
(Over) Twenty Ways to get Kids to Start Trauma Narratives

- 1) Start trauma narrative somewhere other than on the trauma (about themselves, relationship with perpetrator before the trauma, etc)—I always recommend this anyway
- 2) Ask for just one detail about the trauma (“just tell me one thing”)
- 3) Bargain for just a certain amount of time spent on the trauma narrative (“only 5 minutes”)
- 4) Agree to a fun activity after they do the trauma narrative
- 5) Give a prize for every sentence/page/episode they write about the trauma
- 6) Cajole (“Oh come on. You must remember SOMETHING”)
- 7) Encourage (“I know you can do this”)
- 8) Joke (“You don’t remember *anything*? You’ve gotta be kidding me. How dumb do you think I am?? Do I look like I just rolled off the banana boat?”)
- 9) Make a fool of yourself (“I will stand on my head if you write one page”)
- 10) Empathize with how hard it is (“I know it’s really painful to remember this”)
- 11) Praise (“You are the bravest kid I’ve ever worked with”)
- 12) Share your own trauma to model talking about it (if appropriate)
- 13) Use funky art techniques (I had a kid write the whole trauma narrative on my scarf; another agreed to write it on my arm! but when I said it would be tough to photocopy he agreed to go with paper)
- 14) Do it with songs, colors, etc—let them pick a song, color, flower, animal, smell that describes a certain experience, then have them describe how it is like that smell, color, etc while you write it. Once they start to describe an episode adding to it gets easier.
- 15) Use the computer and agree to 10 minutes of a computer game of their choice (within reason) if they do the trauma narrative for the rest of the time
- 16) Young kids: let them “play” what happened, then you write it down and read it to them next session and let them correct/change your narrative of what they played
- 17) Food is The Great Reinforcer. The week before you are going to start the trauma narrative, ask what their favorite food in the whole world is. Bring some the next week, and give it to them for doing the trauma narrative.
- 18) Ask them to explain what they are afraid of. Ask them to trust you for just 5 minutes. If it isn’t okay after that, you won’t ask them to do it again. Praise them like crazy if they manage to do even a sentence.
- 19) Use the “riding the bike” analogy—it’s hard at first but gets easier as your practice (make sure the child can ride a bike first).
- 20) Do a “life narrative” instead of a “trauma narrative”
- 21) Use the Storybook Weaver and let them make illustrations as a reward for describing a traumatic event
- 22) Let kids use window markers as a reward after they have written a page of their narrative.

Judith Cohen, M.D., Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents,
Allegheny General Hospital.