**Practice Guidance: A Relational Approach**

Remember the R’s

* Relate, Respond, Reason
* Reflection not Action
* Relationship building
* Reporting and Recording

 **APPROACH: Relational and reflective**

Families and young people frequently feedback that the meetings they have with family work practitioners can feel unhelpful, punitive and stressful. Creating this situation, even inadvertently is not helpful if our goal is to support change. As, from a systemic viewpoint change comes through a relational approach and any meeting with either the family or the young person should be seen as an opportunity for intervention.

We want to build trust so that families can be open and honest with us and so able to reveal their vulnerabilities and the issues as they see them. Their emotion needs to be heard and attended to, on a personal level. The most helpful way of doing this is to provide them with time and the right space to openly discuss their experiences, thoughts and feelings. This is a relational and reflective approach.

**METHOD: The three R’s**

When we feel under stress we are affected by stress hormones and survival responses. This means our brains are not able to engage rational thoughts as much as we would like and we are not able to keep a handle on our emotions, often left with a primitive response of needing to survive, through fight, flight, and freeze. This can render us powerless and feelings of submitting to the situation unable to find a more helpful way, often leading to doing more of the same (that is unhelpful) rather than something different that can lead to a change.

Bruce Perry introduced neuro-sequential therapy and the concept of, RELATE, RESPOND and REASON (in that order!). This is a sequential approach that was developed for working with young people who are in crisis, however, this is relevant for everyone including ourselves, as we all have a brain and they tend to work in similar ways.

**RELATE**

When under stress there is an automatic tendency to go into problem solving mode, identifying what can be done to avert the emotion and change the situation. The problem with going straight into problem solving mode is the tendency to ride roughshod over how the other person is feeling. The basis of the systemic approach is relational work, focusing on how we relate to one another. To do this we recognise where they are at, how they are feeling and reflect this in our non-verbal and verbal language. This is *attunement.* Once we feel someone’s attuned to us, that they get us and are connect with us, we tend to be able to start to calm or allow ourselves to be calmed (co-regulated by someone else’s calmer and more in control energy). This “I’m getting you” message enables people to start to feel a little safer as calms the lower part of the brain, the necessity to purely survive can be damped and it’s possible to then start the next phase of support.

**RESPOND**

This means that we start to create more safety in our interactions with the person, our responses are open, supportive, accepting and importantly non-judgemental. They show interest and concern. We show active listening by repeating back what they have said, checking out that we have understood them correctly. The most important thing here is EMPATHY, we find a way of connecting and showing that we can empathise with them as a human being. This approach helps to calm the lower/mid brain further and starts to help find more helpful emotions and feelings to enable us to move onto the next stage.

**REASON**

You can only reason, follow logical and rational thought, engage in creative thinking and in higher order/abstract thinking; when someone is calmed, feel safer and reassured that they are understood. In this sense reasoning, doesn’t mean to say that you accept everything that is said, there are ways to find gentle challenges, after all repeating more of the same thing will just contribute to a negative cycle of repetition. Often offering a reflection and insight from what you have heard can help the reasoning move forward. This can introduce ‘difference’ and together you are able to work together to find a helpful understanding; and arrive at a new and co-created, level of meaning about what is going on for them/others. Once you have related, responded and reasoned with someone over a period of time they can engage more willingly, openly and constructively with problem solving and action planning.

**Reflection not Action**

When you agree the meeting make it clear why you are coming out to see them – explain clearly that you want them to have some space and time to talk about their experiences and understand where they are at. Set this message out again at the start of the meeting. Explain that you may be taking a few notes but don’t just put your head down and start writing….

Let them start where they want to; let them set the pace and where the conversation focuses. They will need time, don’t rush or interrupt or pass comment, simply attune. Also in this time try and be mindful of what they are saying and how they are saying it. Think about their presentation, the language used what is the focus is on? Start to be curious what are they finding hard? What do theme do they keep returning to? (Looking for dominant stories) what are they not saying? What do you get the sense is missing? What are the glimmers the mention? (Looking for subjugated stories).

You don’t have to agree with them, you may and that’s OK, but you may not and that is OK as well, but must seek to connect with them. Recognise that this is hard for them, where there are at the moment, what has led them to be here right now? Reflect back to them that you are hearing that. (eg: that sounds hard, goodness, that’s tricky, it sounds exhausting, I can hear in your voice the upset, I hear you, I guess it took you by surprise? …reflective phases to help you acknowledge and connect, but avoid over committing- remember you are there to assist, not get drawn into a battle (or a drama triangle).

**Relationship Building**

Small things can matter when you are trying to connect. Remember basic rules like, be on time, don’t talk about your journey or yourself, don’t go in your court outfit, or with masses of paperwork.

Take one simple note book and pen out. Phones are off and away. If they offer it, take a drink. Make sure you have left plenty of time for the meeting, (remember the tendency to start talking ‘once your hand is on the door about the leave syndrome’). Try and have all relevant people there if possible, so they can all contribute to the conversation. Make sure they have the time to commit to a meeting, not rushing out for school or having to put tea on. Request that those that are present are not doing housework or messaging on phones etc.

* Summarising, checking out and reflecting back:

This is a useful way to see if you have understood the position correctly. “So, this is important, I just want to see if I have got this right you said XXX and feel XXX. So as we have been talking, I have thought xxxxx, is that right for you? It sounds as though the challenge is when its about school, do you think that could be right?. You know as we have been talking I notice that we have bounced around topics quite a lot, there is a lot going on and it can feel confusing, is that how it feels for you?”

* Share boundaries understanding/reflection/connection:

Remember don’t get overly involved emotionally (you may need plan to de-brief with colleague after the visit to account for yourself). You can share an understanding without having to talk about yourself or others personally, but can still convey it with empathy. Eg: “naturally we want to be doing our best, if that happened me I would find it hard, we are only human and I would be affected by that, I would have felt frightened/rejected/confused, I’d have felt it in my heart, in my gut and that would build up over time, I’d be carrying it, it would feel heavy, slow but eventually it have become a wall, is that how it was for you?”

* Mirroring:

Notice their language, verbal and non-verbal. Mirroring this, their way they are sat/use of gestures, subtly mirroring these back these can create a sense of attunement. Listen to their phrasing, note this and bring it back into the conversation, use the points of reference that they have chosen. Use them to explore further eg “ you said that you felt ‘as though you had fallen off Mount Everest’, what did that look like? How would others have known this?”

* Dialogue:

There is more to chatting than you think. Helpful dialogue has 4 aspects: turn taking, connecting, mutual influencing, co-creating outcomes.

* Non verbal skills to tuning into others:
* **S**: Face person **S**quarely
* **O**: adopt an **O**pen posture
* **L**: remember to **L**ean toward each other at times
* **E**: maintain good **E**ye contact
* **R**: try to be relatively **R**elaxed or natural in these behaviours
* Questions to ask yourself about tuning in:
* What are my attitudes towards this person?
* What attitudes am I expressing in my non/verbal behaviours?
* In what ways am I distracted from giving my full attention? What am I doing to handle these distractions?
* Punctuating verbal communication:

There are ways to use verbal communication to convey messages, be mindful of how this is being done:

* Confirming/repeating
* Denying/confusing
* Strengths/emphasising
* Adding intensity
* Controlling/regulating
* Processing what you are hearing:
* Identify key messages and feelings:
* What are the main points here?
* What themes are coming through?
* What is X’s point of view?
* What is most important to her?
* What does she want me to understand?
* What decisions are implied in what X is saying?
* What is X proposing?
* Questions as interventions:
* If conversation is focused too narrowly then ask questions to generate difference
* If conversation is too broad then ask questions to generate connections.

**Recording & Reporting (systemically):**

Reporting this in a systemic way will take account of the position, views and feelings of the family, acknowledging the situation as they see it and being clear this is their perspective.

You need to be careful to separate your own feelings, perspectives and analysis from that of the family.

Hopefully by the end of the meeting you will be able to confirm you understanding of their position and through joint co-creating of meaning have an understanding of how they have arrived at this position. This narrative can then be shared with others in subsequent meetings.

Thanks to Amy Darwin 06.08.18