

Working with Families in Preservation and Restoration

Relationship-based practice skills

The quality of your relationship with a family is the single most important element in achieving meaningful and sustained change that supports a child's safety, belonging and quality of life.

Building a positive, respectful relationship with a family should start at the very first meeting with a child and family. Trust and respect are earned and take time. Understanding this is the first step to working in partnership.

As a caseworker in the Permanency Support Program (PSP) you hold significant power in your relationship with families. This is especially so for families who experience oppression or social marginalisation, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. How you use this power matters to families and forms the basis for a helpful working relationship. The family's perceptions will affect how they respond to you and your work with them.

What can Families Expect from Relationship Based Practice?

- open and honest conversations about why you are involved in their life, how you can help and how you will support them to keep the child safe in their care or maintain connections with their children if they are in care
- asking for, and listening to, their ideas, perspective and experiences and taking these into account
- clarity about what needs to change so that the child will be safe and well cared for
- a commitment to seeing the child and family often and listening to them
- active support for children to maintain cultural connections, including relationships with people who are important to them and help keep them safe
- involving families and children in planning and decisions about their lives

- a clear focus on the best interests, and the rights of, the child in all decision making.

Overcoming Barriers to Building a Relationship with a Family

Families may have a range of reasons for not wanting to work with you. This includes:

- fear that their child will be taken from them, or, if their child has been removed from them that they won't be restored or they won't be able to see their child
- past experiences of feeling discriminated against, humiliated or treated unfairly (McArthur, Thompson, Winkworth and Butler, 2009)
- poor experiences with other workers and services
- feeling powerless, helpless or blamed
- culturally inappropriate approaches
- fearfulness of formal services due to cultural history and experiences
- the presence of mental health problems, drug or alcohol use or the dynamics involved in domestic violence.

You can help to overcome these barriers. A useful first step with a child and their family is to ask each of them 'what has not been helpful in the way services have worked with you in the past?' 'What has been helpful?' 'What are some ways I can work with you so you feel respected by me?'

Relationship-based practice is 'a planned interaction with another person in order to alleviate fear or anxiety, provide assurance, obtain necessary information, provide information, give advice, and assist the other individual to gain more appreciation of, more expression of, and more functional use of his or her latent inner resources.

Mosey (1996)

Tips for Relationship-based Practice

1. Using and promoting empathy

Empathy is one of the key aspects of healthy relationships, therefore it is crucial that we help families, children and young people to develop and promote empathy. Empathy can be described as 'the ability to imagine what another person is feeling and thinking' (Gerdes et. al, 2009). By modelling positive ways of communicating, you can improve the relationship between parents and their children. You can be a coach to parents and help motivate behaviour change. Some of the skills that can make a difference are:

- listen to parents and let them know that you hear and understand what they are saying
- model appropriate ways of speaking and interacting with children while drawing parents into the conversation
- challenge your own prejudices and look for commonalities with people different from yourself
- when working with families who are marginalised, oppressed or victims of violence, knowing ourselves and reflecting on our own reactions
- listen hard and try to hear what the other is feeling and needs in that moment without trying to fix it
- allowing yourself to be vulnerable
- be comfortable with silence.

2. Strength-based approach – asking the right questions

Be open to and curious about the family's strengths, resources and resilience. Listen to the family's story and what they need you to hear.

When parents have made an effort make sure you notice and offer praise. You can use some of the following styles of questions to gain insight into potential areas of strengths.

- **Survival questions**

Example: How have you managed to overcome or survive the challenges that you have faced? What have you learned about yourself and your world during those struggles?

- **Support questions**

Example: Who are the people that you can rely on? Who has made you feel understood, supported or encouraged? How do they do this and how do you respond when they do this?

- **Exception questions**

Example: When things were going well in life, what was different? What made that different to now? What point in your history would you like to relive, capture or recreate?

- **Possibility questions**

Example: What do you want to accomplish in your life? What are your hopes for your future or the future of your family?

- **Esteem questions**

Example: What makes you proud of yourself? What positive things do people say about you?

- **Perspective questions**

Example: What are your ideas about your current situation?

- **Change questions**

Example: What do you think is necessary for things to change? What could you do to make that happen?

While it is important to focus on strengths, be mindful of the experience of the child. Don't focus on strengths alone because you may ignore the child's experience of danger and risks.

3. Developing respectful partnerships with a family

Partnering with families is an important aspect to relationship-based practice. A partnership requires you to share power with families and involve parents in decisions that affect them and their family.

The way you initially approach a family sets the tone for future interactions. Talk to your manager and colleagues about different ways you can introduce yourself to a family. Remember that families have probably had previous interactions with the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ). Consider how these interactions may affect a family's willingness to work with you.

Reflective prompts:

- How am I attending to the power imbalance in my relationship with this family?
- What are my biases about this family?
- What assumptions do I make about this family?
- How do I experience working with this family or child?
- Do I have feelings of worry, fear, sadness or anger? How can I manage these so that my practice is ethical?
- Do I have feelings of hope or optimism? How can I harness this to support the family to change while keeping my focus on the child's safety?
- How can I make sense of this family's response to my involvement with them? What might be influencing this?
- How can I best work with the family who may be fearful or reluctant to engage with me?
- What do I need to understand about this family so that I can find the best way of working respectfully with them?

4. Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing is an approach that requires casework staff to engage in genuine and curious conversation with families and carers. It has a good evidence-base for helping people to change, especially in the drug and alcohol field. When used in a child protection context, the technique encourages children and parents to reflect on what is creating the risks to the child in their family and identify what supports are needed for change. Skills of active listening and reflective questioning encourage change talk and allow you to assess the level of the parent's insight, their capacity for change and understanding of the affect of risk on their child. The core skills of Motivational Interviewing are known as OARS and Developing Discrepancy.

The OARS technique is used to prompt information and encourage clients to open up and tell their story to casework staff.

O	Open-ended questions	Encouraging families to elaborate on their story. Open-ended questions are used to provide forward momentum and allow practitioners to elicit change talk. <i>'Tell me more about....'</i>
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		<p><i>'Tell me about a time when you have made a change – what was happening to you? What was different for your kids?'</i></p> <p><i>'What happened last time you left Rob?'</i></p>
A	Affirmations	<p>Listen to the parent and family's strengths and celebrate these by calling positive attention to them. This action assists parents to reframe their experiences in a positive light, builds capacity for hope and the opportunity for change.</p> <p><i>'It's really important that the kids know their extended family, especially your mum and dad. This gives you some extra support too.'</i></p> <p><i>'You know what you want for the future and what you want for your kids as they grow up.'</i></p>
R	Reflections	<p>Involves either simply repeating the parent's words back to them in order to acknowledge you have listened, to check your understanding or encourage the client to actively hear their own dialogue. More complex reflection involves listening for the parent's message within their conversation and distilling this message into your own words.</p> <p><i>'It sounds like talking about these things with (DCJ or agency) something you have never done before...'</i></p> <p><i>'All of this is really hard and overwhelming: sometimes it feels like you just want to run away?'</i></p>
S	Summary	<p>Allows for a conclusion to conversation that re-caps what has been discussed, identifies change talk, and summarises any progress and themes.</p> <p><i>'Let's see if I got all of the information right and then we can talk about where to next...'</i></p> <p><i>'So, your important goals are [...] but you're not sure how to get these done without Rob in the picture?'</i></p>

Developing discrepancy involves highlighting the discrepancies between the parent's beliefs and values and their current behaviour. This is likely to occur when parents have been able to identify why they are resisting change or are ambivalent about changing.

Here are some examples of things to say to develop discrepancy in conversation:

'You like the way speed helps you stay on top of things but it's difficult for you to control your temper and this is scary.'

'It's nice having Rob in the home as he helps with the kids but when he is angry or violent, you worry about how this affects the kids.'

‘You like the freedom of being able to stay at your boyfriend’s place and see friends, but it makes it difficult to manage the kids and their behaviour.’

‘What things might you miss if you make changes? What are the positives you might notice if you make changes?’

The discrepancy developed in conversations can create the shift required for parents to think and talk about change. Change is possible when parents can discuss the reasons why change would be positive, rather than focusing on resistance and fear.

Working with families is a key component of the casework role, it is fundamental to work effectively with families to support the best possible outcomes for children in the PSP. By ongoing reflection on practice, you can consistently improve your practice when working with children and families.

Please see [Relationship-Based Practice](#) and [Supporting Parents in Restoration](#) for more information

References

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