

Practising Purposefully

SYSTEMIC PRACTICE

Safe Uncertainty



What is it?

A model by Barry Mason which is used to aid reflection on how you are positioned in regards to risk. It also helps us think about the ideal position we want families to take so that they feel able to experiment with making changes in their lives.

The safe/unsafe continuum refers to perceptions about the risk itself. The certainty/uncertainty is about perceived level of knowledge about or towards the risk. It highlights **safe-uncertainty** as the optimal stance. It is a way of *being*, not a technique.

Authoritative Doubt

A worker in the 'safe uncertainty' zone will be comfortable in a 'not-knowing' position and will be able to balance their expertise with *uncertainty* i.e. they will not have all the knowledge, information or facts available to them. They know this and are comfortable holding this 'not-knowing' position. Mason says workers should hold 'authoritative doubt'. In that they should never get caught up looking for the 'right' answer i.e. striving for *certainty* but are always curious as to what else might be happening; they are willing to be educated by the family.

Why is it helpful?

If we act from a 'not-knowing' position we are more likely to be open to new possibilities. There is always something new to learn. We know we don't know everything.

Often families, other workers and even our organisation can push us into acting or being 'certain'. However there can be a false sense of security if you think you are 'certain' you know what is happening and why in the family. Fundamentally we can never know everything there is to know about a family and their lives, therefore we can never be 100% certain about them and in an 'all knowing' position. If you marry your hypotheses your curiosity is shut down which is a dangerous place to practice from. **We confuse certainty with safety, which actually makes us unsafe.**

Families & Safe Uncertainty

We should aim to encourage families into the safe uncertainty zone as well. This is the optimum place for them to start to initiate changes. Often families speak to us about how certain they are they know what the problem is and WHO the problem is. Moving away from this certainty can be a scary place, they may feel out of control or that people are not listening to them.

If we create a secure base (i.e. a solid relationship) with them they will feel secure enough to move away from certainty and more towards uncertainty (just like when a toddler/child moving away from its parental figure to explore the world). We can help this process by increasing the family's resilience, drawing out their values, qualities and core strengths. We can help them view the problem in a different light. If this is successful, then any future challenges that come their way will also be negotiated better.

Safe Certainty

A worker may feel that they know what is happening for the family and can risk assess correctly based on that knowledge. The family may feel certain about what the problem is and what the solution must be. In this zone people are unrealistic, blocking, controlling, potentially confident to the point of arrogant and unwilling to listen to feedback. This is a dangerous place to stay in. Often supervisors of practice or social workers of families can feel pushed into finding solutions – or acting in ways which create 'certainty and safety' such as doing written agreements i.e. planning for every eventuality except the one that actually happens!

Safe Uncertainty

Authoritative doubt will lead people to reflect that they recognise they don't know everything. **This is the optimal stance.** They are comfortable with this uncertainty. They are willing to work with others, make changes and remain flexible in practice. They approach families with respectful curiosity and create multiple hypotheses and thus multiple points of intervention. They reflect on context, beliefs and behaviour but don't rush to understand things too quickly. They are able to use a 'both/and' perspective.

Unsafe Uncertainty

Workers and families in the unsafe - uncertain quadrant may present as not knowing what to do, somewhat lost, they want someone to tell them what to do. They may be anxious and overwhelmed with problems or complexity of the families. This is a vulnerable position to be in. There is a lack of professional understanding of the family functioning and patterns of behaviour.

Unsafe Certainty

If workers and families feel unsafe/unsettled emotionally but feel they definitely know what to do about it this is a position of unsafe-certainty. People know it is unsafe but they report to be certain as to WHY it is unsafe. Sometimes people react rather than find root causes of behaviour. They convince themselves of certainty and are not open to new possibilities until further evidence presents itself to the contrary of their current information. Performance indicators can create an unsafe certainty feel, as can closing a case on the premise that there has been no further police reports so things 'must' be okay.

“WHEN NOTHING IS SURE, EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE.”

-MARGARET DRABBLE

References:

Mason, B. (1993). Towards positions of safe uncertainty. *Human Systems*, 4 pp 189-200