**Practice Note for all SCT Practitioner*s,*** Managers**and Staff:**

**Family, Culture, Identity, Community**

**Practice Note:** Family Culture and Identity **Community**

Sandwell Care Trust is an organisation with staff from diverse backgrounds and different communities; each bringing a unique perspective based on their culture, identity and experience, which shapes their personal and professional lives. As practitioners, working in Sandwell, we recognise that our families have different identities, cultures and communities who will have ideas, beliefs and traditions. By understanding this to build and maintain relationships with families, being respectful and open to learning about their culture and identity enables us to begin to develop a deeper understanding of what this means to them. In addition to this, having an awareness of our own values, beliefs and biases impacts on how we work and view families, cultures with identities that are different or like our own strengthens the quality of our assessments, decision making, and plans.

The purpose of this practice note is to outline what is meant by family, culture, identity and community and why understanding what this is an important part of our work with them. Next, how using the Practice Framework and Model, Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS and Cultural Genograms develops our understanding of the unique individuals we work with, and tools we can use to enhance our understanding of their circumstances. inally, how thinking about what we bring to the relationship with children and families can enrich the relationship, whilst also thinking about possible biases that may impact on the way we work with them can be safely explored through reflective spaces, considering good practice points and links to further reading.

**What is meant by Family, Culture, Identity, Community?**

Understanding what the terms family, culture, identity and community mean to different people and ourselves as practitioners is important as it influences and shapes our work. In some cultures, some types of family systems such as the ‘nuclear family’ comprising of a father, mother and children and two generations appear to predominate although other types exist.

Whilst in other cultures, the term family can also be viewed as a group of people made up of individuals who share common ancestors such as aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents over three generations and for others this definition also includes people who are not necessarily blood relatives (See Practice Note on Genograms and Cultural Genograms). Family members that have passed away can also still form part of some families as well as pets such as dogs and cats. Therefore, it is important as practitioners to understand the range of definitions, how these can change over time in different cultures and most importantly what it means to each of the families we work with from their perspective. Family structures may include:

* Nuclear Family - two parents and children.
* Single Parent Family - one parent raising one or more children on their own.
* Extended Family - two or more adults who are related, either by blood or marriage, sometimes they can be living in the same home. This family includes many relatives living together and working toward common goals, such as raising the children and keeping up with the household duties. Many extended families include cousins, aunts or uncles and grandparents living together.
* Others include: step families, step parents, children raised by grandparents, same sex parents or carers, co-parents where they may be separated/divorced. A family can be formed when a child is living with a connected person who is defined as a relative such as grandparents, a family friend or other connected person such as a neighbour informally or formally. Consideration needs to be given to what type of arrangements this might be to ensure that the necessary support, processes and procedure are followed.

Once we have understood the family’s structure, thinking about their **culture** involves identifying their beliefs, values, norms and expectations, which can be shared and shape an individual’s behaviour and the ways the choose to live their lives. Tedam, 2013 defines culture as ‘*the conceptual system that structures the way people view the world—it is the particular set of beliefs, norms, and values that influence ideas about the nature of relationships, the way people live their lives, and the way people organise their world’.*

Within these different family structures, traditions will exist which are experiences or activities that form part of their culture which are passed down between generations, which can be as unique and special, they may be a foundation for family values and serve as special bonding experience. Cultures can also change over time such as between different generations based on the individual, family, community. Traditions can provide families with a sense of identity and belonging, and a way of transferring their values, history, and culture from one generation to the next.

Identifying family’s cultures and adjusting our practice specific to their needs can be described as a ‘process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures ... in a manner that recognises and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities’ (Edwards, 2015). With reference to the Practice Note on Cultural Competence, developing an understanding of one’s culture and its importance is an approach that encourages practitioners to develop their cultural knowledge, which results in services that are developed to meet culturally specific needs and provide our children and families with interventions that are best suited to them (See Practice Note on Cultural Competence).

**Identity** can be defined as the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that shape the characteristics of an individual or group. Each child, young person, young adult, parents and their carer have memories, experiences, relationships, and values that create their sense of self, which forms part of their **identity**. This also includes the many relationships people cultivate, such as their identity as a child, friend, partner, and parent. It can also include characteristics over which a person has little or no control, such as height, race, or socioeconomic class (Covington, 2008). As with the other terms, understanding what identity means for individuals and the family from their perspective is important as there are different aspects of our identity that can be more visible and the significance of each can change within different contexts and over time.

**Communities** in the context of our work with children and families relate to asocial group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, and/or social, religious, occupational, or other group sharing common characteristics or interests. Individuals may belong to several communities, which are not limited to their geographical location of residence, but can include the community groups that they may part of through faith groups, social clubs etc. (David M. Chavis & Kien Lee, 2015). Therefore, as an individual, family or social group we can be part of several different communities at the same time.

When we work with children, young people and families as part of the work we do, developing an understanding of the **Family, Culture, Identity and Community** to ensure that quality assessments, plans, updating plans and reviews take place. The importance of family, culture, identity and community is captured in our doing wheel which illustrates that at every stage of the work it is important that we understand what this means to them. At the same time, using our Practice Framework and Model helps us to think about how we ensure that our interventions with our families are underpinned with a good understanding of what it means to them (Practice Note on the Introduction to the Practice Framework and Model and Cultural Competence).

**Why is it important to have a good understanding of the family, culture, identity and community?**

* Our families in Sandwell and the surrounding areas are culturally diverse in terms of socio-economic factors, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, religious beliefs. Identifying what family, culture, identity and community means to them from their perspective demonstrates cultural humility and respect which enables us to have ‘courageous conversations’ with families and remaining child focused by responding to any safeguarding concerns.
* By understanding the family, their traditions, rituals, culture, identity and routines particularly what it means in the day to day life of the child, enables us to complete assessments that are holistic and robust. It also enables us to have a better understanding of the strengths and the resource in the family and their network. As the assessment is informed by deeper understanding of family, the plan and interventions that emerge are informed by how best we can work with them to improve outcomes for their children.
* As practitioners it is important to understand our professional and personal experience of families, culture and identity and how this may impact on our interventions as part of developing our cultural competence. Developing cultural competence is important as we need to build on the knowledge that different cultures with different attitudes and worldviews exist and acknowledging those differences and not believing that our own culture is better.
* Quality assurance practice learning reviews in Sandwell identify that whilst we are improving in this area we need to ensure we are consistently good. When working with some families, there can be sometimes be a narrow focus on ‘ethnicity’ and ‘race’ when considering culture, leading to a lack of thinking of what it means in its widest sense. When we think about culture more widely whilst also recognising that all families have a culture, identity and are part of communities our understanding of their strengths and resources is more likely to increase. This means that we can work with families in a strengths-based way, utilising resources within the family and community where possible, whilst adjusting our practice to meet the needs of each unique family.

**How does the Practice Framework and Model strengthen an understanding of Family, Culture Identity, Community?**

When we think about family, culture and identity, as practitioners acknowledging that they are unique and have their own set of values and cultures irrespective of countries of origin, including those individuals who were born in England widens the scope for evidencing culturally competence practice. Families hold a rich source of information about their identity, culture and community that they live in. It is important that we understand the similarities and differences between families to provide the right service and support.

Using our Practice Framework and Model helps us to work in a strengths-based manner and encourages practitioners to become more attuned and sensitive to people from different backgrounds, which allows us to effectively interact, work, and develop meaningful relationships with people from backgrounds different to our own. The next section of this note will illustrate by using the case study of Jamie and Annabelle, how elements of our Practice Framework and Model can be used to develop our understanding of the family, culture, identity and community.

**Jamie and Annabelle’s Case Study**

Jamie is 5 years old and has a younger sister Annabelle, 1 year old and they are the children of Mick, Father and Vicky, Mother. The family identify as White British and reside in the Friar Park area of Wednesbury in Sandwell. Vicky has been experiencing low mood shortly after the birth of Annabelle, she is not in employment and Jamie has recently become unemployed.

Sandwell Children’s Trust previously been involved with the family sporadically over the past three years due to domestic abuse between Mick and Vicky. There have been four police referrals historically, with the most recent indicating that Mick and Vicky were both perpetrators of abuse towards each other which ranged from verbal altercations, to biting, hair pulling, and Vicky being punched in her eye. A Social Worker will be completing a Single Assessment, by applying our doing wheel to develop a good understanding of the children’s family, culture, identity and community.

Prior to visiting the family, consideration should be given to any adjustments that may need to be made in their work with Mick, Vicky and the children, by exploring whether their preferred language, communication styles and needs, and whether an interpreter is required. By having an open discussion with Mick and Vicky and exploring this in the initial conversation sensitively, identifying whether any of the family have any additional learning needs, and their ability to read and write and being mindful of how information is shared with them. By understanding each individual needs and abilities, the quality of the family’s assessments, plans and direct work are likely to be more meaningful and understood by our families using language that they can understand.

In terms of the heart of practice, using **relationship-based practice** recognises the importance of developing and strengthening our relationships with our families whilst also considering their strengths and any trauma that they might have experienced. Thinking about the initial rapport building with Mick and Vicky by using the **Building Blocks**, being open and transparent with them, is more likely to lead to them developing trust, strengthened communication when discussing sensitive or personal information, whilst sharing how their own cultures and identities influence their own parenting and lifestyle choices. The quality of our interventions with families are likely to be more successful, make a difference to Annabelle and Jamie, when there is a positive and trusting relationship between the practitioner and this family.

To establish who the significant people are in the family’s lives, a **Genogram and Cultural Genograms** can be produced with Mick and Vicky together. By explaining to Mick and Vicky what a genogram is, the purpose and agreeing how best to complete it is important. It is important to think of the language used as most people may not be aware of the term ‘genogram’ but most may recognise the phase ‘family tree’. Using the genograms will help form and build a relationship with the family to understand their network and how it can positively influence the intervention with this family and their plan (See Practice Notes on Genograms and Cultural Genograms).

Developing a cultural genogram with the family enables us to have a better understanding of the quality of the relationships, family’s culture, identity, beliefs, traditions and values to inform our assessments, plans, analysis and decision making (See Practice Note on Cultural Genograms). It will also help the Social Worker and the family to identify any patterns and themes, such as domestic abuse being a feature in Mick and Vicky’s previous relationships, as well as in Maternal Grandparents relationship. This enabled the Social Worker to explore support networks with the family, the relationship between Mick and Vicky and their parents being fractured, with limited contact with Annabelle and Jamie.

To develop their understanding of this family’s culture, identity and community, the **Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS** (John Burnham, 2013) could be considered. These relate to Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Education, Ethnicity, Economics, Spirituality, Sexuality and Sexual Orientation (Burnham 2013). Using the Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS within discussions with Vicky and Mick will support us to recognise the importance of using a practice approach which recognises the different aspects of the identities of the families that we work with and their network. This helps us to think about the difference in beliefs, power and lifestyle, both visible and invisible, voiced and unvoiced, which we might want to draw attention to throughout our practice. The Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS could be used as a tool to aid discussions, to explore certain aspects of identities further, as a framework that provides a useful way to get Mick and Vicky talking about identity.

For example, when exploring with Mick, Vicky and the children’s ethnicity, which is one of the Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS, the family may identify as White British, asking open questions to explore what being British means to this family, and what aspects of their lives that they feel a sense of belonging to a White British ethnicity is helpful. Helping Mick and Vicky to understand how they relate to these aspects of themselves lets them explore the influence they have on their lives, and day to day functioning. In addition, when considering the families ethnicity, the Social Worker may not have worked with a family of a similar background. Our Practice Framework and Model reminds us that the child and their family are the expert of their experiences and adopting a position of ‘not knowing’ and being ready to learn will assist practitioners to get to know the family functioning, history, traditions, own childhood experiences and how these may impact on their parenting.

As the practitioner continues to use some of the Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS, the main feature and benefit of this concept is that it helps us talk about aspects of identity out loud. It gives us an opportunity to air our thoughts on aspects of identity that are ‘unsaid’ (that we don’t usually talk about) as well as aspects that we wear on our sleeve. The aspects of identity that are most likely to be overlooked are ones that are invisible and unspoken. During a discussion about culture and religion, Mick shares that the children love celebrating Christmas, and Easter.

By exploring this further, through direct work with the children and Mick and Vicky it emerges that although they do not follow a specific religion, they do occasionally pray and attend their local Church (Church of England), as Vicky helps at the community centre ever month. Focussing on the family’s community resources and by working in partnership with Mick and Vicky, we are more likely to increase safety and reduce risk by focusing on the family’s strengths, resources and support networks. This is likely to reduce the need for continued professional involvement, reduce prolonged intervention with services, unless there are safeguarding concerns that require statutory intervention. Vicky has identified being part of her community group within Church as being her safe space, where she spends time making crafts and cakes, catching up with friends which gives her some space apart from Mick, and she feels as though the members of the group are like her extended family, as she doesn’t have any family that live in Sandwell.

As the assessment progressed, the Social Worker explored with Vicky information from Annabelle’s Health Visitor that suggested following Annabelle’s birth, that Vicky had been experiencing low mood and anxiety. Using a relational approach supported the Social Worker to discuss this with Vicky, whilst remaining sensitive and adjusting her approach to consider any trauma that Vicky may have experienced. Understanding her life history as an intervention can help and support relationship building as well as how their history impacts on their current circumstances, which can be supported with **impact chronologies.** An impact chronology ensures that the themes, trends and patterns of events are analysed and inform the current assessment and plan (See Practice Note on Impact Chronologies). Completing life work with Vicky helped to understand through direct work what is happening now and what has happened historically to understand root causes and presenting concerns.

Vicky shared that within her community and extended family network, the notion of requesting and accepting support services is a negative experience, as her mother told her she was weak for requesting help with her mental health. Mick’s family had also said that ‘she mustn’t call the Police if she and Mick were arguing, as this brought shame to the family and the local community feels they should be ‘sticking together’, and by calling the Police, she is a ‘snitch’. This highlights that individual families, cultures and communities have different perceptions when it comes to professional involvement, which may hinder an individual’s access to support they may require, as well as safeguarding the children from domestic abuse.

For some families in certain communities, sharing information about issues such as domestic violence or sexual abuse might be difficult due to additional factors such as shame, honour and community pressures. In these circumstances, we may need to spend more time with the family to build our relationships to develop their understanding of the reasons for our involvement. This is more likely to address the root causes and presenting concerns whilst considering the cultural differences that may exist (See Practice Note on Strengths Based and Relationship-Based Practice). Families might have their own resources both within the communities and wider family network, and by working with Vicky, to implement a Family Group Conference meant that the Social Worker was able to work with the community group to strengthen support, a safe space and venue for Vicky and the children if required, supporting her to develop a safety plan with the Social Worker. Working with the family by understanding what culture, identity and community meant to them resulted in a robust assessment and the right interventions being developed as part of the plan.

**Reflective spaces and supervision**

Using the Practice Framework and Model when working with families helps us as practitioners to become more attuned and sensitive to people from different backgrounds, which allows us to effectively interact, work and develop meaningful relationships. Prior to undertaking the visit and throughout our involvement the family, it is good practice for the practitioner to also explore their own values, develop their self-awareness and perceptions about the family, which will strengthen their ability to work in a culturally competent way.

Throughout our practice, we often have biases which may have an impact on the quality of our practice and ability to work with families in a holistic and sensitive way. For example, we are aware that this family live in Friar Park in Wednesbury, and the Social Worker may have worked with families who live in the same area or encountered certain stereotypes about people that live in this specific area. This may cloud the Social Worker’s judgement and perceptions of the family, unless they are willing to question their own assumptions and the beliefs that sit behind them. By acknowledging this ‘unconscious bias’, the Social Worker is likely to be more objective and engage the family more meaningfully by being ready to learn about their uniqueness, get to know the family functioning, history, traditions, own childhood experiences and how these may impact on their parenting. It will also involve providing the necessary challenge to partner agencies if the practice or service being provided is not underpinned by a culturally competent approach (See Practice Note on Cultural Competence).

In this example, as part of their continuing reflective practice, the practitioner may consider their own background, upbringing, stereotypes and biases they are more likely to thinking about what they bring to the relationship as practitioners that may impact on the way they will work with this family. This can be as part of self-directed learning, group supervision and supervision. Within supervision, exploring the approach to different families and communities using Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS and the Cultural Genogram helps to develop our self-awareness, critical reflection and cultural competence.

By applying our Practice Framework and Model in reflective spaces and supervision, practitioners will understand that developing cultural competence is a journey, not a destination and should be a continuous process throughout our work with children and their families. Thinking about what we bring to the relationship as practitioners, which can enrich the relationship whilst also thinking about possible biases that may impact on the way we work with children and their families can be safely explored through reflective spaces and good quality supervision. This enables us to grow, learn and develop our cultural competence when working with our families.

**Good Practice Points:**

* Spend time getting to know the family, their culture and increase your knowledge and skills.
* Have a conversation with the family about how they define themselves and involve them in planning interventions as they are the expert on their identity/need and this helps practitioners to understand it from the family’s perspective. By explaining to them that should you make a mistake that they correct you is important.
* An impact chronology and cultural genogram would be used by practitioners to understand a child’s journey and family networks/relationships including family’s values and culture.
* Recognise that although children and families of the same background, may have lived in the same cities and areas and belong to the same/religious groups/communities/class as other people, our approaches should be individualised.

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

* Ensure that if a child were to read their file in the future, that they would know at each stage in their life what their culture and identity meant to them.
* Use cultural genograms as a direct work tool with the child, young person, young adults, parents and carers to which can then be uploaded onto documents with a linked case note providing an analysis of the session.
* Link information obtained from the cultural genogram to your assessments, analysis and planning.
* Developing Impact chronologies and completing life work with the family as part of direct work and trauma informed approaches.

**Further information and reading**

* Practice notes relating to the Practice Framework and model, Relationship Based Practice and Trauma Informed Practice, Cultural Genograms, Visits, Direct work and Intervention, Partnership Working and Management Oversight and Supervision are available on Tri-X.
* Read the Practice Framework and Model Booklet and Sandwell Practice Standards.
* Access Practice Learning Workshops on the Practice Framework and Model, Cultural Competence, Cultural Genograms and Impact Chronologies.
* Dr Prospera Tedam Training: Culturally Sensitive Social Work Assessments & Intervention (March 2021)
* Research in Practice Briefing: Confident Practice with Cultural Diversity 2017
* ‘What is Community Anyway’: [David M. Chavis & Kien Lee](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what_is_community_anyway#bio-footer) (May 2015)

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