Group Supervision Process: Appreciative Inquiry

Part of the Signs of Safety Implementation Documents
– 2nd edition, March 2017

Signs of Safety Group Supervision Process: Appreciative Inquiry

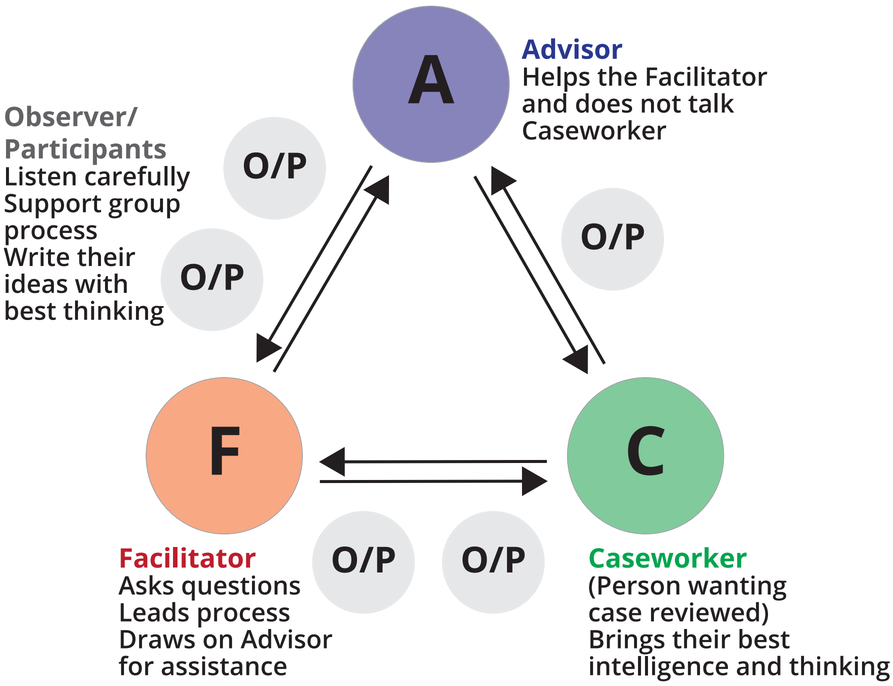
Thinking About Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

'Competency is quiet; it tends to be overlooked in the noise and clatter of problems.'
William Madsen, 2007

The engine room of any Signs of Safety implementation involves embedding a culture of appreciative inquiry around frontline practice across the organisation. This is a radical paradigm shift from the usual anxiety-driven defensiveness and obsession with researching failure that bedevils the child protection field (Turnell, A. & Murphy, T., 2014, 'The Signs of Safety Child Protection Approach and Framework: Comprehensive Briefing Paper', 3rd edition). We know that when we pay attention to problems we emphasise and amplify them. Appreciative inquiry is about paying attention to what is working well, thereby emphasising, amplifying and growing the positive or the strengths (Hammond, Sue Annis, 2013, The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry, Thin Book Publishing Co., Bend, OR.).

Group Supervision Process

This Signs of Safety group supervision process is designed for groups of 4 to 10 people. It revolves around the **caseworker** who brings forward the case. (Sometimes, of course, there is a number of people bringing forward the case). The **facilitator** leads the group process, assisted by an **advisor**. Other group members are involved as **observers/participants**. The roles of each are described in the following diagram:



The entire group, but in particular the facilitator and advisor, must focus on the process and not get caught up or over-organized about the content and detail of the case. This process is all about growing the capacity for the team to create together a fast process for working through, and getting direction in, a case. As with every meeting in child protection, effective meetings are always led skilfully.

Group Process

1. Introductions (2–3 minutes)

If the group is new to the group supervision method, the facilitator should introduce the process, including a quick description of each person's role:

- The facilitator is the ONLY person who talks directly to the caseworker.
- The advisor acts to assist the facilitator to lead the process.
- The observers/participants have the opportunity to learn by staying out of the content of cases and focusing on analysis and judgement processes, thereby assisting the worker to gain a better overview of the case and the direction he/she wants to take.

The facilitator has the professionals, the caseworker, and anyone directly involved in the case say who they are, what their role in the case is, and how long they have been involved in the case. The facilitator will probably need to prevent the professionals involved in the case from going into case content at this point.

2. Genogram (3 minutes)

The facilitator draws the family genogram to include the basic information of age along with the names of the immediate family parents, partners, children, extended family members, and relevant friends. This should include clarifying where children are living, if not with one or both parents. Again, to keep the process focused, this is not the time to describe case information.

3. Background Information (3–5 minutes)

The facilitator gives the worker 3–5 minutes to provide an overview of the case, usually by asking, 'What makes this an open child protection case now?' The worker should be allowed to talk without interruption. The facilitator and observers should make notes of the worker's exact words and begin to analyse the information. While listening, the facilitator can make notes at the side of the whiteboard and should not be trying to 'map' the case by locating information into particular columns. The more experienced workers become at using the process, the more succinct they will be at providing the critical information that is needed to move through the process.

4. Defining the focus of the Appreciative Inquiry (3 minutes)

This is THE MOST important part of the preparatory steps because it provides clear focus for the facilitator and group.

In part, the focus of the AI is defined by the case the worker has chosen to use for the session. The facilitator's role is to ask questions of the worker to further refine the focus, before leading into a line of questioning that explores the details of the work being described. This should be done by "using the 'EARS' process for eliciting and amplifying descriptions of success. The EARS acronym stands for elicit, amplify, reflect and start-over. The primary purpose of this process is to generate a rich, detailed and concrete description, a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1983) of the worker's story of success" (Turnell, A., Chapter 4: Building a Culture of Appreciative Inquiry Around Child Protection Practice, Page 5. To be published).

One such question the facilitator might ask of the worker to refine the focus might go something like: 'What practice have you felt good about when working with this family?' Another might be: 'Where do you feel you've made progress with this family?' Starting out with a general eliciting question may produce multiple examples. If so, the facilitator then asks the worker to choose which example they would like to focus on for the purposes of this appreciative conversation. For example:

> Facilitator: 'OK, so you have said you felt pretty good about the initial mapping you did with the family and that your session with the 6-year-old using My Three Houses went well. Which of these pieces of practice would be most useful for us to focus on in this session?'
>
> Worker: 'Well, it was my first time using My Three Houses and I'm not sure what I did that helped it work out so well. So I think that would be a good focus for today.'

The facilitator now has a focus for the appreciative inquiry – i.e. helping the worker to think their way into and through what they did to help the My Three Houses session work so well for the child they interviewed.

5. The Appreciative Inquiry: Large Group Exercise

5.1 Before leading the appreciative inquiry, the facilitator asks everyone to write down their best eliciting question – i.e. the question they would want to use if they were facilitating the AI. The facilitator also develops an eliciting question.

5.2 Depending on time, some or all of the group share their suggestions. Together the facilitator and worker decide which would be the most helpful question to begin with.

5.3 Using the EARS framework, the facilitator leads the AI. Group members observe the AI and write down the questions asked by the facilitator, identifying the eliciting, amplifying and reflection questions.

6. Review and Next Steps

6.1 The facilitator now reviews the process so far by asking the worker: 'What has been most useful for you about the process so far?' Then the facilitator asks: 'On a scale of 0 to 10 – where 10 means this AI has been really useful in helping you think more about the work you have done, you feel like you really learned something and it was well worth doing, and 0 means the AI didn't really help you much at all – where are you?' If the group has stayed on track, the worker should be rating relatively high at this stage. The facilitator then asks the worker if this is this enough for now. If the answer is yes, end this step here.

6.2 If no, the facilitator should ask: 'What else do they need to focus on?' Then the facilitator should spend some time on that, usually by listening to the issue and getting questions created for that issue.

A low rating from the worker probably indicates the group process has gone off track significantly from what the worker wanted, or that the worker actually now wants something else or perhaps is feeling swamped and anxious about the case. Whatever the problem, the facilitator will need to back up and help the worker identify where the sticking point is and agree on a process to deal with that.

7. The Appreciative Inquiry: Small Group Exercise

If time permits, the above process can be repeated with participants working in groups of three. Each person takes a turn at facilitating an AI (for 7 mins), being the interviewee, and observing the AI, identifying the eliciting, amplifying and reflection questions asked.

8. Review Process for Group

The advisor leads a review with the whole group about what was useful, what they learned, and any issues they have. (The review **should not be** about the content of the case).

How Often Do We Use This Group Process in the Agency or Team?

When presenting and teaching this group mapping process, these questions are often asked: 'How often should we do this in our agency? Do we do this in every case?'

This group process is designed to:

- build a shared, structured, collective team and agency culture, and process for thinking through cases using the Signs of Safety approach;
- enable child protection professionals to explore each other's cases, bringing their best thinking, including alternative perspectives, and to do this without getting caught in one or two people dominating or the group telling the practitioner whose case it is or what they must do;
- develop a shared practice of bringing a questioning approach to casework, rather than trying to arrive at answers.

This group process cannot be undertaken in every case discussion. However, the process can be replicated in individual supervision and when practitioners are thinking through cases for themselves.

Building and sustaining this sort of questioning culture for thinking through cases as a team usually requires this process being undertaken at least once every two to four weeks.

The process presented here offers quite a tight structure, because helping professionals often tend to default to individual supervision, so group supervision is not a normal part of most agencies' practice. Where group supervision is normal, the group conversations can often be very free form and unstructured with little sense of shared purpose. If the majority of quality supervision is individual, this creates a very privatised practice culture within the agency, places excessive pressure on the team leaders or supervisors to be the fount of all wisdom for all practitioners, and limits the capacity to draw on the knowledge and experience of peers. Many supervisors and practitioners shy away from group supervision or, if they have to participate, they do so in a constrained way because of previous bad experiences. It is strongly suggested that supervisors and teams follow the process offered here closely, particularly as they build the habit of group supervision in their teams. This process is safe, well tested, refined, and avoids group dynamics where one or two people dominate.

The advisor role is central to the success of the group process. The advisor should be very active, checking in regularly with the facilitator about their sense of direction and effectiveness of what they are doing. Likewise, the facilitator should quickly draw on the advisor if they are feeling stuck or unsure.