

Merton Practice Framework



Everything we do is to serve our community to create the conditions for every child to experience a life full of love, opportunity and belonging.

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Forward:

Dheeraj Chibber, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion

I am really proud of our social care workforce in Merton. Every day you bring passion and commitment to improve outcomes for our most vulnerable children and families. Our practice model and practice standards have been co-produced with our practitioners and articulates the skills and values demonstrated in the relationship-based practice on the ground. By sharing and owing this across the department it provides us with the opportunity to ensure a high level of consistent practice for all our children and families.

Our work is enhanced by the support and challenge we receive from our partners. We have strong and sustained relationships that support our assessments, interventions and plans at both an operational and strategic level. We are committed to maintaining these relationships.

I do not underestimate the challenges and complexity of the work. You hold a lot of worries about children and have to make difficult decisions frequently within tight timeframes. The senior leadership team are committed to providing continuous support through supervision, training and reflective learning.

It is crucial for Merton as a learning organisation to listen to our practitioners and understand both what supports best practice and what may inhibit it so we can address this and provide the right environment for relationship-based practice to thrive. I look forward to continuing to listen and learn from all our practitioners and partners in Merton.

Introduction:

Our practice model provides an evidence-based framework which develops consistent knowledge and skills across the workforce and supports our ambitions for the children and families in Merton. Using this common language and relationship-based approach supports integrated working across the organisation with our partners, while maintaining the focus on supporting children and families to improve outcomes.

Our practice framework must be read with [Merton Children's Services Procedures Manual \(proceduresonline.com\)](https://proceduresonline.com) which outlines our processes in line with national and local policies and procedures. This handbook will not repeat these nor will it focus on just doing the basics. We are very ambitious and expect all practitioners to know **what** they need to do **when** they need to do it and **how** they need to practice in line with our policies and procedures. This handbook speaks to the **why** we practice in the way we do and our passion to maintain and embed outstanding practice for every child and family that we are privileged to work with and learn from. Our principles and values are the soul of our practice, and these will continue to provide the supportive framework to maintain and embed high quality relationship-based practice across the organisation.

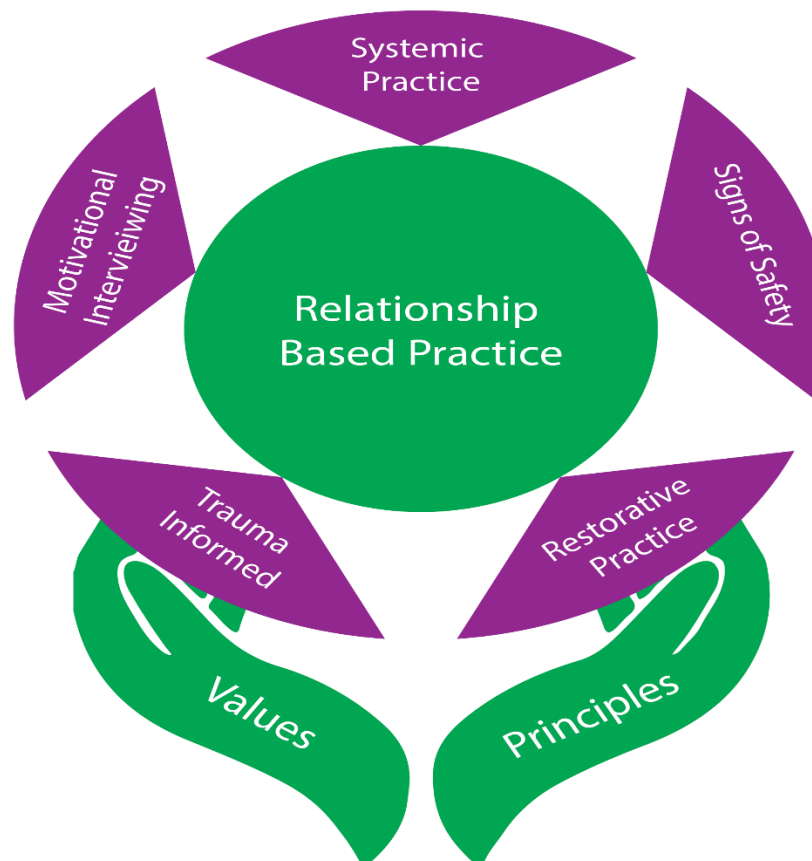
Throughout the Practice handbook we use “children” to refer to children and young people. We support our young people to contribute to decisions made about them and seek to reflect this throughout the handbook.

Practice Model:

A Practice model helps to 'centre' our services, ensuring all our work with children and families is grounded in theory and research, and underpins our values and beliefs.

It provides coherence and consistency to children and families in the way we work with them and will explain to others what it means to be part of Merton Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion. In Merton we enable practitioners to use their professional judgement, to be creative and to adapt a range of approaches, skills and tools to enhance their work with children and their families. These approaches include Systemic Practice, Signs of Safety/Wellbeing/Success, Trauma Informed Practice, Restorative Approaches and Motivational Interviewing Skills. At the heart of these approaches is relationship-based practice.

Merton Practice Model



Relationship Based Practice

The primary resources practitioners have when working with children and families, colleagues and other professionals are themselves and the relationships they establish with others.

Effective relationships are central to successful outcomes. However, we know relationships are complex, requiring an awareness of 'self' and the negotiation of inter-personal boundaries. Relationship based practice recognises that both practitioners and families bring a range of experiences and emotional responses into the work, and this has a bearing on the relationship.

Many of the children and families we work with will be anxious about our intervention and this can trigger powerful feelings, particularly of shame and guilt. This can be seen in behaviours such as violent hostility and passive aggression through to depression, avoidance, and withdrawal from working with us and others. It is important to understand what children and families communicate to us in both a verbal and nonverbal way and help them to feel contained, supported and held through challenging times.

Each family is unique and the interpersonal relationships within families can be dynamic and complex. We need to recognise that children, parents and carers may have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACES) that impact on their capacity to develop trusting relationships. We also need to recognise the barriers within our own organisation, our communities and wider society that can lead to families not being heard. This includes discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, age, disability, social background, gender and sexuality and religion.

How we build these relationships reflects our compassion and empathy, recognising the vulnerabilities and challenges that our families have faced as well as their resilience and strengths and their capacity to work with us to develop their own solutions to their difficulties.

Systemic Practice

Systemic practice is a way of practicing which focuses on relationships and recognises that individuals are always embedded in their social context, focusing on the whole family system rather than individuals. Through a systemic approach, change can be achieved through exploring relationship patterns and understanding how they impact on children. These relationship patterns can be a source of strength and support but may also be stuck and so limit improvement and change. Families attribute meaning connected to these behaviour patterns and it's important to explore and understand this meaning within the social and cultural context for the family.

Change in one part of a relational pattern, or system, can be expected to create adjustments throughout the family and immediate context. The role of the practitioner joining the system is very important to supporting that change. A systemic approach supports us to be reflective and be mindful of our own actions and beliefs and how they can support or inhibit change. Through training and supervision, we can reflect and review our thoughts, feelings, ideas, and responses as well as the tools we are using including genograms, Ecomaps and Social GRRRAACCEESSS to empower families to create and maintain positive change.

Systemic tools

Genograms

A map of family relationships drawn collaboratively with a family can provide a useful opportunity to explore their family story, their family history and the significance of relationships within the family

Ecomaps

A map of people the child and the family see as important and supportive to them. This could include extended family and important people in the child and family's life. Completing an ecomap in a relational way helps us to understand family strengths and what support is effective and why.

Social GRRRAACCEESSS

Understanding different aspects of the social and cultural context for the family including Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual orientation, and Spirituality.

Chronology/timelines

A list, in date order, of significant events in a child and family's life. This can be used with families to explore patterns and meanings and provide families with a collaborative opportunity to ensure our recording of their life stories are correct.

Systemic Skills

Hypothesising-
Generating ideas to open our thinking and ensure we don't become wedded to one idea

Circularity-
understanding the interconnectiveness of family relationships

Curiosity-
Maintaining an open mind and avoiding viewing the family through one lens

Signs of Safety

Signs of Safety (SofS) is a systemic, strengths-based approach, which involves developing collaborative and constructive working relationships with children and families, and amongst professionals. It recognises that situations can change and crucially that families are *essential* to that change process. Practitioners need to be aspirational for families to support them to find their own solutions. A focus on safety is maintained through safety planning with children, family networks and professional networks.

Signs of Safety encourages practitioners to think critically, remaining open-minded, and be prepared to admit they may have it wrong. Maintaining a questioning, not an expert, position is an important aspect of the approach, and it requires respectful professional curiosity coupled with skilful and respectful use of authority.

Signs of Safety/Wellbeing/Success Assessment and Planning tools are designed to be the organising map for using a SofS approach and underpinning these are a variety of tools that practitioners can use creatively and to the child's situation.

	What are we worried about?			What's working well?		What needs to happen?	
	Past	Future	Complicating Factors	Existing Strengths	Existing Solutions	Goals	Next Steps
Signs of Safety	Harm	Danger	Complicating Factors	Existing Strengths	Existing Safety	Safety Goals	Next Steps
Signs of Wellbeing	Wellbeing Concerns	Critical Worries	Complicating Factors	Existing Strengths	Existing Wellbeing	Wellbeing Goals	Next Steps
Signs of Success	Worrying Behaviour	Critical Worries	Complicating Factors	Existing Strengths	Existing Success	Success Goals	Next Steps

Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing is an approach designed to empower people to change by drawing out their own meaning, importance and capacity for change.

It is based on a respectful and curious way of intervening with people that facilitates the natural process of change and honours the individual's autonomy. The process is collaborative, the practitioner is an expert in helping people change and people are the experts of their own lives.

Motivational interviewing recognises that people have within themselves resources and skills needed for change and identifies the person's priorities, values, and wisdom to explore reasons for change and support success. It seeks to understand the person's perspectives and experiences, expresses empathy, highlights strengths, and respects a person's right to make informed choices about changing or not changing. Rather than challenging, opposing, or criticising individuals, it is the practitioner's role to help them reach a new understanding of themselves and their behaviours. One way to do this is by reframing or offering different interpretations of certain situations. This changing viewpoint increases the person's motivation to change based on their own goals and values. Practitioners support their client's self-efficacy by reinforcing their power to make the changes they want. They guide them through the behaviour change process, recognise the positive changes clients make, and offer encouragement along the way.

MI Skills



MI Principles

Express Empathy	Support Self-Efficacy	Roll with resistance	Develop Discrepancy
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Step into the families shoes and see and understand their world	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on skills and strengths that support change• Instill hope that families can reach their goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resistance emerges when an individuals autonomy is threatned	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People change when they see the gap between where they are and where they want to be

Restorative Practice

Restorative approaches enable us to focus on building relationships that create and inspire positive change. It describes behaviours, interactions and approaches which help to build and maintain positive, healthy relationships, resolve difficulties and repair harm where there has been conflict.

Restorative practice involves providing children and families with the right support and encouragement to enable them to reach their goals through providing 'high support' **and** positive challenge' and holding people to account in a meaningful and constructive way. It is also about inspiring families and communities to find solutions to their own problems and to shape their own futures.



There is strong evidence demonstrating that outcomes for children and their families are improved when ***we work 'with' and 'alongside'*** our families ***as opposed to 'doing for' or 'to' them.***

Trauma Informed Practice

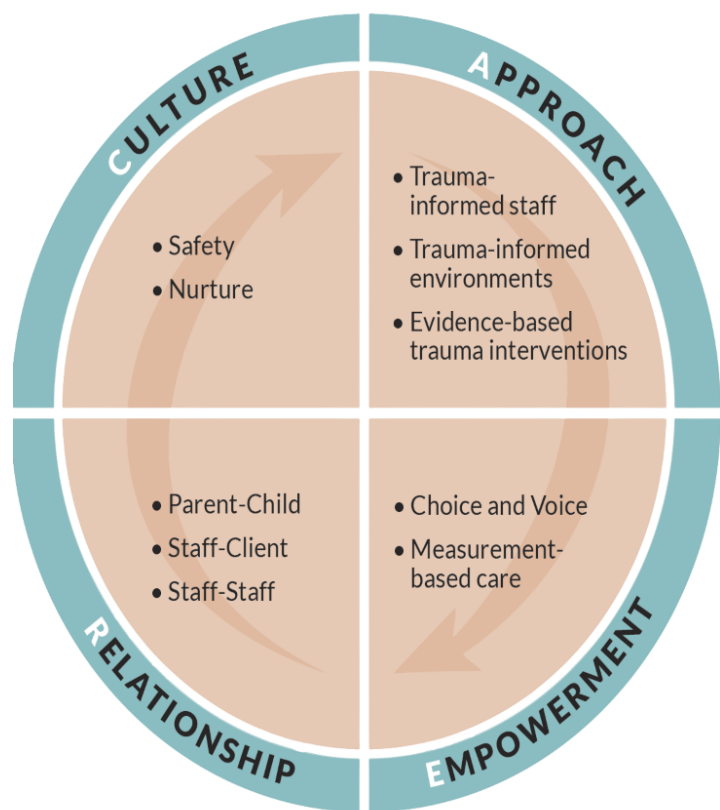
Trauma-Informed Practice is a strengths-based approach, which seeks to understand and respond to the impact of trauma on people's lives. The approach emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety for everyone and aims to empower individuals to re-establish control of their lives.

The effects of trauma are personal and complicated. Many factors contribute to how an individual experiences post-traumatic stress, from personal history and family circumstances to cultural norms and availability of support services. Trauma can be experienced through abuse and neglect, domestic abuse and violence and substance misuse, and also, for example, discrimination, oppression, having a child with a disability, being bullied and experiencing war and torture. It considers how these traumatic event/s can have a long-lasting impact into adulthood, affecting how adults become parents themselves.

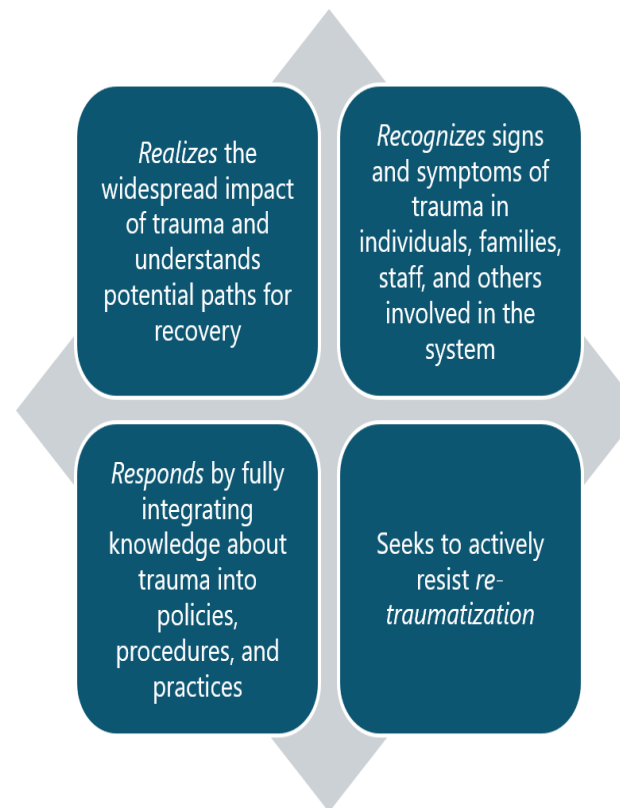
Someone suffering from complex childhood developmental trauma may have no memory or concrete narrative of the trauma. However, it may manifest as difficulties managing emotions, relationships, behaviour, and ability to learn and it will take the development of a trusting relationship to explore this trauma.

Working in a trauma informed way means we understand how trauma impacts on children and parents, we use language which empowers rather than blames. By using empathic based responses to emotions rather than focusing on the observed difficulty, this will help children and families to integrate and manage the impact of trauma.

Trauma Informed Principles



Trauma Informed Practice



Practice Values:

Our practice values underpin the way we practice in Merton.

Children are supported to remain within their families and communities

Family relationships are universally acknowledged to have deep and enduring effects on the well-being of individuals and society. Family is the single most important influence in a child's life. From their first moments of life, children depend on parents and family to protect them and provide for their needs. Parents and family form a child's first relationships and they are their primary role models and teachers. It is in the family context that a child's basic emotional needs for security, belongingness, support, identity and intimacy are nurtured. The parent-child relationship is crucial to this but so too are the wider contextual influences, since parents effectively act as a buffer between the child and these wider influences.

Children thrive when parents actively promote their positive growth and development. Every parent needs support either from their own family or their community, however some families will experience trauma and or vulnerabilities which impacts on their parenting capacities. We are committed to supporting families through these vulnerable periods and empowering them to find the solutions that will safeguard and promote the welfare of their children. When families are unable to do this, we will ensure that children are cared for in a family environment close to their community.

We will see children, hear children, keep them safe and promote their welfare

We will use our direct work skills including observation skills and the most appropriate tools for communication across the ages and developmental stages. This will enable us to listen to children and understand their lives. It will also enable us to provide a clear explanation of why we are involved and what the adults are doing to keep them safe and reduce their worries so we can engage in a meaningful and helpful way. We will have a clear plan of the direct work we are completing with the child ensuring that it is linked to the outcomes of their plan.

When we work with children with disabilities and additional needs, we use communication aid tools such as 'Picture Exchange Communication System' (PECS) for children with limited speech and utilise social media and picture aids to help children communicate.

For babies and preverbal children, we will observe how they look, behave and interact with others in order to understand what they are telling us.

Where there are concerns for the child's safety, we develop an immediate safety plan in collaboration with the family. When we tell a child we will do something, we always ensure we follow through in a timely way and keep them updated about progress in an age-appropriate way.

We will work in a respectful, open, and transparent way with our families, partners, and colleagues

Our relationship-based approach in Merton emphasises the need to foster open, honest, and respectful relationships with families. We will ensure that families are clear about the reason for involvement in Children Services and that they do not experience unnecessary intervention. We will always ask for consent to speak with other professionals about the child/family, unless to do so would place the child at risk of harm. When presented with these challenges we carefully consider the implications for the child and the parents if we are considering overriding parental consent to talk to other professionals.

We will work openly and transparently with colleagues and partners ensuring we use their expertise to support our assessments, interventions and plans to improve outcomes for our children. We ensure when speaking with professionals, that we ask questions which help us to be clear about the specific, observable behaviours of the parents, children, and significant others and identify the strengths and safety that exists within the family.

When we need to have difficult conversations with families and colleagues, we will do this in a compassionate and restorative way to empower and facilitate change.

We will be culturally competent and understand the meaning this has for our families

We understand the child and members of their family live within a cultural context that is both significant to them and influenced by the wider cultural context around the family. We will use all aspects of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS to understand the meaning of culture and discrimination for families. These include Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual orientation, and Spirituality. All our involvement and interventions are underpinned by an understanding of the meaning this has for the families we are working with.

We will acknowledge differences and be mindful of the power dynamics that families can experience when working with us. We will be mindful of our unconscious bias and use reflective supervision to explore how they may impact on the children and families that we work with.

Maintaining a respectful and listening stance enables us to understand the situation from each individual family member's point of view and prevents us from blaming or shaming families.

We recognise that every contact is an opportunity to create positive change through the relationships we build.

We recognise every contact and interaction as an opportunity for intervention to support positive change for children and families.

Children and families may have had previous negative experiences with statutory services and we need to be mindful families may hold set ideas about what Children's Services offer. Therefore, our first phone calls and visits may reinforce any negative

stereotypes that families may hold. With this in mind, our tone, explanation and presentation are crucial to getting the relationship off to the right start. It is important to explore the family's understanding of the reason for the intervention and their expectations at the earliest opportunity.

We are aware of the impact of stress and anxiety and understand that children and families may not be able to hear or retain the information and advice we are offering. Working in an empathetic and restorative way will enable us **to work 'with' and 'alongside'** our children and families **as opposed to 'doing for' or 'to' them**, promoting them as agents of change who will find solutions with our support.

Practice Standards:

Our practice standards set out the way we will work with children and families throughout their journey with services in Merton and are underpinned by our practice values.

Intervening early providing the right support at the right time

Before our interventions, visits or meetings, we have made time to think about what we are trying to achieve, how we will achieve it and how we will know we have been successful.

Research tells us that Family support services which are community-based and have involvement by the community are more likely to be accessed by families. In addition, community services which are organised to promote 'empowerment' had improved outcomes for parents and, indirectly, for children.

This is outlined in Merton's Effective Support Document: [Effective Support for Families in Merton - Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership \(mertonscp.org.uk\)](http://mertonscp.org.uk)



RIGHT
HELP

To work alongside all family members, helping them to think about their worries and come up with their own ideas and plans to make things better, building on their own family and community resources and strengths.

To develop and train the children's workforce so that everyone uses the same language, tools and approaches so that everyone knows what to expect.



RIGHT
TIME

To have clear information along with agreed systems and processes so that problems are picked up early and support is put in place to help things get better.

To work together to provide support to children, young people and their families at the lowest level possible in accordance with their needs.



RIGHT
PLACE

To support connections in the community, building relationships with local people so that everyone knows how and where to get advice and support when they need it and that people can access services and support in their local area

Assessment of need and risk

Assessments are a dynamic process and the more we involve the child, the family and significant others the better informed we are about the family history and context. It is very important we involve fathers and male carers in our assessments and interventions. When fathers and male carers are living outside of the home or there are concerns about violence, we need to ensure that we have engaged with them in a meaningful way. [The Myth of Invisible Men \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

The child's views, wishes and feelings inform and lead the assessment of need and risk and we will meet with the child separately to capture and record their views. If the child cannot or does not want to see the practitioner alone, this is discussed with a manager and the reason recorded. We should reflect and be mindful about what may be influencing or preventing the child from engaging with the practitioner.

We triangulate what children, parents and professionals are telling us, in addition to what we observe the child and parents doing. We use evidence-based tools such as Safe Lives, Dash, NSPCC Neglect Toolkit, Modern Slavery Assessment Tool, and other tools to help our analysis.

When completing the assessment with the family, the focus is on immediate and long-term risk, analysis, and reflection of historical information, worries, strengths, need for protection, family network and complicating factors. We ask questions that help us to understand the past and current harm, i.e. 'what specifically are the parents doing', 'how often' 'how severe', 'when was the first / last time' 'what was the worst time' 'what is the impact on the child?'

The Signs of Safety framework is used to keep a focus on managing risk using the danger statement and safety goals to inform the process: moving from where we are now to where we all want to get to for the child. We will support the family to reflect and look at the worries from different perspectives. Weight will be given to the worries and strengths supported by what research says about what raises and reduces the risk in this child's situation. We always make sure there is a clear contingency, or 'back-up', plan in place saying what will happen if the family are not able to carry out or sustain the safety plan.

We are mindful of the impact that reading an assessment may have on each individual family member. As practitioners you know your families and you need to write assessments in a way that each of your families can understand. When sharing assessments with children it is important to think about how all of this family information may impact on the child. Preparing a narrative for the child in an age-appropriate way can support them to understand the relevant aspects of the assessment and the strengths and risks presented.

Planning and reviewing outcomes

Our plans will be SMART:

- **S**pecific, **S**ensible and **S**ignificant
- **M**easurable, **M**eaningful and **M**otivating
- **A**chievable, **A**greed and **A**ttainable
- **R**elevant, **R**ealistic and **R**esults-based
- **T**ime bound, **T**imely and **T**ime sensitive depending on ages and stages of development

We will state clearly what outcome will be achieved for the child, who will do what and in what timescale. We will also be clear from the beginning about how we will measure success and mobilise the strengths of the family to achieve the solutions to reduce risk and meet the needs of their children.

When we identify resources and provide interventions, we need to be clear from the beginning about the impact this will have on achieving the outcomes for this child and family. Using the Danger Statement and Safety Goal to inform what outcomes we want to see for this child there is a simple plan format below:

What needs to happen to make things better and safer for the child/young person	Who will be responsible	When does it need to be done
What are the interventions and resources including those in the family	This will include family members as well as the professional network	Specific timescale/dates and in the child's timeframe

Family members are encouraged to involve their wider network in developing the family support plan through a family network meeting and in reviewing it in family network meetings and/or family support meetings. 'Family finding' tools and techniques are used to help the family develop their connected support network.

Everybody, including the child will need to know what is in the plan and receive a copy of this. We will need to consider how to write the plan in an age-appropriate way so that children can understand and do not feel overwhelmed.

Plans will be reviewed on a regular basis and progress analysed. This will inform our decision making and children and families need to be clear from the beginning about what will happen if outcomes are not achieved, and the risk continues or escalates.

Recording and report writing

A child's record tells their story, and we will write them for children to help them understand their journey, while being mindful that they will be reading this in the future if they choose to access their records. When we write in this way and include the child's views and experiences, this will help us to think about the support we offer to families and how to evidence this in their records.

The Child's record is not just a place to store information. It should be a tool that assists social workers in planning and making the best decisions for children. Description without analysis makes it very difficult to understand how and why some critical decisions

have been made. Practitioners need to think about the purpose of each piece of recording. For example, when recording a visit to the child, the record is about the reason for the visit itself as well as its contribution to the whole assessment and the importance of not just what happened or what was said, but what that **means** for the child.

Recording also provides an audit trail of accountability for the quality of social work practice and decision making about a child's life that can be taken forward if a new social worker becomes involved or if out of hour team needs to access information in an emergency.

We will always speak and write our reports using language that the family speak and understand in a sensitive and straightforward way. The active involvement of children and family members should be built into recording practice and should include the multiple voices, representing the different perspectives, beliefs and opinions of the diverse people involved in a child's life.

Using evidence-based research helps us to extend our knowledge base and apply new insights to our practice.

Corporate parenting

When we have the privilege of looking after children, we will do this in the best way; keeping children connected with their families and communities and providing loving relationships where they can thrive. When children cannot live with their birth family or extended family, we will find permanent families for them in a timely way which meets their needs. We will ensure they grow up with a strong identity and self-belief. We understand the trauma children have experienced and utilise evidence-based interventions to mitigate any long-term impact on their outcomes.

We encourage our looked after children and care experience young people to express their views, wishes and feelings, take them into account and let them know how we are going to act on them. As an organisation we are constantly learning through the feedback we receive from children and young people.

We have high aspirations for our children, and we never give up on someone as we support them through adulthood. Across Merton, our ethos of corporate parenting means that we are all responsible for the children we look after, and our care experienced young people.

Creating the right organisational environment to support best practice

In Merton we have a deep commitment to learning processes and practices. We are curious and inspired to continuously improve. We recognise that deep learning can be achieved when we make mistakes and things go wrong. We are committed to actively engage in problem solving to explore better solutions.

The senior leadership team is committed to fostering an environment that is conducive to learning. We will achieve this by ensuring there is sufficient time for reflection and analysis. Regular high-quality supervision and team meetings provide the space for individual and group reflection, analysis and development.

Our quality assurance process not only provide us with a window on current practice but our collaborative approaches to audits ensures that we understand the practitioner's perspective as well as feedback from children and families to evidence the impact of our interventions. We analyse performance data to help our understanding of any change in performance and triangulating this with audits and practice observations provides us with feedback on both our collective strengths and areas for development.

In Merton, we recognise that our workforce is our most valuable asset in transforming the lives of vulnerable children, young people and their families. Our Academy partners with the Frontline and Step Up to Social Work programmes and Social Work Apprenticeships to support people wanting to enter the social work profession.

We have high aspirations for our newly qualified Social Workers and provide a high level of support, learning and assessment to guide them through their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). Having the same aspirations for more experienced Social Workers, opportunities are available to support and supervise students and train to become qualified Practice Educators. Practitioners are also supported by the Workforce and Practice Development Team through individual and team support, including

consultation, mentoring and reflective spaces and, with embedding Merton's practice model, delivering evidence-based practice and developing individual and team skills.

Our Learning & Development offer is constantly reviewed based on needs analysis, feedback from staff through supervision and appraisal processes and findings from our collaborative learning reviews.

Self-care and accessing support

We acknowledge the stress involved in keeping children safe and promoting their welfare and as a leadership team we are committed to your wellbeing.

It is important to acknowledge the feelings and responses evoked as a result of the complexity of our work which are normal and should not be bottled up. Stress and crisis will challenge us but they don't need to damage us. Your manager, peers or the [Employee Assistance Programme \(EAP\) \(sharepoint.com\)](https://sharepoint.com) support you and help manage these emotions and build resilience.

By implementing the principles of 'Psychological First Aid' to improve longer-term wellbeing outcomes we can each offer humane, supportive and practical help, paying attention to the factors that seem to be most helpful to people's long-term well-being and recovery.

These include:

- facilitating the conditions for people to feel safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful
- helping to ensure access to social, physical and emotional support
- helping people feel able to help themselves, as individuals and communities.

We encourage you to respect your own (and colleagues) needs and boundaries; looking after yourself both physically and emotionally; keep connected with colleagues and partners and build collaboration and mutual support; Stay in touch with your values and what is important to you; Rest when you need to or do something completely different and seek help when you need it.

Acknowledgement:

We would like to thank all the local authorities that have published their practice handbook and provided both the framework and the inspiration that we have gratefully utilised.

References:

[The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care has developed a prototype diagnostic tool](#) for organisations to understand how well they are using research and evidence in practice and in the management of their operations.