Who in your team would notice?
2. Heather’s feedback on Maisie’s recording is harsh, and it is correct. What made it hard to hear? What would have made it easier to use?
3. Maisie is back at her desk four days after a death. Ray calls it a wound: “the helping so you don’t have to feel”. What does he mean? Is he right to let her stay?
4. What do you do with the cases that stay with you?

For supervision. What does your supervisor know about how you are, and how do they know it?

If any of this is close to home for you or for someone in your group, the book lists sources of support at the back. Your employer's staff support service and your union are there for this too. The guide is free to copy and share for teaching and team development. The novel is available in paperback and on Kindle.