

Child Protection Connection

Linking research, training, and practice for CPS staff

CPS Training Institute

Solution-Focused Intervention: A Model for Interviewing

Practitioners and educators are exploring ways to discover and mobilize client strengths. Solution-focused intervention, based on work by Steve de Shazer and colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, originally was developed for individual, couples, and family therapy. But it provides tools that can be useful in a variety of practice settings, including CPS.

Application to CPS Practice

Solution-focused intervention emphasizes collecting information and maintaining productive relationships with clients. It provides structure and tools to conduct interviews, including questions that build on client strengths. "We don't have the time or resources, especially out here in rural areas, to devote unlimited time to one client. In the solution-focused approach, we can increase client cooperation and reduce the stress of our jobs by seeing some measure of success," says Ben Larson, CPS Specialist from Region 1, who recommended we feature the approach.

The following information highlights key points noted in a recent article about solution-focused intervention and interviewing for client strengths.

Key Principles

Solution-focused interviewing emphasizes two approaches: developing well-formed goals with the client within the client's frame of reference and developing solutions with the client based on "exceptions."

Well-formed goals are negotiated and defined between worker and client and meet the following criteria:

- important to the client

- small
- concrete, specific, and behavioral
- seek presence of behaviors rather than absence of behaviors
- represent beginnings of behaviors or situations rather than endings
- realistic
- perceived by the client as involving "hard work"

Exploring for exceptions involves looking at occasions in the client's life when the problem could have occurred but did not. Workers focus on the who, what, when, and where of exception times rather than focusing on problems, thereby identifying resources and strengths.

Interviewing Questions

The relationship between client and worker usually focuses first on the client's concerns or problems. In solution-focused interviewing, workers listen to concerns and then turn the conversation toward developing well-formed goals.

The "miracle" question is a starting point: "While you are sleeping, a miracle occurs. That miracle is that the problem which brings us together is somehow solved. Only you don't know that because you are asleep. What will you notice that is different tomorrow morning that will tell you that a miracle has happened?" Other questions can be asked to help the client identify what will be different (the people, the behaviors, the activities), developing both an expectation of change and a sense of purpose and goals.

The "exception-finding" question is used to discover the client's present and past successes in relation to client goals. Eventually the successes are used to build solutions, by identifying what the

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*Solution-focused interviewing
can increase client cooperation
and help us see success.*

Using Persuasion with Involuntary Clients

Too often practice books and practice instructors place primary emphasis on voluntary clients. They are nice to work with, but they are not common in our practice. Involuntary clients include clients required to see a helping practitioner and those pressured to seek help. Sometimes workers are as reluctant to work with involuntary clients as the clients are to work with them.

Ronald Rooney's *Strategies for Work with Involuntary Clients* (see Book Stop) addresses public-agency practitioners with legal mandates, large caseloads, and feelings of being unappreciated, overworked, and underpaid, as well as private-agency practitioners who may not recognize that they are in fact working with involuntary clients. Sound familiar? Its goal is to help both clients and workers become more voluntary and responsive.

Rooney notes that initial contact with involuntary clients may involve persuasion to encourage participation. To do this, he recommends to workers the following guidelines:

- Try to be perceived as believable, likable, and as expert as you can, while remaining ethical and genuine.
- Clarify central values held by clients rather than immediately attempt to change their values.

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Book Stop and Journal Highlights

The Resolution Scrapbook as an Aid in the Treatment of Traumatized Children by Liana B. Lowenstein, *Child Welfare*, July-Aug. 1995, vLXXIV, n4, p889-904.

The Resolution Scrapbook is a technique, developed by Jan Hindman, in which traumatized children complete treatment activities and compile them in the form of a scrapbook. Scrapbook activities facilitate children's resolution of trauma. Their progress through the phases of treatment becomes a lasting record for the children after treatment is terminated. This approach can be used with children experiencing trauma such as abuse and neglect, family violence, divorce, and bereavement. The article discusses guidelines for its use and steps in creating a scrapbook, including the initial session and activities related to introductions, feelings, trauma resolution, empowerment, and termination.

Families and Forgiveness: Healing Wounds in the Intergenerational Family (1995) by Terry D. Hargrave. New York: Brunner/Mazel, \$28.95.

This book presents a framework to turn family devastation into hopeful relationships. It acknowledges the pain of victimization and the hope of rejoining family members by a strategy of forgiveness. The process involves active participation of victim and victimizer, mutual responsibility, and four "stations" of forgiveness: insight, understanding, compensation, and forgiveness. Conceptual approaches, therapeutic

techniques, and case examples are used, along with the author's own experiences.

Family Based Services: A Solution-Focused Approach (1994) by Insoo Kim Berg. New York, NY: Norton.

This book presents a definition and step-by-step description of the solution-focused intervention process with troubled families. The book provides methods for identifying resources in crisis-prone and physically violent families. It offers suggestions for utilizing these resources to empower families. Case examples are used to clarify concepts, and sample assessment forms are provided which can be adapted to any setting.

Strategies for Work with Involuntary Clients (1992) by Ronald H. Rooney. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

This book helps answer the question, "But how does this apply to people who don't want to see you?" Noting that involuntary clients are the rule in practice rather than the exception, the book cites practice literature with involuntary clients, offers practice tips with case examples, and provides insight into the nature of involuntary relationships and knowledge about how to act in them.

Involuntary Clients in Social Work Practice (1994) by Andrea Ivanoff, Betty J. Blythe, and Tony Tripodi. New York, NY: Aldine De Gruyter.

This book offers a pragmatic approach for working with involuntary clients based on research findings. Topics include engagement and assessment, planning and implementing research-based practice, termination and follow-up, and specific client populations. The book offers case examples with therapeutic foster care and intensive family preservation services and a detailed description of the process with CPS clients.

Solution Focused Intervention (continued from page 1)

client may have contributed to making the exceptions happen and thus uncovering strengths.

The "scaling" question helps to make complexities of a client's life more concrete and manageable. It asks clients to give a number from 0 to 10 that best represents where the client is at some specified point, whether regarding a relationship, a behavior, or a situation. Almost any aspect of a client's life can be scaled and thus used to identify both baselines and progress.

The "coping" question is used in situations where the client feels hopeless. It accepts the client's perceptions and asks the client how s/he copes with such overwhelming circumstances and feelings. It helps maintain a strengths perspective.

The "what's better" question, often open-ended, asks "What's happening in your life that's better?" It is used in later sessions to identify exceptions and recognize ongoing changes in a client's life.

After asking questions, workers provide feedback to clients to reinforce client resources and strengths. Such a process builds collaboration, gives support to clients' perceptions, and helps set goals. It is consistent with the approach of building on strengths used in the risk assessment model in CPS. ✕

Source: *How to Interview for Client Strengths* by Peter De Jong and Scott D. Miller in *Social Work*, v40, n6, p729-736, November 1995.

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Top 10 Ways to Have Fun at Work

1. Have at least one toy on your desk.
2. Have a magic wand to grant wishes.
3. Leave a quarter on several desks and deny knowing about it.
4. Wear a funny hat to work.
5. Dance your way down the hall.
6. Have a cartoon or joke book to read.
7. Have a Nerf basketball hoop on your wall.
8. Place a baby picture of yourself in your office.
9. Make a paper airplane and sail it.
10. Buy a fun toy for someone else.



Source: *The Better Way*, 1995, Ann L. Fry.