

Introduction

The challenges of growing up are difficult enough for children without the added pressure of being subject to abuse or neglect. For some children and young people the nature and significance of this abuse results in intervention by statutory agencies, such as the Department of Child Safety in Queensland. For helping professionals charged with the responsibility of working with these children and young people, having a strong framework for these vulnerable members of our community is critical to ensure the best outcomes for the children, their families and our society.

There are six key elements that need to be considered when working with children in the care of the state. These are:

1. building rapport;
2. developing trust;
3. maximising participation;
4. working in an age-appropriate way ;
5. practicing in a culturally sensitive way; and
6. building supportive relationships.

Each of these elements will be discussed briefly in this chapter.

1. Building rapport

The skill of building rapport is critical to ensure appropriate levels of participation by children. Participation on its own cannot occur unless a meaningful relationship is established with the child and so many factors can affect how this relationship is forged (Commission for Children and Young People (NSW), 2003).

Building rapport with children and young people is impacted by a range of factors, including:

- chronological age;
- developmental age;
- emotional state;
- emotional maturity;
- cultural factors;
- disability;
- the child's motivation and perception of the purpose of the communication;
- the child's current situation -hunger, frustration, tiredness, recent trauma and separation;
- the child's familiarity with the location/venue and the materials used in the communication process;
- the communication strategies of the helping professional;
- the relationship between the child and the interviewer;
- the physical environment; and
- the presence of other adults who are unfamiliar to, not trusted or perceived as powerful by the child (Department of Child Safety, 2003).

Many strategies can be utilised in order to allow children to feel comfortable. These include the following:

- find a comfortable place to talk;
- ensure your questions are age-appropriate;

- choose simple words - sentences should contain only one thought or issue;
- avoid negatives;
- be honest;
- use the child's name and names of other persons referred to - personalise the conversation as far as possible. Don't use pronouns;
- be patient -allow the child a sense of control;
- be aware of your own values and reactions to children;
- remember that each child's experience is unique;
- be aware of your non-verbal communication including personal space, eye contact, seating (don't stand or sit higher than the child), facial expressions and voice tone;
- avoid 'why' questions -they are threatening and increase the child's resistance;
- avoid using adult language concepts, such as figures of speech;
- avoid using suggestive statements and leading questions; and
- have FUN -do something the child enjoys.

It is important to develop a range of techniques to establish rapport so that if one does not work you can try other strategies. This will help to create a safe environment and will maximise your outcomes when working with children (Department of Family Services, 2000).

2. Developing trust

When building rapport with a child, it is important to show that you can be trusted. For children, trust is about being consistent and not just saying the 'right thing' but also demonstrating that you can 'do the right thing'. If you tell a child that you will telephone them, then you need to follow through. Never make promises that you cannot keep. When building trust it is important that you are clear about boundaries where trust cannot be maintained. Children should be informed when you are unable to keep information, that they provide to you, secret. Not being able to keep a child or young persons 'secret' would only occur under certain circumstances. These include instances when the child discloses harm, abuse or neglect that has occurred to them or others, including any indications of suicidal ideations. It is also necessary to disclose any information that is given pertaining to a criminal offence. Thus honesty is important when establishing trust (Commission for Children and Young People (NSW), 2001).

3. Maximising participation

The most important skill to have when working with children and young people in the out-of-home care is the ability to ensure active and genuine participation. Participate means, 'to take or have a part or share, as with others' (*The Macquarie Dictionary*; 3rd edition, 2001). There are many ways in which people can participate. These range from someone taking part in decisions that affect them to simply knowing that their views are being considered, when decisions are being made.

Participation for children is about ensuring that they can have their say in decisions in a way that is comfortable and appropriate. To do so requires that adults give children time to have their say and to give full consideration to these views in all forms of decision making. Of course, sometimes children and young people choose not to participate, but this can be considered a form of participation. The most important thing is that children are given the opportunity to be involved in making decisions that affect their lives (Commission for Children and Young People (NSW), 2003).

Participation by children and young people should be encouraged when considering important issues such as:

- why they have been taken into care;
- what will happen to them whilst they are in care;
- who they will be living with;
- how long they will be living with these people;
- whether they will get to see their friends;
- when they will see their parents again;
- their health and education;
- legal matters ;
- living arrangements;
- being safe from abuse or neglect; and
- issues or concerns of the child (Commission for Children and Young People (NSW), 2003).

To be able to take part in the decision-making process, a child needs to be informed. Participation and informed decision making are intimately linked. Being given access to information (in an age-appropriate fashion) will assist children to:

- better understand events in their lives;
- make sense of various actions taking place;
- make informed comment on future plans;
- more fully participate in the decision-making process;
- keep records of important events in their lives via written documentation; and
- feel more empowered as client/consumer (Cashmore and O'Brien, 2001).

Involving children in decisions helps them understand how decisions are made and develops their judgement skills. What they learn from participation will be carried through to their adult lives. While their attitudes may differ from the people who have always made decisions on their behalf they want to feel that their families and communities value their contributions. (Commission for Children and Young People (NSW) 2003).

4. Working in an age appropriate way

Many children coming into contact with the child protection system have learning or physical disabilities that will inhibit their ability to absorb, process, analyse and retain information. They may be street-wise but also may be immature or emotionally stunted. Children have a shorter attention span than adults and cannot concentrate or sit still for long periods. Many teenagers will have poor literacy skills so it will be a challenge for them to understand written material. (Department of Family Services (QLD), 2000)

The following points assist in guiding the participation of work with children in the out-of-home care:

- no written material should just be sent to a child without prior discussion of the content and meaning;
- best practice is to give the written material in person and discuss its contents;
- children will need to know why they are receiving the material and what they should do with the documents/letter. Many will not be interested in the document, or will be angry and aggressive towards you as the bearer of bad news;
- for young children, use pictures or illustrations;

- use a variety of mediums to disseminate information, not just written information;
- ask a child or young persons foster carer and/or parents/teachers/community partner to assist in imparting information;
- use resources such as board games or cue cards could be developed to assist departmental officers with young children;
- no matter what age the child, departmental officers should avoid the use of jargon, and use simple, short sentences and everyday words; and
- teenagers could be linked with their consumer organisation, the CREATE Foundation, for further support and information.

Never assume that children and young people share the same meaning of words as you (especially words like 'foster carer' or 'social worker') and may have very negative feelings towards certain words such as 'police' (Department of Family Services, 2000).

Convention on the rights of the child

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted by the United Nations in 1989, clearly spells out that children and young people have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. As a signatory to the Convention, the Australian Government has made a commitment to giving children and young people the help they need to participate in the important decisions that affect them. As a result, the participation of children is requirement and not an option (Department of Family Services, 2000).

Barriers and challenges to participation

Most research in the area of participation points out that we live in a society where adults do not generally listen seriously to what children and young people say, do not consult them about their views and do not encourage them to take part in decision making. Children and young people can feel that adults do not listen to them. Some of the barriers to listening include:

- presuming what a child or young person will say/think ;
- the attitude of adults: 'It's easier if I do it myself', 'I don't have time', 'We have never invited the kids before', 'They don't really want to be involved', 'We can't pull them out of school';
- holding meetings at times when children cannot attend;
- not providing appropriate refreshments at meetings;
- not providing resources (transport) for children and young people to attend meetings, or covering expenses;
- holding meetings in places where children and young people feel uncomfortable; and
- not inviting children and young people to meetings (Calvert, 2000).

The provisions for sharing information with children and young people need not be seen as an onerous imposition. These are important tools for empowering the most vulnerable group within the child protection system. Such processes allow them to participate to a greater degree in decision making about their lives and provide greater opportunities for developing good working relationships between the departmental officer and the child or young person. Access to information is a basic right for children in out-of-home care, and the accumulation and storage of such information is one way of ensuring that their 'history' is not lost (CREATE Foundation, 2000).

Children involved in the child protection process are usually anxious and confused. They feel powerless and caught up in a train of events beyond their understanding or control. Their anxiety will inhibit their ability to listen, understand and process information that you give them. They may

already be traumatised by the harm that has led to statutory involvement in their lives. Lack of information and understanding about the process they are going through can worsen this trauma (Commission for Children and Young People (NSW), 2003).

5. Practicing in a culturally sensitive way – working with Indigenous children and young people

An effective plan relating to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child and their family takes into account the family's preference for involvement of a local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander agency, members of the local Indigenous community or an Indigenous worker. In working with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children, the diversity of communities must be reflected in the services offered and protective strategies mobilised at the community level. Regardless of your relationship with the child it is critical that you seek advice from a recognised Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander agency to plan how best to work with the child (Department of Child Safety, 2004).

Child protection work involving Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families evokes strong feelings among such children, family members and the broader Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community. This is largely because of the practices of removing Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children from their families. Practitioners should recognise and be sensitive to this history and the feelings it can evoke. Comments of parents and assistance from recognised Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander agencies should be sought at all stages in the child protection process (Department of Child Safety, 2004).

Professionals should recognise that effective intervention with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children will often require involvement by culturally appropriate support workers. Families should be consulted about their preference for involvement of culturally specific agencies or use of mainstream services. Issues that need to be approached sensitively when working with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families include their:

- reluctance to use external help because of shame within their community;
- belief that the alleged harm to their child is a result of an accepted cultural or religious practice;
- fear that intervention will further stress families; and
- associating government intervention with previous experiences of abuse, trauma or separation from family, for example, the Stolen Generation (Department of Child Safety, 2004).

6. Building supportive relationships

In 2002 the Commission for Children and Young People in New South Wales researched the best way to work with and support children and young people. The principal finding of this inquiry was that the threat of children's vulnerability is increased when they lack supportive relationships in their lives (Commission for Children and Young People (NSW), 2002). The inquiry also found that the most important relationships for children and young people are those with their family, friends, and the people they come in contact with at childcare, schools and community settings (Child Protection Council NSW, 2002). When family relationships are weak, children can usually manage with support from significant people and vice versa (Brannen & Moss, 2002). However, when both family and other supportive relationships are problematic, children become extremely vulnerable (Commission for Children and Young People (NSW), 2003).

As such the best way to support vulnerable children is to build their existing relationships - families, friends, childcare, schools and the community. The commission inquiry identified that children want to get help early, well before problems become overwhelming. Investing time and energy early

in a child's development can reap significant rewards in the long term (Child Protection Council NSW, 2002).

This has implications for how work with vulnerable children and young people is conducted. It is the relationship a child has with a particular worker that is the key to intervention success. The most successful intervention services are those that:

- are flexible, responsive and work together with other agencies;
- are staffed with workers who are good at building relationships with children;
- allow the child and family to see the same worker on most or all of their contact with the service;
- provide quick and accurate referral;
- provide recreational activities through which children can knowingly or unknowingly receive help; and
- respect children's privacy and don't judge them (Commission for Children and Young People NSW, 2003).

Conclusion

Working with children in out-of-home care is one of the most rewarding roles for helping professionals. However, the nature of such work requires that significant skills in working with children and young people be developed. The key aspects of building a successful working relationship include building trust, developing rapport, maximising participation, being age-appropriate, building supportive relationships and working in a culturally sensitive way.

For helping professionals charged with the responsibility of working with these children and young people, having a strong framework for these vulnerable members of our community is critical to ensure the best outcomes for the children, their families and our society.

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