**Good Practice for Carrying out Direct Observations of Practice**

This practice guide should be read in conjunction with the Guidance on Undertaking Observations of Practice in Services for Children and Young People.

**Considerations for managers undertaking observations:**

* In carrying out an observation of practice, the observer is expected to enable the observee to critically reflect on their own practice and where possible, uncover their own learning. Observers are expected to have regard for this good practice guidance for observation of practice.
* When an observation of practice is undertaken by a manager, especially as a precursor to an appraisal, the supervisory relationship may imply a sense of checking out that the practice observed meets some sort of required standard (PCF). It is going to be important therefore to be clear what is being observed, what sort of judgements might be being made and why.
* Direct assessment of practice can generate a large amount of information and it can also produce anxiety in the individual being observed, which has the ability to adversely affect practice. Setting key areas for reflection and observation in partnership, prior to the observation taking place, can also reduce anxiety as well as refining the focus of the large amount of information that may have been collected through observation.

**Consent**: If you are not line supervisor for the case or event being observed, the observee will need to obtain informed consent for you to be present and observe their practice. Sometimes service users say no, even when consent was gained in advance. This is their right and you may need to cancel your part in the meeting or visit.

**Suitability:** Not every event is suitable for observation purposes. For example, if a child has one supervised contact with their parent each month, adding another “presence” to this could affect the quality of that outcome for the child. Think about whether adding an extra presence to observe could have any negative impact.

**Role:** If you are not line supervisor for the case or event being observed, you will need to introduce yourself as the observer in the situation, making it clear that your only role is to observe the practice of the observee. This is important to establish at the start.

**Where to sit:** Try and position yourself in the room where you can have a clear view of what is going on and hear what is being said – but where you are not in a prominent position. “Sitting back” allows others to be less aware of your presence as an observer.

**Don’t get involved:** As an observer, you should try not to get involved. You are watching what is happening and taking notes. Getting involved and giving your opinion will change the course of the event. If a service user speaks to you or asks your view, remind them politely of your role. It isfine to respond to small children who approach you in play.

**When something appears to be going wrong:** As an observer, you should try not to get involved. But if you are concerned a serious practice error is being made or a child is being placed at risk or in distress, you can prompt the observee. If you remain concerned you could ask the observee to bring the observation to a close, reflecting on the learning from this afterwards.

**45 minutes is enough!**

For an observation of practice, 30 to 45 minutes is a good guide. Unless there are sound practice reasons why the observation should run on past this, you should aim to finish on time.

**How much should I write during the observation?** Try to write brief notes of key events and moments. You can listen and write but you cannot look around and write so it is important to balance what you see, what you hear and what your write down. Try to use exact language where this is significant as this can produce powerful learning. In the reflective discussion which follows there will be some areas where your recall of events differs from the observee. Your notes will be important in discussing this.

Make sure you are noticing things in a balanced way - what went well, alongside where things might have been done more effectively and areas for development.

**How do I help people critically reflect?**

* Start by asking what they think went well.
* Ask what went less well.
* Offer any opposing perception you have.
* Ask them why they think it went the way it did.
* What theories, values, models and methods underpinned their practice?
* Ask them if they could have done something differently.
* Ask them to identify what the outcome might have been if they had done something differently. People sometimes get stuck here and say there was nothing else they could have done. There is always something else a person could have done – however unusual.
* Challenge assumptions! Ask why? What if? How do you know that it is the case? Try not to put words into their head. Your role is to help them uncover their own thinking.
* Identify the learning from the experience. Identify steps for future practice and any actions to support learning / development. What needs to happen to make this good?

An example of critical reflection can be found in Appendix 1.

**How do I handle any post observation disagreement:**

Critical discussion is a positive thing but sometimes people can get locked into perceptions of events that are wildly different. It is important to remember that we all construct what we see to a certain extent around who we are – some things will stick in our memories, others will pass us by altogether. The process of uncovering why we saw or remembered things the way we did can be just as important as the event itself in terms of developing insight for personal change. Remember this is a learning opportunity and unless there is a clear area of practice concern or overt unprofessionalism, somebody does not have to be ‘right’.

Appendix 1

**An example of Critical Reflection – Case Study Example**

**Start by asking what they think went well**

Rachel thought that she successfully explained the content of the single assessment to ten year old Ryan’s Mother, Jolene. She reflected that she had wanted to achieve this before the assessment was authorised as she was not sure all of her information was accurate. As it was, there were a couple of mistakes which Jolene highlighted and Rachel was able to correct. She felt this increased her professionalism and built trust with Jolene.

**Then ask what they think went less well**

Rachel felt that she did not so successfully communicate the content of the single assessment to ten year old Ryan. She felt that she tried to involve him but that he was easily distracted. She felt her language had been child centred but that Ryan “was not interested” in listening.

**Offer any opposing perception you have**

As an observer I agree with what went well. In terms of what went less well, I agree that Ryan did not participate as fully as he might have done but I also felt that contrary to Rachel’s view, the language was not particularly child centred either in the assessment or in Rachel’s explanation of the content. For example, Rachel said that Ryan could sometimes present as “detached and uncommunicative.” Ryan said “What does that mean?” and Rachel replied,“ it means that sometimes you present as withdrawn.” I did not feel that the second explanation was any clearer for Ryan than the first. His mother then said “yeah, in a world of your own you are” and Ryan glared at her and went back to his comic.

**Ask them why they think it went the way it did**

Rachel felt that her successful intervention came about through her honest approach with Jolene in saying that there were some facts she was not sure she had got right and that in offering the opportunity to influence the accuracy of the document, she involved Jolene in a meaningful way.

In terms of Ryan, Rachel said that she had felt “uncomfortable” talking to Ryan about that part of the assessment. Looking back on it, she thought that perhaps she didn’t clarify it further for him because it would have involved asking him to revisit something she felt he would find upsetting.

**What theories, values, models and methods underpinned their practice?**

Rachel’s assessment was strong in analysis of attachment between Jolene and Ryan. She showed a clear grasp of the theoretical framework and made good links to Jolene’s own experience of being parented. Rachel empowered Jolene by involving her fully and by valuing her opinions. At one point Rachel stated that she did not agree with Jolene’s view of why Ryan did something – but that she would note Jolene’s opinion on the assessment as being different. Jolene felt she had practised in an anti-discriminatory way by not making assumptions about Jolene’s ability to provide for Ryan’s basic needs, based on her mental illness and alcohol misuse. This felt important to Rachel who noted that her family had been poor as a child but it had not meant that she had gone without the things that really mattered. Rachel’s assessment was evidenced based, checking out levels of family debt, Ryan’s access to toys and learning materials, clothes, shoes and food. Parts of the core assessment were informed by more detailed assessment using the Family Assessment and a couple of key tasks and interview schedules. Rachel felt this was important to generate strong evidence of the dynamic in the family, rather than rely on assumptions from a couple of general meetings.

**Ask them if they could have done something differently**

Initially Rachel said that she couldn’t have done anything differently. She felt she was short of time and that it would have taken several sessions to explain the assessment to Ryan in truly child centred and supportive terms. This was time that Rachel did not feel she had. She also felt that explaining what she meant by “detached and uncommunicative‟ to Ryan would have involved reminding him of incidents which were painful for him. Upsetting him would have served no purpose she believed and could have undermined work with Jolene.

After deeper reflection, Rachel thought that perhaps she could have just used some simpler language. Like “it means that sometimes you are quiet and sit away from other people – you don’t seem to want to talk or get involved.”

Once Rachel had identified this, she was perturbed as to why she had not simply done this, and appeared to be upset as a result. We talked this through and tried to uncover why Rachel had not had this insight at the time. Initially Rachel talked about workload and feeling pressured to meet targets and not wanting to get into something which might take longer to sort out. I challenged this assumption using a normalising question, saying that in messages from serious case reviews, the voice of the child was sometimes not heard and their view not recorded or sought as the practitioner was trying to protect the child from difficult or painful conversations. I asked Rachel if this might be the case for her?

Rachel stated that yes – this was the reason. This and perhaps something around not liking to be seen as a person who “upsets” people.

**Identify the learning from the experience**

* Need to ensure that a parent's needs don’t dominate at the expense of the child.
* When Rachel feels that she is trying to protect the child from painful or difficult conversations - reflect that children cannot participate in decisions about their needs and plans to meet those needs if they are not fully informed.
* When Rachel feels a child is uncommunicative – reflect what efforts were made to enable communication in the child’s rather than adults world.

**Identify steps for future practice and any actions to support learning/development**

* Rachel to read Chapter 7 from Horwath’s “The Child’s World” 2005 which contains detail on how to achieve the following in practice:
  + Build a rapport in which the child gains trust, feels understood and accepted;
  + Create a safe space where the child’s needs can be expressed.
  + Reassure the child that their voice has been heard and that their opinions will be listened to.
* Rachel and her manager to explore supportively in supervision some of the other issues raised around Rachel not wanting to “upset people‟. Consider training in assertiveness to enable Rachel to effectively challenge without upsetting people.