

Relationship Based Practice

Using relationship based practice helps caseworkers build trusting and authentic relationships with children and families that support change. Caseworkers need to build effective and genuine relationships with children and families in order to:

- Help motivate and support parents to make changes to keep their children safe (preservation) or have them safely returned home (restoration).
- Support children and families with the uncertainty and emotions caused by separation.
- Gain insight and information from children, families and carers to support decision making and permanency planning.
- Support and encourage carers while working to achieve permanency for children.
- Support meaningful family time.
- Help with family finding activities and developing a family network for the child.

The work we do as caseworkers in the Permanency Support Program (PSP) is deeply personal for the families we work with. Caseworkers must acknowledge the individual experiences of children and families by taking time to listen and demonstrating empathy. By identifying strengths and resilience, you can help families work with their strengths to create and sustain positive change.

Foundations of Relationship Based Practice

The central concept of relationship based practice is that the quality of relationships is the most important tool caseworkers have to create change. It requires caseworkers to create meaningful and effective relationships with the child, their family, kin, and carers to help create and sustain positive change.

Many families will be in crisis and may not have chosen to work with you. It takes skill and self-awareness to develop relationships in this context. It can be particularly challenging to develop relationships when people have experienced violence or oppression. They may feel anxious about the unknown, fearful or see being involved with child protection as a threat to them, their children, and family.

Asking a vulnerable or traumatised parent to reveal to you the things they are most ashamed of, is a lot to ask. Relationship based practice requires casework staff to appreciate the gravity of what we expect of parents, carers, and children and to reciprocate with empathy and support.

Cultivating trusting and meaningful relationships fosters genuine participation and may encourage children, parents, families, and carers to accept and ask for help. It also creates an opportunity for caseworkers to model positive behaviours and strengthen parent child relationships.

“The quality of the relationship between practitioner and family has been described as ‘the single most important condition to achieving change’

- Ashley & Nixon, (2007).

Key Messages for Caseworkers in Building Strong Relationships

- **You** are the most important resource in your toolkit. The **use of self** is integral to your practice.
- The key to achieving successful change lies in the quality of the relationship between you and the family.
- Your relationship with a family should be approached with an understanding of their experiences of trauma, discrimination, grief, loss, and violence.
- Compassion and empathy are the primary skills of our work. However, remember not to minimise violence or risk. The safety of the child and family is paramount.
- You have an important role in promoting and fostering healthy relationships between the child and those who are important to them.
- Caseworkers need to appreciate a family’s cultural knowledge, protocols and practices.
- Caseworkers should model healthy and respectful behaviour, relationships and ways to handle difficult situations. This may encourage positive change.
- Quality relationships with colleagues, other professionals and community members are essential to providing a quality service.

Elements of Relationship Based Practice

Empathy

Empathy is defined as understanding a person from their frame of reference or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts (American Psychological Association, 2023). In other words, empathy is the ability to metaphorically walk in another person's shoes.

Within the PSP, casework staff are frequently required to talk to children, families and carers about their most painful experiences, experiences in which they were hurt or hurt others. In either case, the people we work with are often holding shame, which can cause tremendous internal pain and negatively impact how they treat themselves and others. Bréne Brown (2013) calls empathy the antidote to shame, saying "if we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive".

Casework staff have a profound opportunity to connect with vulnerable children and families when they share their stories, and through empathy, help them let go of shame and build hope. Empathy most strongly influences a family's response to intervention. Empathic caseworkers create less resistance and therefore increase the connection between themselves and families. Empathy also increases the chances that a parent will identify and discuss concerns with their worker (Forrester et.al, 2007) and in turn, increase the chances they acknowledge the need to create change.

"Empathy is cultivated by courage, compassion and connection"

- Bréne Brown (2013)

Strength-based approaches

A strength-based approach asks that we look at families and children differently, viewing people who are often seen as 'in need' or vulnerable, as resourceful, strong and resilient. This strength-based approach is an effective basis for creating a working relationship. When family strengths are valued, we are more likely to reduce risks for the child. By identifying periods of time when a child is safe and cared for by their family, we acknowledge that the family is doing well some of the time (Edwards and Turnell, 1997).



Reflections

- Remember change is possible.
- Families will not be able to develop respect for you unless you respect them.
- If you approach families with anxiety and distrust, you will receive this in return.
- Warm, encouraging, and empathic relationships creates safety and opportunity to build skills and make change.

Tips for Caseworkers

- Spend time with the family. Observe how they talk and interact with each other. What are the strengths in the family? How do they handle stress or difficult situations?
- Ask curious questions to develop an understanding of a family and their circumstances, and about how they experience and interpret the world.
- Be conscious to pick up on strengths and encourage them.
- Build relationship by offering practical help; for example, while helping family members tidy the kitchen or taking them to pick up groceries. Use these times to have meaningful discussions.
- Paraphrase and reflect to clarify, so family members feel understood and heard.
- Talk to parents or carers about the strengths of their child.
- Reinforce any positive behaviours or interactions you observe.
- Ask parents and carers about what works best for them and their family and be flexible in your approach.
- Always think about the way the child experiences life in this family.
- Work in spaces where children, families, and carers feel more comfortable. Offices might not be the best space.
- Trust that the people you are working with can grow and change. Demonstrate that you believe in them.
- Be mindful about your own values and bias when working with families.

Tools and Resources for Caseworkers

- [Australian Catholic University's Kids Central Tools and Resources kit](#) has a range of practical advice and activities to use with children and families in the child protection context.
- This [video](#) features practical demonstrations and resources for direct work with children
- This [video](#) explores the importance of empathy, and how it is different from sympathy.

References

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