



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Hearing parents' voices: the first assessment visit

Introduction

This is the second of two learning tools which have been jointly developed alongside 'Annie', a parent who has experience of working with social workers. In the first tool, 'Hearing from Annie: a parent who has experienced child protection involvement', Annie outlines her views about the importance of working in partnership with parents, and argues that the first meeting between a social worker and a family, which usually takes place in the family home, is a key opportunity to engage family members and start to build a transparent and collaborative working relationship. If you have not already done so, please read Annie's learning tool before starting this one.

Paying attention to setting up positive and collaborative relationships with parents is vital in social work practice. The role of the practice supervisor is crucial in helping supervisees to consider how they can work collaboratively with parents from the outset. You have real influence as an 'invisible hand', shaping the kind of relationship that social workers build with families. As Annie says, 'You don't get a second chance to make a first impression.'

'Listening to parents' concerns, taking their views seriously, treating them as partners in solving problems with their children, giving them useful information, paying attention to the realities of their lives rather than the agendas of particular services: all these things which are reflected in the findings of many of the studies, are a matter of the right and proper way to treat people.' (Quinton, 2005, p156)

The ideas presented in this learning tool will help you to be the ‘invisible hand’, ensuring that social workers demonstrate and promote transparent and collaborative working relationships with parents, regardless of the reason for referral. This allows all parties to build trust, which helps them have honest discussions about how best to safeguard the children in question, as well as any support the parents might need in doing so.

This learning tool helps you to guide your supervisees through their first assessment visit communication with parents. It covers how to communicate most effectively and why it’s important to get it right.

Prompt questions are provided, which can help your supervisees to:

- > consider the factors that may influence how they and the family respond to each other, and how that learning can inform their planning and communication
- > understand how best to structure discussions with parents so that they engage and build relationships from the get-go.

Though there are many demands on your time in supervision, it’s well worth asking your supervisees, even if only briefly, to reflect on their initial response (and what might be influencing it) prior to meeting a new family. In this way, you can get them to think about any assumptions or unexamined beliefs they may have that could hinder their ability to develop a positive working relationship.

Reflecting on how you and the family might respond to each other

What is your response to the family and the referral?

It is helpful to spend time in supervision encouraging your supervisee to reflect on their immediate response to the referral. You might want to explore:

Social GRRRAACCEESSS (gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality), to help them consider how their personal stories, cultures, values and beliefs may affect the way they respond to parents and families, and vice versa.

Other factors like workload stress, or having previously worked with a family facing a similar issue.

Whether or not there is an 'organisational story' around families who have had many re-referrals, or who have been involved with social workers a long time - they may have a 'reputation' that could influence both how they are approached and how they might respond to being approached.

How might the parent(s) respond to the social worker?

Parents and families will almost certainly feel a level of shame and resistance around the thought of social work involvement, which is entirely understandable. That's why one of the most effective things you can do is to ask your supervisee to put themselves in the family's shoes.

By considering what a family might be experiencing prior to the first assessment, the social worker can help to minimise the impact of any shameful feelings, and think about how best to acknowledge these in a positive, empowering way.

It's also useful to get them to consider that, while this may be their first encounter with the family, it's unlikely to be the family's first encounter with the organisation they represent, a fact that's easy to overlook in a busy working environment.

It's therefore important to get your supervisees to think about:

How their visit might make the family feel:

- What feelings might the visit stir up for the parents?
- How might those feelings manifest or affect communication?
- How can they acknowledge this?
- Do / how do social GRRRAACCEEESSS play a part?
- If there is evidence of domestic abuse, how can they avoid exacerbating it ?
- Might the family fear being reported to the Home Office or police?

If there's been a delay between the referral and the first visit:

- How might the family have experienced this?
- How might their experience affect the way they communicate?
- Has anything changed for them during that time, either positive or negative?

If the family's had social work involvement before:

- What were the circumstances around it?
- How did the contact end?
- What were the positive and negative experiences, and how might this affect the new relationship?
- What expectations might they have (e.g. if a child is temporarily living elsewhere as a result of a duty and assessment visit, the family might expect this to be resolved in the first meeting)?

Environment and context:

- Will the parents be able to concentrate during the visit, e.g. might they have to look after a small child that needs lots of attention?
- How can the social worker address this, or be helpful in offering support?
- Are there any other issues or concerns they can help with?
- What else can they do to find out more about the perspective and experience of this family?

Planning the core structure of a first visit

Though each family is unique, there are a few key things every social worker can do to build a positive relationship with them from the start.

Working with a supervisee, go through the outline structure and prompts below to see what should be covered in a first assessment to encourage collaboration and transparency.

Introductions and key information

It's important that the social worker begins the assessment by asking for permission to talk about:

> **What they do**

Families need information about the social worker's role and statutory powers. They may, for example, fear the social worker has the power to remove their child then and there. It's therefore important to reassure the family that this could only happen if there was an emergency and / or a court order. This helps to remind the family that the social worker is there to both support them and safeguard the welfare of their child. It also allows the social worker to better understand how the family perceives the purpose of the visit.

> **The purpose and objectives of the visit**

The family needs to know what the social worker hopes to achieve during the visit, what might happen next, and whether or not there's likely to be ongoing involvement. The social worker should also seek permission before taking notes, be clear about how they'll be used and who they'll be shared with, and discuss the limits of confidentiality.

Explaining how the first assessment works

The social worker should explain how and why they intend to work with the family during the visit. This might include:

- > **Acknowledging** that any shame or resistance the family might be feeling about the visit is common and wholly understandable.
- > **Explaining** the value of working collaboratively with families.
- > **Inviting** the family to feedback about their experiences so that the social worker knows what works and what doesn't, and so the family can be honest if something bothers them.
- > **Committing** to being open, honest and completely transparent with parents, so they're always 'in the loop' when it comes to the social worker's plans.
- > **Recognising** how important parents are to children, and that the social worker is ultimately there to help strengthen those bonds and alleviate tensions to sustain family life.
- > **Saying** it's OK to ask questions throughout and that there'll be time at the end for questions, too. It could also be useful for the social worker to understand what might prevent the family from asking questions by saying things like, 'How will I know if you're finding it difficult to say you don't understand? What can I do to help you with this?'
- > **Explaining** that, after this introduction, there will be a chance to hear more of the parents' perspectives about the referral, as well as what the social worker thinks.
- > **Asking** the parents to explain in their own words their understanding of the reasons for the referral.
- > **Ending** the visit by summarising the discussion, explaining what happens next and checking that notes (if taken) accurately reflect what occurred.

Ending the visit

Paying attention to how the first (and every) visit ends is vital. Leaving time for a free discussion at the end allows the social worker to:

- > **Check in** with parents to ask how they are feeling, and whether or not they have any questions, concerns, ideas or observations they've not yet had the opportunity to share.
- > **Share** their own responses to the discussion, e.g. are they feeling more or less worried following the visit? Why is that? Have they observed evidence of strength or resilience?
- > **Ask** for feedback from parents about their experience of the discussion - is there anything that could have been done differently?
- > **Tell** the family what happens next and when, and how to contact them if they think of something they forgot to ask during the visit.
- > **Offer hope** by reassuring parents that change is possible, even in the face of significant issues. This is a small, easily-overlooked thing to do, but incredibly effective when connecting with families.

What's next?

Having worked through this structure with your supervisee, you might want to talk through how the visit went in the next supervision. Did anything change as a result of this preparation?

You might also want to explore how your supervisee can continue to work transparently and collaboratively if there is a need for an ongoing relationship with the family. Are there elements of the first visit structure that could be replicated in ongoing work?

Finally, in the words of Sarah Gillinson (The Guardian, March 21, 2017):

‘In truth, this isn’t about innovation. It’s not about asking most social workers to do anything new or radical. It’s about incentivising a new balance between risk management and relational support by enabling social workers to do what they do at their best: to see and build on people’s strengths, head off problems before they become crises, show empathy, and offer creative and flexible support, focused on the long term.

Without this kind of human interaction there are no relationships. Without relationships, there is no trust. And without trust there is only so much a social worker can do.’

Other ways you can use this tool

Explore how to engage parents through the ideas presented here as part of a group discussion or whole-team training event.

You might also ask a supervisee to work through this learning tool as a way of preparing to visit parents for the first time and then talk about this in supervision.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

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Quinton D (2005) 'Themes from a UK research initiative on supporting parents' in Scott J and Ward H (eds) *Safeguarding and promoting the well-being of children, families and their communities*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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