



Relationship Based Practice



The signs of safety approach emphasises the need to foster open, honest and respectful relationships with families. This means social workers and other professionals have to have difficult conversations with families in a compassionate and respectful way. To help support the making of relationships, this document is designed to provide helpful ideas and ways of approaching work with children and their families that is relationship based at its heart. It should be read alongside the [Signs of Safety Practice Framework and Expectations document](#) that sets out expectations for Signs of Safety as Bexley's agreed way of working.

Helping children and their families who are in crisis or in difficult or dangerous situations to be safe, to cope and take control of their lives again requires social workers who are highly skilled in their interactions. Practitioners need to offer stability and consistency to families, many of whom have experienced generational trauma and for many, the 'intrusion' in their lives, unwelcome and threatening. The relationship between the practitioner and the child and family is often the most important tool in supporting families to make the necessary changes to keep children safe.

Parents, often along with wider family members, are usually the best people to understand their child's needs and can work collaboratively with the professional network in effective safety planning for their children. We know when parents feel listened to and heard, they are more likely to work with the social worker to identify difficulties and bring about change.



In Bexley, children and their families have told us when they have healthy relationships with social workers they see and feel:

Equal

Capable

Understood

Respected

Listened to

Worthy

Kindness

**Change can
happen**

Supported

Honesty

Compassion

Children and their families who have developed good relationships with their social workers usually have good communication, a shared understanding of what the child's life is like and are working together to improve outcomes for the child.

This brief guide helps social workers think about how to build relationships with children and their families and how to approach assessments, at the early stages of work.

Building relationships

When social workers are working with children and their families, these are some important points to consider to help build a positive working relationship:

- Make sure you complete your 'This is Me' document and share this with families either prior to, or at your first visit. Showing your 'human side' in a comfortable and contained way can support the relationship by addressing some of the power dynamics.
- Explain the role of a social worker and the powers social workers have, alongside the support that can be provided.
- Use simple, jargon and acronym free language, so families understand and can fully participate in the conversation. Where necessary, use an interpreter, signer or advocate, to promote the families' understanding and engagement.
- Trust that parents are the experts on their family and listen to what they say.
- Respect parents' views and opinions and accept that there will be times when they differ from our own
- Listen to what families have to say, we want to make sure their voices are heard.
- Be honest, so families are clear about our worries and work with them to find solutions.
- Be clear with families when there are examples of strengths and safety. It is important to acknowledge when children are receiving good and safe care. Families are encouraged that you are not solely focussed on negative experiences of care or criticism.
- Be reliable and follow through with expectations/ tasks. If difficulties arise, communicate these to the family in a timely way. If we say we are going to be somewhere or do something, we will.
- Show families kindness, and help them to understand what may be causing some of the difficulties, and support them in making the necessary changes to keep children safe.
- Acknowledge when things become overwhelming and support the family in thinking through next steps.

- Consider the different types of support the family may need and endeavour to respond to this, including when necessary, the use of universal and specialist services.
- Advocate on the family's behalf to make sure they are treated respectfully and fairly.
- Take an active interest in children and their families. Remember things like birthdays, hobbies and interests and use these in conversations with the child and their family. Try to spend time on more positive engagement that is not solely problem-focussed.
- Avoid thinking of about the families we work with as 'cases'. They are not merely statistics in a system.

It is important to remember that for many families, having Children's Social Care in their lives is a frightening and challenging experience. It is the role of the social worker to find ways of engaging families. Parents may already have negative feelings about themselves and their circumstances and the interactions with families can either strengthen this, or with skilled and positive relationship building, help families to challenge these beliefs, identify the strengths they have and support change needed to keep children safe.



Approaching Assessments

Consider what an ‘assessment’ means for a family with whom Children’s Social Care has become involved. What is normal, every-day practice in social work can be potentially ‘threatening’ to families, many who are living with the effects of trauma and for who, an assessment can create feelings of shame, fear and negative self-belief. Whilst a thorough assessment is essential in social work, thought needs to be given as to the way in which it is conducted, ensuring sensitivity and understanding at each stage. Below are some key points to consider when starting an assessment.

- Read the records of children and families with whom we have worked before, to understand their past. We know this is important to stop children and families from having to tell their stories repeatedly.
- Keep an open mind, test hypotheses and don’t start the assessment having already made up your mind.
- It is essential to know if children and their families need an interpreter or advocate as part of the assessment, to make sure they understand questions and can contribute to the conversations.
- Appreciating the culture of children and their families will help understand particular needs, values, beliefs and attitudes. Ask questions about their religion, culture and values to understand why they may be thinking and acting in the way they do.
- Consider the approach and tools you may use with children and their families to complete the assessment e.g. scaling questions, miracle/magic wand questions, motivational interviewing, case mapping, words and pictures, other direct work tools and stories.
- Think through who may need to be involved in the assessment to help provide a clear understanding of the family’s situation, e.g. conversations with children and their family together, individually, specific family members, friends and professionals.
- A visit plan is helpful to think about the key information you would like to gather for the assessment to understand the needs of each child and adult in the family. This will also give the family an idea about the number of visits (communicate clearly with families if this needs to change) and what may be discussed during the visit. Knowing this in advance may help to reduce some of their anxiety.
- When going to a visit, be on time, or text or call ahead if you are running late. This is a simple courtesy but shows you value the person.

- Develop strengths based questions to help children and their families identify the problem themselves and decide what the solution(s) may be. This can reduce the power imbalance and reinforce a collaborative approach. Ask for their consent to contact family, friends and professionals. Again, this supports working collaboratively with families and can reduce the family's perception of being 'done to'. However, it is also important to be clear and transparent about statutory responsibilities.
- Explore who is around in the network of family and friends, to find out who is available to offer help and support. Be specific in what support is being asked for and by who. Be sensitive to difficult family dynamics and support with reparations when appropriate. This may include mediation and drawing on the strengths of the relationship.
- Case map together with children and their family, develop danger statements paired with safety goals, scaling questions and next steps.
- Identify strengths and existing safety.
- In collaboration with the family, develop a plan that will help to meet their needs, that is in their language and addresses their and our concerns.
- In writing the assessment, use language the family will understand and avoid using jargon. Use the family's words as quotes. Imagine the child is reading it.
- Tell children and families when the assessment should be completed and how they will receive a copy. Make sure the family can read or alternatively, discuss how the assessment will be shared with them in a meaningful way that can be understood.
- Sharing feedback is important and families will be asked for feedback whilst they are receiving support. It is important that families are clear about how their feedback will be used. If you are given feedback, listen to it and try and make changes that could help you work better with families in the future.

The assessment process can be challenging for families, as they face a time of uncertainty about the future outcome. The focus should always be the safety and well-being of the child but following the guide above can support to contain families whilst any assessment takes place and is likely to increase family participation and engagement.

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