**Practice Note for all SCT Practitioners, Managers and Staff;**

**Relationship Based Practice**

Relationship Based Practice is founded on the idea that human relationships are important and need to be at the heart of our work with children, young people, young adults and their families to ensure meaningful engagement (Trevithick 2003). When we become involved with families this often happens at some of the most difficult points of their lives, when they are feeling vulnerable and this can trigger a range of responses. At the same time, when developing relationships with our families, partner agencies and staff in our organisation, as practitioners we also bring a range of experiences that can inform our work. Understanding this and what enables or forms a barrier to developing meaningful trusting relationships is important to provide the necessary help and support to make a difference in the lives of families and to working together effectively.

Getting the balance right between providing the necessary relational support and following the processes that we need to when managing risks can sometimes be a challenge. Sandwell’s Practice Framework and Model has been developed using a relationship-based approach at its heart to support our thinking when working with our families and their network. Using this approach helps us to continuously reflect on how we build, develop, maintain, sustain and end our relationships with families and professionals and the quality of the help and support provided at the different stages.

The purpose of this practice note is to outline what is Relationship Based Practice by focusing on some key concepts, why the approach is so important when working with children, young people, families, professionals and other staff and at the heart of our Practice Framework and Model. Next, how using particularly, the relationship-based building blocks and Cultural Genograms strengthens our practice. Finally, the note identifies the importance of reflective spaces such as supervision and training to build upon our relationship-based skills.

**What is Relationship Based Practice?**

Relationship-based practice is based upon the idea that the professional relationship represents, ‘the medium through which a practitioner can engage with the complexity of an individual’s internal and external worlds and intervene’ (Ruch, 2005, p113). It is an approach that recognises that human behaviour and the way in which we develop relationships are complex and often informed by previous and current life experiences including those within our early childhood some of which are visible, invisible, conscious and unconscious.

Underpinned by a range of theories such as psychosocial, psychodynamic and systemic, approaches collectively, they recognise the complexity of human behaviour and how these can be managed through the way we function and relationships (Rogers 1961 and Hollis 1964). In doing so, it enables us to reflect on the responses by families, professionals and staff that might be triggered for a range of reasons such as unconscious processes and defence mechanisms which might be linked to previous and current experiences. This means particularly when working with families using this approach helps us as practitioners consider the possibility that some responses displayed might be a natural response resulting from experiencing emotions such as anxiety, trauma and fear.

Developing positive relationships using this approach are ‘essential rather than incidental’ (Alexander and Grant, 2009). Fewster (2004) goes one step further suggesting that within the caring role, often ‘the relationship ***is***the intervention’. Essentially, adopting a relationship-based approach requires us to focus upon developing quality relationships when working with families, partner agencies and staff within our organisation whilst also developing our understanding about how these complexities might present themselves.

Further developments in relationship-based practice have recognised the need to also consider the impact of organisational, social-economic and political factors in addition to structural inequalities such as poverty, adverse childhood experiences, abuse, Covid-19 and discrimination in adopting a relational approach. It means that we think about connecting with the responses to different experiences, being empathetic and reflecting on our approach with families, other agencies and staff within the Trust.

Within this approach, the ‘use of self’ is important which means that as practitioners we are self-aware, remain curious, observant and by generating and testing hypotheses can be both reflective and reflexive to strengthen the quality of all our relationships. Building upon these skills of reflection and developing our emotional intelligence is also an important aspect of relationship-based practice. Ingram (2013) highlights the role of emotional intelligence as a trait and skill that can help practitioners manage the emotional complexities of our work. Emotional intelligence can be briefly defined as ‘the ability of an individual to: be aware of their own emotions; be able to understand and manage these effectively within relationships; be motivated to similarly understand the emotions of others; and to communicate this within relationships’ (Morrison, 2007). In doing so, it enables us to adopt a proactive rather than reactive approach when relationship-based issues become evident.

**Why is adopting a Relationship Based approach so important and at the heart of our Practice Framework and Model?**

* Adopting a relationship-based approach provides us with additional factors to consider when thinking about how to develop enabling relationships such as our own approach, the experiences of the family, partner agencies and staff. For example, for many families, the involvement of Children’s Social Care might trigger a range of responses such as such as anxiety, hostility, depression, avoidance. When this happens, we sometimes refer to this as ‘family’s non-engagement’ or ‘disguised compliance’ rather than also reflecting on how the family might feel, our approach as practitioners, partner agencies and what we have done collectively to engage the family.
* By recognising how an individual’s experience, background, view, identities and responses to specific situations are unique enables us to use a person-centred approach when developing relationships and providing help and support. Using tools such as Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham 2012) enables us to think about our approach as professionals by recognising the power differentials, making the necessary adjustments whilst developing our cultural competence when working with families (Practice Note Cultural Competence).
* Working with our families in this way is more likely to enable us to get a better understanding of their experience which includes their strengths, resources and difficulties impacting on them and their family. It helps us to be more empathetic, attuned and mindful of what can be a barrier and what can enable us to develop meaningful relationship with families.
* Due to the importance placed on the development of enabling relationships, where issues are identified, it means that we are proactive in recognising this, considering what it means for the child and identifying a strategy to address it. This might involve work being undertaken with the family and professionals to ensure that any barriers are addressed. In doing so, this results in the quality of our relationships being improved which is likely to strengthen the quality of the help and support being provided and children’s experiences being improved.

**How using the Relationship Based Building Blocks and Cultural Genograms strengthens our practice with families, partner agencies and within SCT?**

The Building Blocks and Cultural Genograms are part of our Practice Framework and Model and are

used to support how we think about how we build, maintain and sustain trusting relationships with children, young people, their families partner agencies and within our organisation. The Relationship Based Practice Building blocks are part of the Intervention aides used within our Practice Framework and Model. Intervention Aides are visual tools that support us to reflect upon the way that we practice and work with our families and professionals (see Practice Note on Intervention Aides).



**The Relationship Based Building Blocks**

These building blocks help us to focus on how we build effective relationships with children, young people, their families and professionals. These help us to think about our intervention by breaking down the relationship and the type of work we are doing with the family and their network into three stages. These include building relationships, maintaining and sustaining them and future proofing them for children. When working with families and partner agencies we need to think about the three different stages and what we are doing with the family to know whether we are providing the right help and support at the right time.

**Building Block 1: Building Relationships**

The ‘**building relationships’** stage occurs when we first contact our families and professionals when a referral is made, or the case has been allocated to us as Practitioner. This stage of the relationship is important as it can (although not always) impact on the quality of the next two stages.

**What does Stage 1: Building Relationships look like in practice**?

When initially meeting the child and their family, this stage involves spending time with them to get to know them by actively listening, showing empathy and discussing the reasons for your involvement. By doing this, you develop a shared understanding about the worries, how the family feel, your role, responsibilities and the process. By being open, honest and respectful enables you to begin to build trust and a rapport. You can use the diagram of the child’s journey to support the discussion about where their child is in the service and where we hope to get to.

Being clear with the child and their family about their rights in the process, what they can expect from you, the support and make them aware of the complaints process is important. Talking to the family about how you will focus on their strengths, relationship-based and trauma informed is important. Supporting child/ren to participate by thinking about how you will apply the 4 x I’s (Inform, Involve, Invest, Influence) throughout your involvement. Use tools like cultural genograms, life work and impact chronologies as a way of developing your relationship, understanding their culture, family traditions, identity and their experience. Using these tools as part of your intervention might also reduce the intensity of some of these sessions as you are co-producing something together.

Being mindful of the language used helps families to understand what you need to do together and what terms like an ‘assessment’ or child protection enquiries mean.

**What does Stage 1: Building Relationships look like in practice**?

At the same time, building relationships with partner agencies is important as you begin to know who is involved, what work they are doing and the quality of the relationship that they have developed with the family.

Depending on the individual needs of the child and their family, this stage might require more time or visits for example if an interpreter is required or there are additional needs to consider. Taking this into account additional support or adjustments are put in place to enable the family to meaningfully engage. Plan with the family and professionals what needs to be done, discuss initial safety planning, reflect on your approach and the quality of the relationship developed to see whether you are ready to move onto the next stage

It is natural for families to feel and show a range of responses in relation to your involvement. If it has been difficult to develop the relationship, reflect on this yourself and with your manager so that you are not ‘stuck’ at this stage. Families will observe whether ‘you do what you say’ and will also be undertaking their own assessment of whether you put all the things you have said like being respectful into practice. Build upon other feelings that might be present like hope and change and your common goal to make things better for their children also helps to move to the next stage.

**Building Block 2: Maintaining and Sustaining Relationships**

The next stage focuses on how we ‘**maintain and strengthen the relationship’** that has already developed with the family and professionals. Moving onto this stage is an important step as this is the stage when most of the help and support will be provided. If time has not been spent at stage 1 building the relationship, it will be difficult to progress to this stage and work with the family and partner agencies to provide the help and support needed.

**What does Stage 2: Maintaining and Sustaining look like in practice**?

During the early part of this stage, continuing to work with children and families by continuing to be respectful, open and fair is important. By developing cultural genograms and supporting them to access Family Group Conference are ways in which we can empower families by developing a deeper understanding of the resources as well as risks within their network. Safety planning with the family helps them to see that even if there are setbacks that how they respond to them is often equally as important as the issue itself.

Maintaining and sustaining the relationship through working with the family and professionals, good communication, being realistic and clear about the help and support being provided and what behaviours need to change over what period is important. This stage is also about building confidence, self-esteem, encouraging the family whilst being clear about the worries, reducing risks and seeing what difference has been made for their children. Modelling responses such as being soloution focused when issues emerge as well as acessing help and support is also important.

Within this stage of the relationship, most of the sensitive, difficult and sometimes challenging conversations take place whilst the plan is progressed with the family and professionals. Barriers to moving onto this stage of the relationship are promptly addressed. There will also be opportunities to work together with other professionals to provide practical support, to nurture change with the child/young person and their families.

**What does Stage 2: Maintaining and Sustaining look like in practice**?

Continuing to work with the family in a way so that they feel motivated and not overwhelmed is important as this stage is likely to feel quite intense for the family as the pace of the work needs to be informed by the child’s timescales for change. Relationships developed with professionals are also crucial at this stage as you will have an understanding together about how to support the family, work together and be clear about each other’s contribution to the family’s plan. Working in this way means that professionals and the family are clear about their contribution to the plan and any issues will be addressed. Both the family and professionals will be able to see how you model your practice by being strengths based, relationship- based and trauma informed with both the family and professionals even if some challenge might be required. Using supervision to reflect on this progress, address any barriers and the difference made for the children and important.

Supporting the family to develop and use their own safety plan is a key part of this stage and is important for the ‘future proofing’. Empowering the family and professionals to think about the plan when you are not involved is important to reduce professional reliance. Continuing to actively update and review the progression of plan with the child, their family and their network including professionals by encouraging them to identify what they feel is helping to support them to reduce the risk of further/ future interventions helps to sustain relationships.

Through continued engagement with the child/young person, their family and professionals the practitioner should use this opportunity to not only maintain the relationship, they should be thinking ahead to the final ending stage. As part of this stage, actively planning what it will look like for the family and professionals when you are no longer involve will help move to the next stage providing a smooth transition for everyone involved.

**Building Block 3: Future Proofing for Children**

Although this is the final stage, our planning for this stage began at the beginning of our involvement as we have always considered with the family and professionals how long the support might be needed. Throughout our work with children and families, we will have worked with them to determine whether sustained changes have or can be made to provide stability and permanence for their children. When we have done this, we will have worked in such a way to ‘future proof’ the support provided to reduce the likelihood that they will return to the service.

**What does Stage 3: Future Proofing look like in practice**?

Valuing endings as much as how we begin, maintain and sustain our relationships with families and professionals is an important part of this stage. As things improve and the difference made for their child/ren can be clearly evidenced continuing to support the family and partner agencies to be planning for when you will no longer be involved is crucial. As well as evidencing the progression of the plan, the family’s safety plan will have been tried and tested over time to ensure that the child/young person’s safety is ‘future proofed’

The safety plan will be used by the family and their network including partner agencies when there will no longer be any statutory involvement and will include a contingency. In doing so, it can also be used if their child’s case is being stepped down to Targeted Support or a partner agency such as Education or Health.

**What does Stage 3: Future Proofing look like in practice**?

If another professional/agency will be the lead, using a relational approach will mean the family we will be part of the introductions and handover visit by supporting them to start the beginning of their relationship (Stage 1).

With the help and support provided to the family, they will feel more confident to implement their safety plan without our involvement. There will be ongoing reflection and evaluation with the family and their network including professionals about what has worked well, strengths for the future and coping strategies, signposting to other services for further support. Ensuring that we do not create professional reliance is important as our relationship was formed for a purpose, to help the child, young person, young adult and family achieve positive change. Ending the relationship evidences the changes made and supporting the family and professionals to continue without your involvement is an important part of this stage. As you have discussed endings as part of the previous stage, they are aware of this.

Families will feel a range of emotions about your involvement coming to an end and continuing to be sensitive to this is important. Over the course of several months, we will have spent time with them at some of the most challenging points of their lives. At this stage of the relationship, clear timescales should be discussed with the family and professionals so that they are aware of when the last review, interventions and visit will occur. It also needs to be followed up by a letter. By showing the family and professionals that you have taken account of the time that they have invested in a relationship with you will help them prepare for the ending and continue to maintain the progress and make a difference to the experiences of the children that has already been evidenced over a period of time.

**Cultural Genograms**

Cultural genograms are an important part of our relationship-based work with children/young people and families especially where there are safeguarding concerns. Creating a cultural genogram with the family helps them to tell their own story from their perspective, understand their network and explore how this can positively influence the intervention and plan (see Cultural Genograms Practice Note).

**How we can strengthen our Relationship Based Practice using reflective spaces**

**Supervision, Group Supervision and Team Learning**

Using reflective spaces especially supervision is important to strengthen our relationship-based approaches as practitioners and Managers. Supervision helps us to focus on the enabling relationships being developed in work with children and their families and reflect on what barriers might be present when other relationships are more difficult. Supervision also provides a safe space where reflection on our emerging feelings can occur allowing us to reflect on our work with families as well as thinking about what is happening from their perspectives. This can encourage us to hypothesise about what is happening, consider alternatives and weigh up different ideas.

Supervision can be helpful when reflecting on our work with families where we may feel ‘stuck’. Adopting a relational approach means that we consistently reflect on our practices in supervision. In supervision we have the space to recognise and describe the behaviours and emotions being exhibited by family members and think about how these impact on our interactions with them. Here we can also consider what this may mean to the child whilst collaboratively thinking about strategies to address this with the family and their networks.

Using the reflective questions in the Practice Framework and Booklet (pages 31-32, 48-49 and 51) and Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham 2012) within supervision can be used to discuss the quality of relationships with families in the context of issues such as adversity and discrimination. It provides a space to explore how our personal selves inform our professional identity and our relationship-based approach with different families. Reflecting with your supervisor and colleagues about creative ways to work with families based on a good understanding of their background, culture and identity strengthens our ability to be reflexive and reflective in the context of a containing, trusting supervisory relationship. In doing so, it also enhances relationships in supervision and those between the practitioner and the family. These supervisory relationships in turn have the power to impact positively on other relationships such those between parents and children. Regular Group Supervision and Team Learning also provides reflective spaces to develop Relationship Based practice

**Practice Learning**

There are a range of relationship-based Practice Learning opportunities in Sandwell as part of the core offer which include the monthly Practice Learning Workshops which are all underpinned by a relational approach. In addition to this, since 2019, SCT have been working with the University of Birmingham as part of the innovative RiVR project. This stands for **R**esearch **i**nformed **V**irtual **R**elationship Based Training. This is innovative training programme that provides you with the ‘best seat in the house’ as you accompany Louisa, (Social Worker) as part of her work with the Harris Family. This includes following her around the office, on home visits, in meetings and supervision to explore what up to date research (University of Birmingham UOB) says are the enablers and barriers to effective relationship-based practices in social work.

Using immersive 360-video technology, we provide you with the chance to experience the emotions, atmospheres, physical spaces that can either create barriers or enable effective relationship-based practices. The training provides opportunities to develop your observation, reflection and critical thinking skills and knowledge through planned ‘immersive’ learning opportunities. This collaborative project with the UOB has been written, directed and acted by practitioners and Managers across the Trust. The launch events are being held in September and dates for the training will be advertised the Learning and Development ‘Info Burst’ and Trust Comms. Effective relationships are central to successful outcomes for children young people and their families and it is important that we share good examples of where this has made a difference to their lives.

**Good Practice Points**

* Creating a Cultural Genogram with families at the beginning of your involvement and supporting them to utilise Family Group Conferences are ways in which we can develop our relationships whilst developing a better understanding of their circumstances.
* Families will respond in different ways due to our involvement in the lives of their children and acknowledging their feelings, being clear about our worries and the help and support available.
* Developing meaningful, trusting relationships with families is easier when we are consistent in our approach by showing respect, being polite, open and honest.
* Use the Building Blocks with families and other people in their network such as professionals within their network to ensure that you build, maintain and sustain and end relationships well.

**How can I evidence this work on the child/young person/young adults file?**

* Explicitly refer to the different stages of the relationship in your case notes and within your Supervision and consciously use this to reflect on whether you are doing the right work at the right time.
* When the family have been provided a copy of their own Cultural Genogram upload another copy onto the document section of the child’s file and include the analysis within the home visit case note and within your assessment.
* Use the Relationship based reflective questions in the Practice Framework Booklet within Supervision to reflect on the quality of the relationships being developed with the family.

**Further information and reading**

* Practice notes relating to Cultural Genograms, Cultural Competence and the Practice Framework and Model are available on the Learning and Development page.
* The Practice Framework and Model Booklet is informed by a relationship-based approach throughout. Specific information about Relationship Based Practice and tools to support intervention are outlined in pages 22-27. Reflective questions specifically focusing on relationship-based practice are on pages: 31-32, 48-49 and 51.
* Alexander C et al (2009) Caring, mutuality and reciprocity in social worker–client relationships: rethinking principles of practice. *Journal of Social Work*, 9, 1, 5–22Hollis F (1964) Casework: a psychosocial therapy. New York: Random House.
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* https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/training-and-development-programmes/online-learning-packages-tailored-support/relationship-based-family-support-and-child-protection/

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