

Guide to Solution Focused Questions



Overview

The Signs of Safety model of practice is a strength based approach which is rooted in solution focused therapy. This guide gives an overview of some of the different solution focused questioning techniques with examples and ideas for follow up questions, however, in any situation, your intuition as a practitioner will be the best guide of what questions to ask next.

Solution focused questions are intended to help build trust with children, young people and family members, and elicit detailed information to inform your assessments and plans. This guide should be considered within the context of Appreciative Inquiry and the EARS approach.

General Points

Compliment – Acknowledge the person's strengths and past successes. Throughout your conversations try to acknowledge the positives where this is relevant, also, even if you are discussing a difficult situation and you are worried, you could make a genuine compliment such as 'I am impressed by how calm you have been throughout this situation'.

Use silence – Allow 10, 15 or 20 seconds for the person to respond avoid the temptation to fill in silence with advice.

Use open ended questions – Use questions which encourage descriptive answers rather than questions that can be answered with yes or no and force someone to make a choice.

Avoid why questions – 'Why' questions tend to generate a short response and in most cases can be rephrased to get a better quality answer.

Avoid questions that are confrontational, judgemental or negatively phrased.

- ✗ Why haven't you taken James to school this week?
- ✓ What has been happening this week that has stopped you from taking James to school?
- ✗ Why did you try to commit suicide?
- ✓ What is happening at the moment that makes you think ending your life is a good idea?

Where possible try to phrase difficult questions in a positive way, particularly at the beginning of the conversation to get people to engage with you on difficult subjects.

- ✗ Why are you still in a relationship with your husband?
- ✓ What are the positives for you in continuing to stay in this relationship?

Relationship questions

Relationship questions are intended to identify the people in the life of the children and family and the impact they have (whether this is positive or negative). The relationship questions will help identify worries, strengths and safety and help the practitioner to identify the family's safety network.

Questions for Families	
Initial Question	Follow Up Ideas
Who are you closest to in your family?	Tell me about that.
Is there anyone that you ask for advice when you are worried about your children?	Tell me about a time when you were worried and ____gave you advice, how did this help you?
Can you tell me what you like about your son?	Tell me about the things you do to show your son that you love him.
Who would _____ (the child or young person) say are the most important people in their life?	How do these people help _____ to grow up well?
If something really good happened in your life who is the first person you would tell, outside of your household?	Tell me about_____, what do you like about them? How have they helped you in the past
What's the biggest fear you have about your relationship with _____?	Has anyone been able to help with this fear? What have they done in the past that has helped?
Tell me about one family member who is on your side?	Tell me about a time when they have supported you, what did they do?
Who else in your family is concerned about this problem?	What have they said or done that tells you they are worried?
Who could best support you in dealing with these problems?	How could they help? How have they helped in the past?
Questions for Children and Young People	
Initial Question	Follow Up Ideas
Can you tell me what you like about your Dad?	What would you say he is good at?
Who do you consider to be your best friend?	What do you have in common? What do you like best about them?
What happened between you and _____that scares you?	When is the last time this happened? Was anyone able to help at that time?
Who makes you feel safe? How do they do this?	Tell me about a time when (the problem happened) and _____made you feel safe, what did they do?
When there are arguments between you and _____, what happens? How does it change how you get along?	When was the last time you argued with _____? How was this resolved at the time?

Indirect Questions

Indirect questions invite people to consider how other people feel about a situation or how other people would respond to some aspect of their life, their behaviour or future changes.

Indirect questions can also help people to share information about difficult issues and will enable a discussion about specific problems without directly challenging behaviour. This is particularly useful if the person you are speaking with does not fully acknowledge the issue or the impact it is having on the family (for example a drinking problem or domestic abuse).

Questions for Families	
Initial Question	Follow Up Ideas
Has anyone ever told you that they think you have a drinking problem?	What have they seen that would make them think you have a drinking problem?
During court proceedings, what changes do you think the judge will expect from you before they will consider letting your children live with you again?	What do you think is the most important thing that needs to change? What do you think the judge needs to see to be satisfied that things have changed for good? Is there anything that you can do more of or do differently to make this change happen?
How do you think ____ will react/ what do you think they will say when you make the changes we have talked about?	What do you think they might notice first?
If your children were here (and could talk, if the children are toddlers or babies) what might they say about how they feel when you and _____ have a serious argument?	What might you say to them if they told you how it makes them feel?
How is it that someone might think that you are neglecting or mistreating your children?	What might they have noticed about your children?
If I was to ask (partner/children/friend/relative/ teacher) what would they say was different?	When might they have first noticed this difference?
Tell me all of the reasons why your friends think you shouldn't be in a relationship with ____, for a while?	What might be their main reason for thinking this?
What would your kids say are the best times they have had with you?	How might they describe what this felt like for them?
Questions for Children and Young People	
Initial question	Follow Up Ideas
Why do you think your Mum might be worried about you?	What might she be most worried about?
How do you think your brother/sister feel when Mum and Dad argue?	What might they say if you asked them about this?
What would _____ say/ think/ do if they were with you when Mum and Dad had the really big argument?	What might they tell you, about how it felt like for them at the time?
What would your friends say are the good things about you?	What might they say they like most about you?
If your cat/dog/rabbit could talk what would they say are the good things about you?	What might they say is the best thing of all?
What would your teachers say is your best subject at school?	What other subjects might they say you are good at?

Coping Questions

Coping questions help shift the focus away from the problem to look at a solution. Where people feel hopeless this can help remind them of a time when they have done something positive to make things better. By unpicking what they did to cope in a specific situation you can identify existing strength and safety which will inform your safety plan.

Questions for Families	
Initial Question	Follow Up Ideas
I can see how things have been really difficult for you, yet I am struck by the fact that you get up each morning and do everything necessary to get the kids off to school. How do you do that?	Who else has noticed that you are able to do that?
What helps you to keep going even though things are really hard?	What else?
You say that you're not sure that you want to continue working on your goals. What is it that has helped you to work on them up to now?	What else has helped? Who has noticed that you have been working on your goals?
Have there been times this week when things have been good/not as bad? What was happening to make you think that?	What was different? Who was there?
Tell me about a time when your son/daughter was really angry and upset and you managed to calm them down?	How did you do this? Did anybody else notice?
Questions for Children and Young People	
Initial question	Follow Up Ideas
Your teacher tells me that you are up to date with your maths homework, how did you do that?	What made you stick at it?
How do you manage to keep those scary thoughts away?	What helped you most?
If I was a fly on the wall and I watched you coping with stress when you are in your room, what would I see/hear you doing?	What would you do next? What else would you do?
Who taught you to cope so well with your feelings?	Anyone else?
What do you do to release stress?	Anything else?
What are the main things you do to keep yourself from getting angry/sad?	Who might notice if you weren't so angry/sad?
How did you keep your brothers safe the last two times that_____happened?	What did you do? Have you done this before?

Exception Questions

Exception questions identify an occasion where a problem could have occurred but didn't (or did occur but was less severe). The follow up questions you ask should then identify who was involved, what happened, when it happened and where, in order to understand the conditions that helped the exception to occur – avoid asking why.

The intention of exception questions within the context of Signs of Safety is to identify the existing safety and existing strengths which can then be built on to create a Safety Plan.

Questions for Families	
Initial question	Follow Up Ideas
Has there been a time when you were really upset about something and you didn't have a drink?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was different this time/ what did you do differently?
Have you ever experienced a situation kind of like this one that you were able to improve by doing something differently? What did you do differently?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who was around you at the time? • When did this happen?
Have there been times in the last couple of weeks when the problem did not happen or was less severe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where were you when this happened? • Who might have noticed afterwards?
Tell me about a moment when you could have done _____ but you stopped yourself?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you feel afterwards?
Tell me about a time when you have been the best parent you can be?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What helped you to do that?
Tell me about a couple of times you managed to keep the kids safe from _____? How did you do it? I'd like to hear the details.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who did you tell?
When have you been depressed and not used drugs/alcohol to make you feel better?	
Questions for Children and Young People	
Initial question	Follow Up Ideas
Tell me about a time when you made yourself safe? What did you do when _____ was happening?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was different this time/ what did you do differently?
Tell me about one or two good things that happens in your family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who was around you at the time?
Tell me a time when you told a trusted adult about what happened?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When did this happen?
Tell me about some times when you haven't been as worried as you are now.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where were you when this happened?
When has there been a time that Mum/Dad showed you they are ready to change?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened next?
When things are going well, and you are happy, what does it look like?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is with you? • What are you doing? What else?

Goal Setting Questions

Goal setting questions will help identify things that can be changed to improve the safety/wellbeing of the child and will inform the development of the safety/wellbeing/success goals.

Questions for Families	
Initial question	Follow Up Ideas
What do you think needs to change about the relationship you have with your children?	What else?
What do you think is the next step that should happen to get this worry sorted out?	When do we need to see the changes by?
As a result of everything that has happened with _____, what are the things you would now always do or always avoid doing so that he doesn't suffer any further injuries?	What help might you need with this? What else might help?
What would you have to see to make you believe things had changed?	Who else would need to see this?
What would be happening if things were working better for you?	What else? Who would notice?
You want things to get better, what do you need to see that will make you think things are better? (what behaviours/ conversations/ actions)	What else? Who else will need to see this?
What will it take to make things just a little better?	Anything else?
What's one thing you've thought about that you wished would change?	What is the first thing you would notice if this change happened?
What do you think your family/child/safety network want you to achieve in the next month?	How will they know when you have achieved it?
What do you think your children want from you? What would they say?	What else? What would you say to them?
Who do you want to help you get through the next few weeks?	Anyone else? What can they do to help you get through the next few weeks?
When do you need to see the changes by? And how long will we need to see this for us not to worry about the problem?	Who else will stop being worried about the problem?
Questions for Children and Young People	
Initial question	Follow Up Ideas
If I could invite your favourite sports figure/ superhero/actor/singer over to meet with your Mum/Dad, what would they tell your Mum/Dad to do, to make things better with you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's the most important thing? • How will you know that things have changed? • Anything else? • Who else might be able to help?
What would you have to see to make you believe things had changed?	Who would notice if this happened?

If you could ask your Mum/Dad to change three things to make you feel safer, what would they be?	Which change would you want to see first?
How do you want your parents to behave with each other in the future?	What would be different for you if this happened?
If you could have 3 wishes for your family, what would they be?	Which one would be most important?
Where would you say that you want to be at age 18?	Who might be with you? What might you be doing?

Miracle Question

The miracle question provides an opportunity to talk about a future away from the current and past problems. It will help to capture the views of children, young people and family members and inform the development of the 'Safety Goals.'

Because this is a long question make sure you ask this question slowly, breaking it down into understandable chunks, almost like you are telling a story. It might also be helpful, particularly for children, to add small details that relate to the child like what is in their bedroom and include their siblings in the story.

The miracle question should be asked later on in the process, when you have a clear understanding of the worries, strengths and relationships.

Adult Miracle Question Example

Imagine you woke up one morning, and the problems that resulted in Children's Services becoming involved with your family are solved, all the barriers that have prevented you from solving these problems previously are gone. What will be different that will tell you this miracle has happened so you know that the future will be positive and the problem is solved?

Child Miracle Question Example

I want to ask you a strange question. Imagine that while you are fast asleep in bed tonight and everything in the house is quiet, a miracle happens. This miracle has solved the problems in your family and all your worries are gone.

But, because you are sleeping, you don't know that the miracle has happened. When you wake up in the morning what will be different that will make you realise that the miracle has happened and the problem is solved?

Follow up questions

- What will be the first thing you notice that will tell you things are different? What else?
- What will you see/hear?
- What will be different?
- What might others (mother, father, spouse, partner, siblings, friends, work associates, teachers, etc.) notice about you/Mum/Dad that would tell them that the miracle has happened, that things are different or better?
- Fast forward to later in the morning, what is happening now that will tell you the miracle has happened?
- What is different at school/home/ other places?
- Back at home, later on, what do you notice is different?
- Have there been times when you have seen pieces of this miracle happen?