

## Darlington's approach to working with families is relational and restorative based.

### What is it?

Relational and restorative practice is grounded in the idea that human **relationships** are of paramount importance and should be at the heart of all good **social work practice**. In its simplest terms, it's returning to the core business of seeing the dynamic between people to be the site of change. When service-users and professionals get together and things work well, this is more likely to help make children in Darlington safer and able to remain within their families.

Putting relationships front and centre of practice means that service-users are partners in setting the agenda for the changes that will be most meaningful to them. It is more likely that families who have co-produced their plan will sustain the working relationships and have a vested interest in achieving positive change. On both sides in an interaction, those involved constantly monitor how things are going. As a result, the conversation can lead to surprising outcomes if there is openness to going with what works.

The restorative part of practice relates to a firm source of support **alongside** a respectful source of challenge. Restorative practice is flexible in that sometimes, it may be more appropriate to be more supportive than challenging (and vice-versa). The 'relational part' is the way of working that tunes in to **how much** support and/or challenge is warranted in any particular moment.

### Why are we doing it?

Darlington's vision for families is:

We will always try and help families to find their own solutions

We will always try and help families stay together

We will always try and return children home

Relational and restorative practice has been shown to be effective in helping people (service-users and professionals alike) find meaningful solutions to issues in their own terms. For example, what works for a family we are working with at a moment in time, changes. The expertise service-users have about their own lives is built on by working relationally (tuning in to the relationship at hand) and restoratively (providing an appropriate balance of support and challenge).

Darlington has been working with other authorities who have adopted this model and research has shown that the numbers of children receiving statutory non consent-needed levels of intervention fell and many measures of wellbeing for young people and their families, and professionals rose. Darlington is changing because it believes *working with* families rather than *doing to* families, leads to better outcomes for children/young people and their families.

### **How are we doing it?**

There has been a large investment in staff and training in relational and restorative practice. Managers are driving changes in practice, providing supportive challenging discussions in care pathways during supervision and developing new ways of working with professionals, creating opportunities for them to work alongside social workers to promote resilience in families with whom they work.

There has also been the appointment of two relational and restorative advanced practitioners. The role of the Advanced Practitioner is to provide support at both a team and individual level to embed the changes in practice, direct work (providing training, facilitating restorative 'circles', observing and feeding back practice) and indirect work (providing resources online and supporting partner agencies to understand the practice model).

To ensure that the model is sustainable in Darlington we have adopted a 'Train the Trainer' approach to widen the relational expertise across the service.