

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Working with Young People : **Discussing Family**

Youth work has often been practised in a way that has not acknowledged the significance of family for the young person. Also, the role family can play as a resource to the young person now and into the future has often been underestimated. Sometimes the family has been seen as irrelevant; sometimes as the cause of the problem.

The growing field of risk and resilience research, however, provides solid evidence of the importance of keeping young people connected to family. This research recognises the need for all people to be interdependent, rather than independent, and to have ongoing relationships with family.

It appears important then to think of ways that youth work can expand to address young people's issues in relation to their families and, where possible, effectively include them in interventions. There are a number of barriers to this occurring. These include a worker's professional background, skills and interest, a young person's willingness and motivation, and the organisation's commitment and capacity to value and encourage work with families.

Safety is paramount

It is important to recognise that under certain circumstances the family home is an unsafe environment for a young person, or that a young person's behaviour may place family members at risk. The physical or psychological safety of a young person and the family needs to be paramount.

The need for protection from certain individuals or situations is vital, but it should not be at the expense of other family or adult connections that are functional and beneficial to the young person.

Worker issues

Some workers say that talking about family with a young person is like opening "Pandora's Box" and many express that they feel they do not have the skills to deal with the fallout. Part of the problem is that working with young people and families is often seen as a specialist area of expertise rather than an integral part of youth work.

A starting point for you as a worker is to reflect on your own values and beliefs regarding the role of family in a young person's life. Next it is important to be clear about your strengths and weaknesses in relation to working with young people and families. One way of looking at this is to think of family as a young person's "terrain" – workers can then identify the extent and the ways in which they will traverse this terrain with a young person.

Assessment

Good assessment is critical to identifying the family links that a young person has to draw on. This includes

establishing who may have been significant in the past. Family relationships are likely to change over time, particularly in the case of those young people who lead relatively chaotic lives. Ongoing assessment of the quality of family relationships is important. (See: Effective Assessment of Family Information at Intake).

Six things that can help

Below are six ways that we can start talking with young people about families:

Unpacking

Taking apart all the bits that make up what a family means to them. Giving them a chance to tell the story (e.g. safety/danger, belonging/rejection, guilt/feeling like a disappointment to others, mixed feelings)

Acknowledging

Validating their feelings and statements about family:

- "Sounds like you got a raw deal at home."
- "If you have kids what would you like to be different for them?" (e.g. don't yell at them, don't force them to do things, eat good food, make them feel wanted)

Educating

Talking to the young person about what we know, in a language they understand:

- "Babies aren't born naughty or bad, children learn who they are from those around them. If children are told they are trouble all the time, soon they will believe it."
- "Everyone needs to feel as though they have people

around who can listen to and help them, whether they are family or not.”

Considering other perspectives

Introducing the idea that there may have been reasons that others behaved the way they did and that families usually do the best they can at the time – and sometimes that’s not so good:

- “What do you think was going on for mum at the time? Maybe she wasn’t coping/no sleep/no support/angry at being on her own.”

Empowering

Giving young people encouragement to change things using their own resources:

- “It’s great that you can see where this view of yourself has come from - it hasn’t come from you. Now you have a chance to rebuild that view. As an adult, your own view of yourself can be even more important than what others say about you.”

Planning

Looking towards the future and making plans to reach goals:

- “Who thinks well of you that you can get some support from?”
- “How would you like to change the picture of you and your family?”
- “What small steps can we plan?”

Confidentiality and Consent

It is important to reassure young people about confidentiality and consent. They remain your primary client and their trust in you is essential for your work with them. Be careful, however, that strict adherence to confidentiality and privacy guidelines is not an excuse for keeping family ignorant of important issues, especially if the young person is still dependent on them for care.

Make an agreement together about what information they are comfortable for you to share with whom. One good way of framing it is to ask what they will let you share with a family member, rather than what they won’t. This sends a strong, positive message about the importance of family.

See: Confidentiality and Duty of Care Issues

Discussing Family Issues

Below are some ideas for starting discussions with young people about family:

- Ask open-ended questions like – “Can you tell me a bit about your family?”
- Identify your loyalty to the young person as the main focus.

- Be clear about any communication you will/won’t have with family.
- Ask how they would like their family relationships to be? What was the best/hardest thing about their childhood?
- Identify any strengths in the family.
- Acknowledge any hurt that exists between family members separating people from behaviour where possible.
- Acknowledge that even people whose family life has been difficult often feel that they need to stay connected to them in some way.
- Promote the idea that seeing someone once a month and getting on is better than living in conflict. With the former, you have something to build on.
- List what things they can control within their family and what they can’t, or what they feel could be fixed and what can’t.
- Include community and significant others in considering the concept of family – broaden the possibilities.
- Be open about the fact that we all have some bad or at least mixed feelings about our family – that the perfect family is a myth.
- Talk about the part they’ve played in family life. Identify what they take responsibility for and congratulate them on that.
- Suggest that if two people are to get along better, both



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- There is solid evidence to support the importance of family/young person connectedness
- The need for protection from certain individuals or situations is vital, but it should not be at the expense of other family or adult connections that are positive.
- Be clear about your values with regard to the role of family in a young person’s life and recognise your strengths and limitations as a worker in this area.
- Be aware that strict adherence to confidentiality and privacy guidelines may be keeping family ignorant of important issues.
- Use circular questioning to take the focus off one particular person.

have to make some changes.

- Talk about what sort of communication/approach works with family members and what doesn't – encourage letter writing where appropriate.
- Talk about the future of family relationships and identify what it would take for things to improve.
- Remember that forgiveness isn't compulsory
 - sometimes the only thing people owe their family is to acknowledge how it really was.

Other useful skills

Some young people may actually need reassurance that it's OK to say negative things about their family as they may feel they are being disloyal. Reassure them all families have their problems, that what they say will not be judged and that sometimes it is helpful to talk things through with someone outside the family.

Circular questions are designed to take the focus off one person by asking questions that are relational and focus on the context from the perspective of other family members.¹ Instead of asking young people questions about themselves, ask them a question which requires them to answer from the perspective of another family member. For example:

- "How worried do you think your dad is about you?"
- "What do you think your mum would say about your relationship with your brother?"
- "If I were to ask mum about your behaviour towards her, what do you think she would say?"

Another point to remember is that **young people may be worried themselves about a family member's health and well-being**. Simple scaling questions may be useful to elicit the extent of this concern, e.g. "On a scale of 1-10, how worried are you about your mum, if 1 equals not at all, and 10 equals a lot?"

Where possible, try to hold a positive stance in relation to their family. This helps to avoid inappropriate 'collusion' with young people against their family. Young people respect a worker's unconditional attitude towards family members, even if they are not yet willing to offer the same themselves.²



Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets

- Simple Guide to Genograms
- Dealing with "Black & White" Thinking
- Reframing Feelings About Family
- When Contact with Family is Harmful
- Confidentiality and Duty of Care Issues

Parent Help Sheets

- Family Dynamics
- Building Our Relationship
- Improving Communication
- Dealing with Conflict



Suggested Reading

- Daniel, B., Wassell, S. & Gilligan, R. (1999) Child Development for Child Care and Protection Workers, Kingsley, London.
- Nichols, M., P., Schwartz R., C. (2001) The Essentials of Family Therapy, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.
- Clark, R. (2000) "It has to be more than a job": A search for unconditional practice with troubled adolescents. Deakin University: Policy and Practice Unit.

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2. Clark, R. (2000) "It has to be more than a job": A search for unconditional practice with troubled adolescents. Deakin University: Policy and Practice Unit.

