

Supporting Reflective Conversations

Tips for Managers

Reflective practice in the Permanency Support Program (PSP) is essential for effective practice and good decision-making for children and families.

Encouraging and supporting your team members to practice self-reflection helps them learn to critique their own thoughts and actions. Group reflective practice is a good way to help your teams practice a culture of critique by safely reflecting on practice and examining unconscious bias and assumptions.

Regardless of whether you practice group reflective practice managers and team leaders need to guide and mentor individual staff to reflect on their decision-making and practice. This helps ensure

- that children and young people (child), families and carers are being treated with dignity
- that practice is skilled
- staff address bias, assumptions and power
- staff make fair decisions based on evidence
- casework is being recorded fairly
- practitioners to recognise and understand their beliefs about other cultures
- casework is in the spirit of the permanency framework.

Managers are responsible for decisions made within their team, and equally responsible for creating a team environment where critical reflection is safe, welcomed and practiced by all. By engaging in critical reflection, you show you are committed to ethical practice and a culture of learning.

A reality of working in human services is that although the overwhelming majority of staff are well intentioned, we sometimes make mistakes, and our mistakes can leave lasting scars on the people we seek to help.

As workers in the Australian child protection system we also carry the legacy of the Stolen Generations, and must learn from it, by helping our teams to reflect as individuals and teams. We also need to create cultures that encourage our teams to be courageous and remain hopeful.

“The beliefs that we know what good is, and can instil good in others, are so ingrained in the social fabric that there is little meaningful conversation about our potential to do harm. Even when confronted by graphic evidence of harm arising from social work actions, our historical response has often been to protect ourselves from seeing what we perhaps fear most – we, the good guys, doing harm. (Blackstock 2017)

Common Errors in Thinking and Information Gathering

Research by Eileen Munro (1999) identified common errors in child protection reasoning. These are:

- making judgements very quickly, with too little information
- failing to revise judgements in the light of new information
- focusing on gathering information that validates an existing judgement and discounting information that conflicts with that judgement
- relying too heavily on information our organisation or DCJ knows and therefore, overlooking significant information known by others
- focusing too much on memorable and current information and too little on written and historical information
- failing to verify and cross-reference information
- practitioners expressing themselves in vague terms
 - focusing too heavily on the first and last pieces of information received
- prioritising the views and experience of adults over that of the child
- failing to record the analysis and outcome of the assessment.

Creating an Environment Where Reflection is Safe

Facilitating critical reflection requires analytical and communication skills. Good communication skills will help your team members trust that they can open themselves up to critique of their practice.

If you supervise a caseworker who is reluctant to self-reflect, create an environment where it is safe for them to be vulnerable before you can expect change. This will include sharing your own vulnerability.

Each PSP Service Provider will have a different model for mentoring and supporting staff (often called supervision) and managers should use your one-to-one processes to explore blockages to reflection.

Things to be curious about are:

- Have you created a culture where it is safe for your staff to be vulnerable by;
 - really listening to caseworker concerns
 - sharing decision-making with the team
 - reflecting on your own views and decisions and acknowledging to your team when things did not go well, or could go better.
- responding to issues of performance \How have they previously experienced supervision?
 - Has a previous manager targeted them when they questioned decisions?
 - Have they worked with a family that suffered a child death or parental suicide?
 - Have they experienced bullying or harassment in the workplace and are now guarded with what they are willing to share?
- What are their personal values and what motivates them in their work?, consider Motivation Mapping – also see [Reflective Practice – Practice Tips](#).
 - this will help managers understand how best to connect with different workers.
- Have you created development opportunities, by:
 - building skills and knowledge about theory and research that informs their reflective practice
 - building reflective practice confidence
 - bringing learning from reflecting with them about a specific family to broader applications across other families
 - encouraging them to practice different approaches to reflection.

Reflective Prompts for Critical Self-Reflection or Supervision

Every staff member comes with a set of beliefs and experiences that have moulded how they interpret the world. Challenging these can be uncomfortable and trigger difficult emotions, but this is what you must embrace in order to apply reflective practice.

If you manage a staff member who resists reflective practice, your role is to support them to see situations from different perspectives. You could use a formal framework like Motivational Interviewing (see [Relationship-Based Practice](#) for more information), or you could use some reflective questions like the ones below as a guide:

Reflecting on working with parents:

- What do you think the parent was trying to achieve (or prevent) when they made that decision?
- describe times when the parent has tried to protect the child.
- What do you think might prevent them being able to protect the child every time?
- How could you support the parent to remove some of those barriers?
- Why do you think it might be hard for the parent to tell you the whole truth?
- What do you think the parent would see as their strengths? How could you help them build on these?

Reflecting on working with carers:

- What else is happening in the carers life that could be causing them to act this way for example, do they have a sick relative, tension with their partner, concerns at work etc?
- What has been this carers experience with caseworkers? How could these past experiences affect their reactions today?
- What has the carers own experience of trauma been?
- How could the relationship of relative and kin carers with the child's parents be affecting their ability to providing a loving and safe environment?
- What has the carer done that has helped the child?
- If they could change one thing about their relationship with you, what do you think it would be?
- If they could change one thing about the 'system' what do you think it would be?

Reflecting on working with children:

- What do you think their behaviour is trying to tell us?
- What do you think the child remembers from when they lived with their parent(s)?
- What do you think the child has been told about why they were removed?
- What have they done to help themselves survive?
- How might a child view the actions of family, carers and caseworkers?

Reflecting on working with Aboriginal families:

- How do you think your presence might be affecting this family given the history Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had with child protection and the Stolen Generation?
- How do you demonstrate your commitment to being responsive and sensitive to this family and what they and/or their mob have been through as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? Have you asked about their story? Did you genuinely listen?
- How did you model respectful engagement for example by using appropriate language or being aware of their specific cultural sensitivities?
- Have you taken time learn about this particular families cultural; identity, needs, sensitivities and preferences?
- Have you challenged your own cultural beliefs, biases, and assumptions and identified whether they are linked into your casework practices with this family?

Reflecting on Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families:

- Have you focused on the child and family's perceptions?
- Have you explored their understanding of the child protection system and your work with them?
- Have you taken time learn about this particular family's identity, needs, sensitivities and preferences?

- Have you tried to understand their culture? Do you believe they think you understand their culture? Have taken the time to understand their culture by talking and learning from them?

Further Information:

For further information Please see [Reflective Practice](#), [Group Reflective Practice](#), [Reflective Practice - Practice Tips](#) and [Relationship-Based Practice](#).

References:

Blackstock, C. (2017). *The occasions of evil angels: learning from the experiences of Aboriginal people and social work*. Kick, S. and Stokes, J. (eds). *Social Work in Canada*. Thompson Educational Publishing.