

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Working with Young People : Involving Disengaged Family Members

Assessment processes with young people often seek to identify positive relationships that they have with family members and other significant adults. Equally important is the relationships that are conflictual or damaged in some way, as they can often be relationships of equal or greater importance to the young person. In some of these cases, the challenge for the worker may be how to re-engage a family member in the young person's life.

Some adults may be physically absent from a young person's life, yet hold a particularly strong place in their life schema. Absent parents, for example, may still have a powerful influence in the young person's life.¹

Supporting young people to build and improve, or at the least gain a greater understanding of difficult or absent connections with family members, is often particularly beneficial for young people. The young person's experience of therapeutically working through difficult relationships will offer them valuable insight for future relationships, and for their view of themselves, others and the world.²

When contact is not in the young person's interests

Exceptions occur when contact may be detrimental to the young person, or to the family member. **The safety of the young person and others is of paramount importance.** This principle clearly overrides other advice in this help sheet. Utilize supervision processes in your decision-making.

See: **When contact with family is harmful**

Possible reasons why a family member may be disengaged

There are many possible reasons why a family member may be disengaged or disconnected from a young person. These include:

- **Exhausted/disheartened** Families may have been dealing with many complex issues and/or behaviour difficulties in the young person over a long period of time. They may be caught in very difficult relationship dynamics which they have been unable to shift. They may have tried so hard for so long and feel exhausted, disheartened or fed up with the situation.
- **Personal suffering.** Family members may have gone through quite traumatic experiences. They may have done what they could, but have got to the point that they have needed to prioritise their own health and wellbeing or that of other family members.
- **Limited skills.** They may lack communication or relationship skills. They may have found it very hard to hold firm boundaries with the young person, and may feel they have no choice but to have no contact for a while.
- **Avoidant coping style.** They may have an avoidant coping style whereby they find it hard to sit with strong emotions or relationship problems, and instead avoid people they have difficulties with and try to distract themselves or focus on other things.
- **Don't care enough.** A small number of people, for different reasons aren't capable of having sufficient empathy, care and commitment for a young person. They may have experienced abuse themselves. They may be abusive towards the young person. The young person may have been left to manage on his or her own through difficult times. Bear in mind, however, that some family members may act like they don't care as a way to hide feelings of failure and inadequacy. These families may shift towards being more connected with the young person if they experience understanding and assistance from you or others.
- **Not within a family's control.** It may also be that the young person is the one who is disengaging from their family. This may be related to their efforts at this developmental stage to individuate and separate from family. The young person may have an avoidant coping style, or has made it impossible for family to have contact with them. It may be that the young person has felt deeply hurt and has needed to separate from family for a time, until they are better able to deal with it.

1. Owusu-Bempah, J. (1995) information about the absent parent as a factor in the well-being of children of single-parent families. *International Social Work*, 38 (3), 253-276

2. Corey G., Schneider Corey, M. (2003) *Becoming a Helper*, Brooks/Cole, USA. pp. 32-47

Consent from the young person to talk to a family member

There are times when a young person will refuse to talk about their family. Or they may refuse the possibility of engaging a particular family member. If you think that discussing family issues or contacting a family member would be helpful, explain the reasons why you think this way and possible outcomes. Reassure the young person about the process you would use, but respect the fact that at the end of the day it is their decision.

Even if the young person will not consider having any contact with the family member themselves, you could ask the young person for their consent to allow you to speak to the family member on their behalf. This may put you in a better position to assess the suitability of encouraging the young person's relationship with the family member and help you to gain a broader understanding of their background.

Talking to a family member about their relationship with a young person

If you have the consent of the young person to talk to a family member, then consider using the following approach. It is important to explore the family member's perception of the relationship and their ideas about how the young person may perceive the relationship.

- Explain your role with the young person and that you have the young person's consent to speak to them.
- Explain your reasons for thinking it may be beneficial to the young person to work things through, and to possibly have some contact with them again, in a way that might work for both.
- Gauge their response to your contact.
- Continue your assessment about whether or not contact with this person is likely to be beneficial for the young person.
- Explain that you understand they may have a different view about things than the young person, that you would like to meet with them to talk things through further and hear about their experience and challenges with the young person and what they believe the young person's strengths are and how these may be worked on.

Some good questions to initiate this process with include:

- What has the relationship been like over time?
- Are there times when you haven't felt able to guarantee the safety of the young person? Was there court intervention? Were child protection services involved?
- Were there times when the relationship was working well? What was happening then? Who was around or absent? What changed?

- What events have taken place at different times which have affected the relationship?
- What have been the good things/ parts of the relationship which are ok/ work well?
- What are the main difficulties or the hard parts of the relationship/parts of the relationship that haven't work so well?
- Are there other ways to interpret the young person's behaviour?
- What has led to the disconnection? Has this occurred over time? Or was there a specific event?
- What may be good things about getting in touch with the young person again? How could the family member support them?
- Are there things the young person may be able to do differently to help things get better/avoid further problems? Are there things the family member may be able to do differently to help things get better/avoid further problems?
- What may be the difficult/sensitive things about being in touch with the young person?
- What sort of contact would they like with the young person? Are they interested in providing the young person with some support? If so what sort of support? What are the boundaries and limits?

Similar questions can be asked of the young person to elicit their feelings about the family member.

See: **Talking to young people about family**

Is it the right time for them to have direct contact?

Even if the relationship is not harmful and rebuilding the relationship in time is likely to be beneficial for the young person, now may not be the right time to begin direct contact. Sometimes family member/s and a young person clearly need a break from each other. An agreement that they will have a break and come back at a mutually agreed time to review the decision may be the most appropriate response at this stage.

Further, direct contact between the young person and a particular family member may not be suitable until other processes have taken place, for example, individual or family counselling. A family member may have clear ideas about what needs to change before they are willing to be involved again, e.g. John must attend an anger management program and promise he won't threaten me again.

If the young person and their family member are caught in a difficult dynamic, their contact may reinforce old patterns. It may be that your contact with both individually is a good way to understand their relationship. This may help

to change perceptions and work towards finding ways that the relationship may proceed, prior to the young person having direct contact with the family member.

It is also possible that while there may be deeper issues which need to be 'worked through' over time, possibly with professional assistance, some direct contact between the young person and the family member may be beneficial. This may enable the young person to begin to rebuild connection in the mean time, while the deeper issues will be dealt with in another forum.

Starting to rebuild the relationship

A family member may be more willing to re-engage in their relationship with the young person if they have some new strategies for doing so. Try to identify an area of tension that impacts on the relationship and consider guidelines or techniques for dealing with the issue. For example:

Help the young person and family develop clear and appropriate boundaries for their relationship, by doing the following:

- **Time together.** They may need to limit their time together if longer periods of contact end in arguments.
- **Neutral person present.** Conversation and interaction may remain more reasonable and be safe if a mutually agreed upon third person is present.
- **Certain topics.** They may need to decide to avoid one or more topics to avoid getting into the same old heated arguments. They may have to work to find other areas of common interest or discussion.
- **Resolve an issue at the outset.** They may need to discuss one particular issue (with the support of a professional) in order to be able to move forward at all.

Ensure the family member has support

Where family members are disengaged, it may be due to a lack of ideas or support for the relationship. If you are able to offer debriefing and advice to family members as needed, this may support the relationship as it evolves into a more positive dynamic. If you are not able to provide direct support to the family member, due to program constraints, refer the family member for individual or family counseling. (See: When to Refer and to Whom).



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- There are many reasons why a family member may be disengaged or disconnected from a young person, such as exhaustion, personal suffering, limited skills or an avoidant coping style.
- If you think that discussing family issues or contacting a family member would be useful, explain why and the possible outcomes.
- Explore the family member's perception of the relationship and their ideas about the young person's perspective.
- Even if the relationship is not harmful and rebuilding the relationship in time is likely to be beneficial for the young person, now may not be the right time to begin direct contact.
- A family member may be more willing to re-engage in their relationship with the young person if they have some new strategies for doing so, and appropriate support.



Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets

- When Contact with Family is Harmful
- Confidentiality and Duty of Care Issues
- Effective assessment of family at intake
- When to refer and to whom
- Talking to young people about family

Parent Help Sheets

- Dealing with past hurts and traumas
- Building our Relationship
- Feeling blamed



Suggested Reading

- Selekmán M. D., (2005), Pathways to Change, (Brief Therapy with Difficult Adolescents), The Guilford Press, New York
- Selekmán M. D., (1997), Solution-focused therapy with children (Harnessing Family Strengths for Systemic Change), The Guilford Press, New York.



Strong Bonds

Jesuit Social Services
PO Box 1141
Collingwood Victoria 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700
Email info@strongbonds.jss.org.au
Web www.strongbonds.jss.org.au