Volume 2

Working Effectively with Systems to Support Vulnerable Families

Practitioner's Resource Guide

Strengthening Families Together Pilot

MSF | MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

" I can do things you cannot. You can do things I cannot. Together we can do great things "

Mother Teresa

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
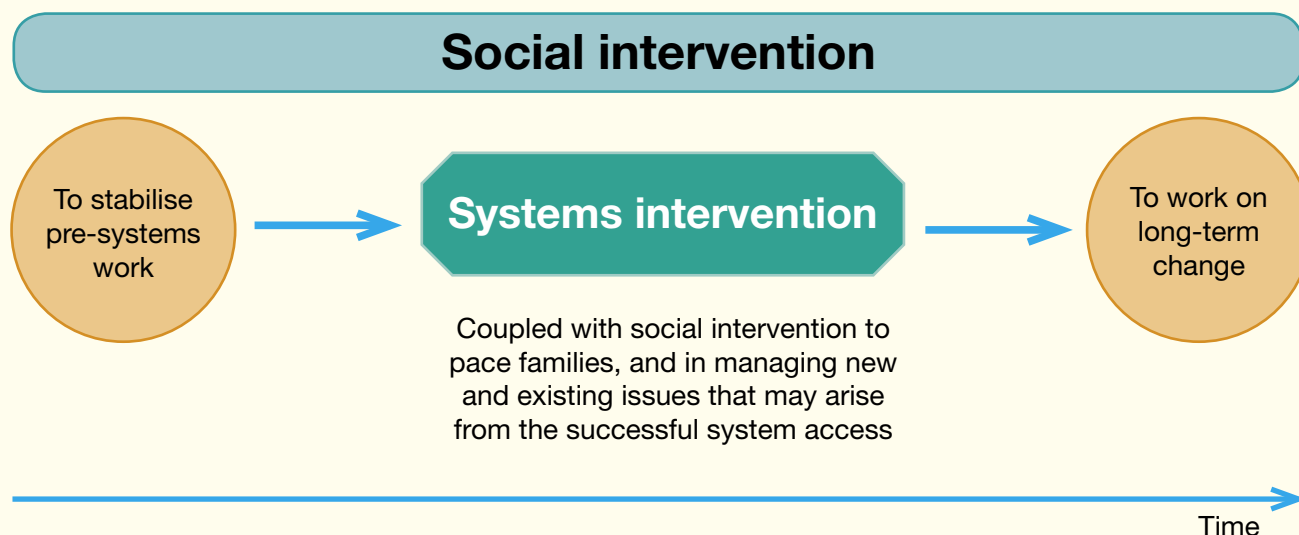
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INTRODUCTION

The *Strengthening Families Together (SFT)* Pilot is an initiative led by the ComCare and Social Support Division of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) to support vulnerable families with multiple issues who repeatedly return to help systems even after receiving assistance from various help sources.

Recognising that vulnerable families face complex needs, and are often unable to work on their underlying social issues due to systems barriers or the need to work with multiple help systems, the SFT Pilot seeks to better identify challenges they face, and jointly work with the systems and families to formulate solutions that will be effective in supporting them. The SFT Pilot aims to adopt innovative approaches, and a holistic multi-agency coordinated effort to assist vulnerable families. This is done through tighter coordination amongst agencies and advocating to help systems for flexibility in the provision of assistance for these families. These systems include the Ministry of Social & Family Development (MSF)/Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) and Social Service Offices (SSOs), Ministry of National Development (MND)/Housing & Development Board (HDB), Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Manpower (MOM)/Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), and Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)/Immigration & Checkpoints Authority of Singapore (ICA). Through this pilot, we also hope to better equip social work practitioners with the skills and the right approaches in supporting vulnerable families as they work towards self-reliance and resiliency.

The pilot comprises two main forms of intervention, namely, social and systems intervention. For the purpose of the pilot, the following definitions have been adopted:

- *Social intervention* refers to work done by the social work practitioner with the family to develop their capacity to improve their circumstances and sustain improvements in outcomes. It seeks to enable families to cope with stressors and address their problems more effectively, and impart the necessary skills and knowledge to the families to empower them to do so.

- *Systems intervention* refers to work done by the social work practitioner to coordinate and advocate for tangible assistance with the various help systems (i.e. health, education, housing, etc.) according to the needs of the family. Intervention with systems is not an end in itself, but seeks to stabilise families to work on their underlying issues. This also involves in-depth assessments to identify areas of need.

As shown in the diagram below, social and systems interventions take place in tandem. Social intervention is necessary to help stabilise families for pre-systems intervention, pace families and help them cope with emerging issues as a result of successful systems access, and to support families on long-term change. Social intervention is also important after a systems intervention breakthrough, so that the family can yield the most benefit from the help obtained.

Social intervention

To stabilise pre-systems work → **Systems intervention** → To work on long-term change

Coupled with social intervention to pace families, and in managing new and existing issues that may arise from the successful system access

Time

Volume 1 of the practitioner's resource guide covers social intervention and Volume 2 covers systems intervention.

Volume 2 aims to provide practical guidelines and tips for social work practitioners to work effectively with systems in supporting vulnerable families. It covers both the soft skills of how social work practitioners should approach and engage systems, and the preparation needed in terms of understanding how the systems work, how to influence and negotiate for help components, and ways to enhance systems coordination. It also includes the technicality of how an inter-agency case conference should be conducted, and what to capture in a social report in order to advocate effectively with systems.

This practitioners' resource guide was developed by SFT Pilot Senior Practice Leaders to share their best practices and the rich knowledge which guided them as they worked with systems to support vulnerable families.
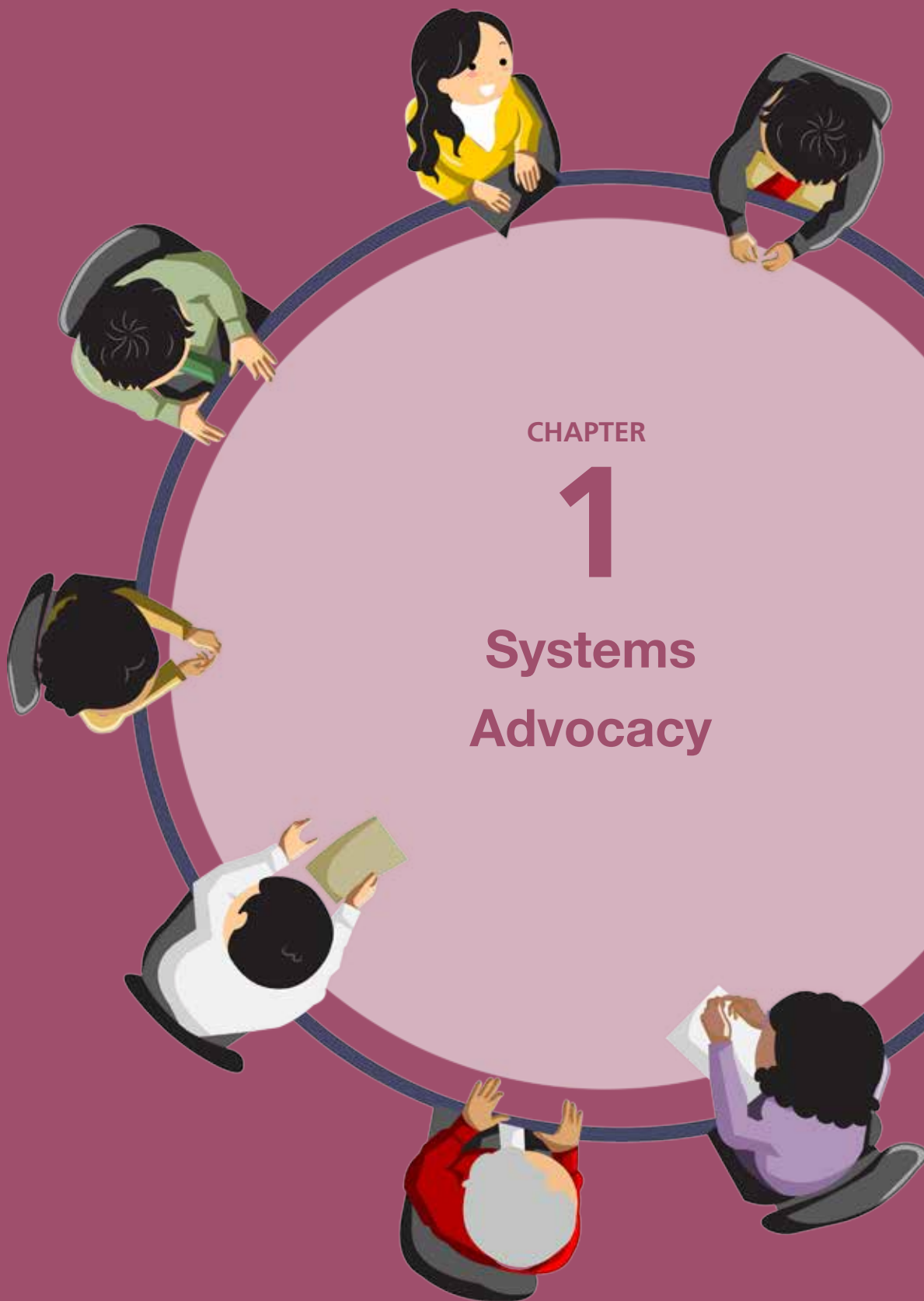
Introduction

The educated and trained social work practitioner will readily agree that advocacy is "at the heart of social work" (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2000) and an essential skill in a profession that promotes social justice, equality and social inclusion. Advocacy has been a central and critical skill highlighted in core documents such as 'The Professional Capabilities Framework' (TCSW, 2012) in England as well as National Occupational Standards for Social Work, and Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) in 1995. Advocacy also features prominently in most case management literature and frameworks.

As we embark on systems advocacy, it is essential to ensure that families are given a clear voice in the decisions that involve their lives.

Systems advocacy can occur at any part of the case management process. Comprehensive assessment at the beginning and throughout the case management process of the type of systems intervention needed would allow for a more focussed and strategic systems advocacy.

Based on the SFT Pilot experience, a new domain on "systems access" was added to the original Family Advocacy and Support Tool (FAST) by Dr John S. Lyons. This domain can be helpful in contributing to the formulation of assessment and planned follow-up relating to family's access to systems. It also helps to highlight the interdependency or inter-related impact of the help components.

Objectives 🔍

1. To describe systems advocacy in social work.
2. To highlight ways of engaging in systems advocacy.
3. To explain the importance of integrating the benefits of systems advocacy into the social intervention component.
4. To discuss ways to create a culture of advocacy.

How do you do it ❓

What is Systems Advocacy?

Systems advocacy is especially essential in the case of vulnerable families with compelling needs that hinder or draw back the progress of the families. Systems advocacy can be case- or cause-based. Case-based advocacy is focussed on individual cases. Cause-based advocacy involves collating knowledge from a number of cases for collective advocacy for systemic and structural changes to policy, legislation or practice.

Systems advocacy is not about being adversarial or controversial. The purpose and goal of this form of advocacy is about highlighting the importance of the need, mediating, bridging, and creating conversations between families and societal institutions for positive family outcomes, and access to resources to address basic needs of families. It is also about framing the importance of certain basic help components as critical in the developmental progress of vulnerable families. Rothman (1994) refers to this process as fixing a "problematic person-in-environment fit". Good casework and assessment form the steady basis of effective systems advocacy.

Systems advocacy can occur using various effective modes such as writing quality social reports and letters, as well as facilitating effective inter-agency case conferencing.

In systems advocacy, the social work practitioner draws on qualities and skills used by lawyers such as appealing and collating evidence to make a good case with the right context. Negotiation with systems is also a critical skill and we assume the role of a representative for the family.

If a family is refused or denied access to a resource from systems:

1. The first step the social work practitioner needs to take is to determine the reason. Problem definition is critical for troubleshooting and for meaningful advocacy to occur. This could involve contacting the systems by telephone or in person, which would allow the sharing of possibly more sensitive information which may not be reflected in writing. However, writing an email is also helpful for documenting the reason.

2. There are a number of reasons why the family may have been denied access. If the family had been referred to the wrong department, it is important for the social work practitioner to make the right link. The correct information needs to be properly documented, so that this can be shared with other social work practitioners in the agency/programme. The reasons for the denial of access should also be explained clearly to the family. Moreover, it is not sufficient to simply make a new referral for the family. Seasoned authors in social work such as Brindis, Bart and Loomis (1987) state that "highly vulnerable families need more than a referral". They highlighted the need for additional encouragement and support from the practitioner, otherwise the family may not engage with services.

3. If the family is denied access due to differential intake processes in the systems, the social work practitioner needs to bring this to the open and highlight the inconsistencies in practice. The end goal is to ensure equal access for the family based on the basic needs that may be unmet.

4. If the family is rejected because the family does not meet the eligibility criteria, the social work practitioner can appeal for flexibility to be exercised by the systems (Greene et al., 2007). There is a need to sensitize the systems to the needs of the family, and to highlight the family's strengths and positive qualities. For some agencies, outlining the inter-relatedness of the issue on other domains is helpful in providing agencies a perspective on the effect and urgency of the assistance (e.g. the need for stable housing so that clients can look at employment opportunities, and thereby increase the household income). Comprehensive, good quality social reports and well-crafted letters of advocacy are key in this process. The way the social work practitioner presents information can make a critical difference in accessing systems. Systems would most likely not give a case due consideration if incomplete, ambiguously or highly emotionally charged information is presented. Appealing for a family involves specificity and objectivity. Our professional credibility depends on the ability to articulate the family's needs, assure the systems of our professional credibility, and also create opportunity for the systems to reconsider the case.

5. Another scenario is where unsuccessful attempts to engage some systems had resulted in gaps in service or hindrance in another aspect of intervention. In this situation, systems advocacy will occur in the context of inter-agency case conferencing.

6. Once links with systems have been made and advocacy has begun, it is important to keep vigilant and monitor that agreed upon services are implemented. Social work practitioners need to be prepared to continue to mediate and troubleshoot any glitches that may occur along the way (Kilpatrick and Holland, 2009). Conversely, it is also important to maintain these links through the closing of loops and regular updates to systems where possible. Besides networking, such efforts enable help agencies to appreciate the progress made by families as a result of the assistance provided, and are in effect, a subtle form of advocacy to systems.

Culture of Advocacy

Culture of advocacy refers to the "behaviours, beliefs and values that inform social workers as advocates" (Dalrymple and Boylan, 2013). This also refers to a frame where seasoned social work practitioners who incorporate advocacy as a core component of their practice are also able to teach and guide new practitioners joining the profession. This is coupled with the knowledge base developed on theory and practice of systems advocacy to educate how the process is embarked upon in the social work profession. An effective way of creating this culture is to table the issue of systems intervention at case presentations and group supervisions, and talk through the methodology. Getting new workers to also observe how the seniors undertake systems advocacy through platforms such as inter-agency and intra-agency case conferencing is helpful.

Things to note

1. While having the good intent of developing self-advocacy skills in families, social work practitioners need to assess the capacity and ability of the vulnerable family, and their current stress levels. The family may not have the bandwidth to advocate for themselves at this point. As a result, the family may not pursue the linkage with the systems or feel disillusioned and totally disengaged.

2. At times gaining access to systems is a challenging process, and navigating through these systems may not be easy for the family. Coaching and walking with the family through the initial stage of systems work is critical.

3. It is important to ask ourselves what is the objective of the intervention so as to ascertain who the advocate needs to intervene with to secure the change needed or have access granted.

4. Closing the loop is very important. Keeping the systems informed of the progress of the family and the impact of the systems help is very critical. This can be done through structured inter-agency case conferencing on a regular basis (e.g. once every three months).

5. Gaining access to resources should not be seen as an end in itself in systems advocacy. It is also important to leverage on the positive outcome to help families move to the next milestone.
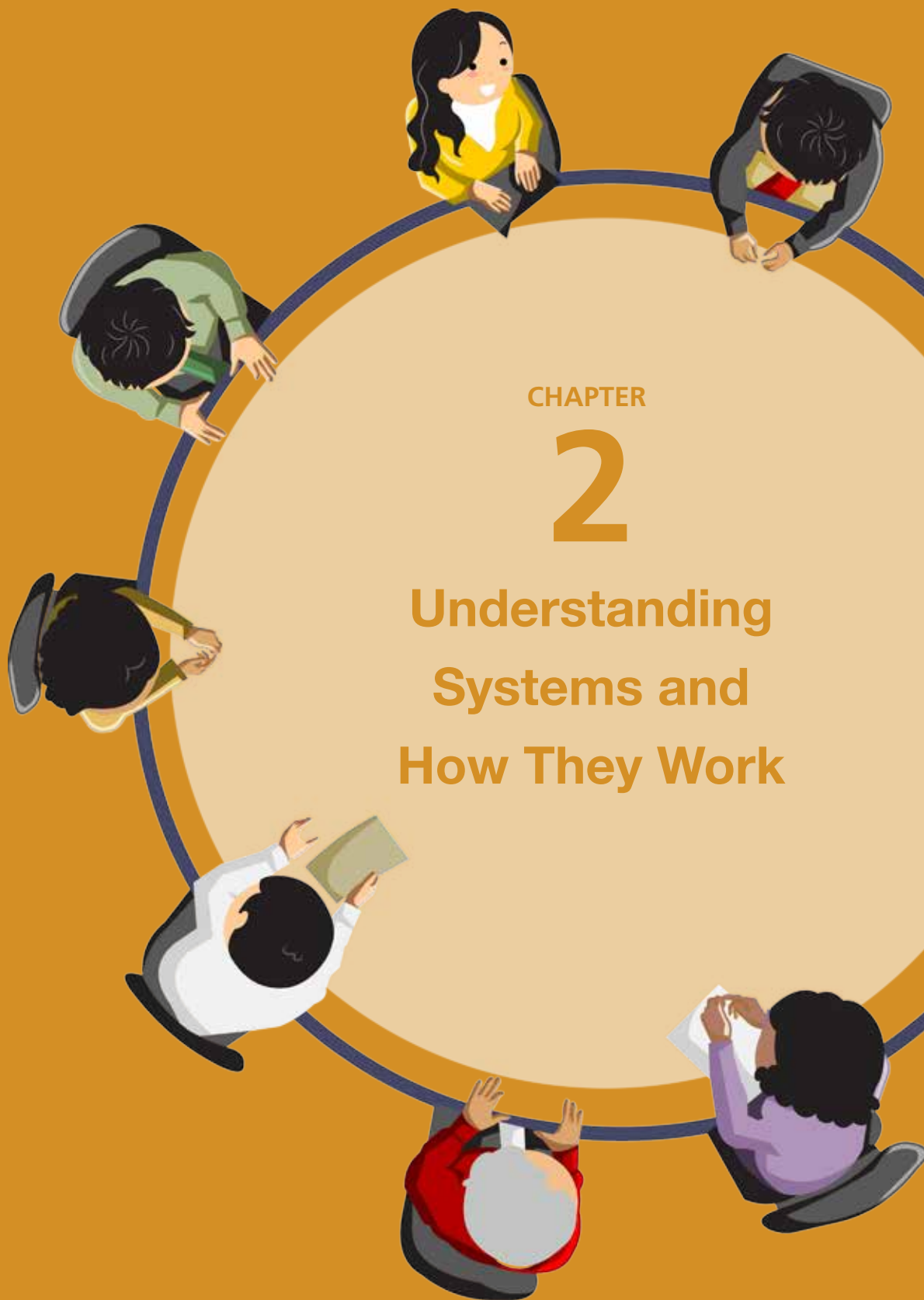
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Understanding Systems and How They Work

Introduction

As the social work practitioner assists the vulnerable family, it is inevitable that they play a broker role with the respective systems that the family is seeking help from. Some of the possible systems that greatly influence the lives of the families are financial assistance, housing, healthcare subsidies, employment assistance, training support, immigration, education and childcare service providers. It is paramount for the social work practitioner to understand the policies of various systems in order to better assist the families.

Objectives 🔍

1. To better appreciate the positions of the respective stakeholders and understand the objectives of various policies.
2. To empower social work practitioners to advocate for the families, and propose alternative solutions to the families and systems.

How do you do it ❓

Before approaching the systems, have a good understanding of the following and how it relates to the needs of the family:

1. Be familiar with the mission, vision, objectives and functions of the systems.
2. Be familiar with the features and eligibility criteria of the policies, programmes and schemes.
3. Understand the policy intent of the programmes and schemes.
4. Find out how the policies of various systems are related to one another, and what the implications for the family are.
5. Find out the systems' approach towards vulnerable families or people with similar profiles as these vulnerable families.
6. Keep abreast of local news and parliamentary debates, Budget and Committee of Supply announcements related to the systems.

Make use of this knowledge to connect with the systems. Actively think out of the box and propose alternative solutions in the context of how the systems operate. Always try to work towards a win-win solution, and engage the systems in joint-solution development to get greater buy-in.

Things to note ✏️

1. Provide the systems with the critical information that they need in order to assist in their decision making.
2. Always keep in mind how the policies and policy changes have impact on the individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities.
3. Strive to understand the particular issue in great depth before proceeding to advocate for the family.
4. Influence policy change by informing policy makers of changing trends in family profiles and highlighting unmet needs of vulnerable families, and support this by providing statistics to depict the magnitude of the issues.
5. Be mindful that while most policies are targeted at the general population, help agencies do have flexibility criteria for deviation cases on a special case-by-case consideration.
6. Be prepared to resurface ideas and proposals, even if these may have been rejected earlier. Oftentimes, the ideas will be taken on board when the timing matches with the organisational/national agenda.
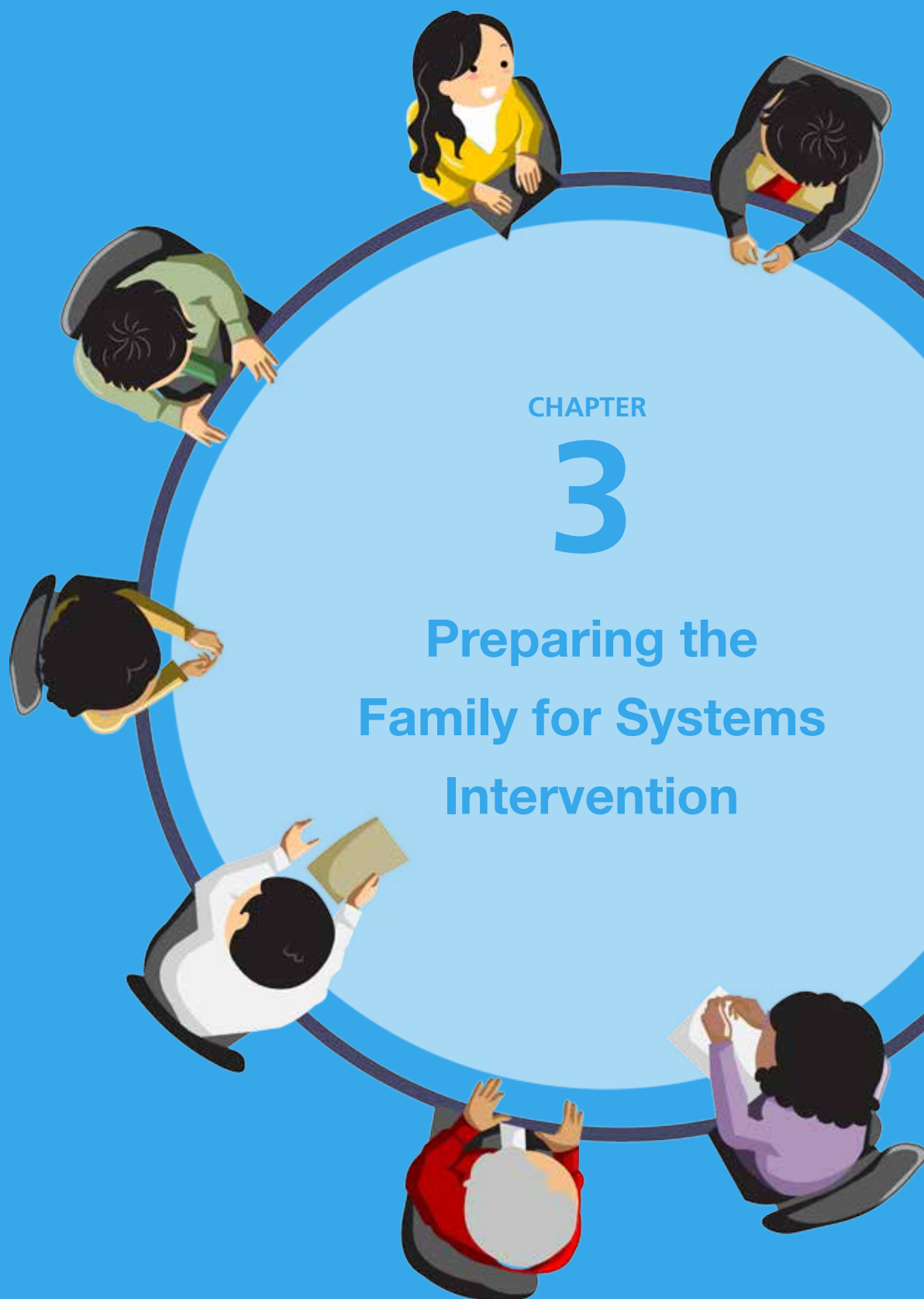
Preparing the Family for Systems Intervention

Introduction

Preparing the family is an integral component of systems intervention. Vulnerable families have multiple needs that require engagement and responses from a number of service organisations both governmental and non-governmental. The family's involvement ensures that they are also learning effective ways of interacting with the systems in the process. This intentional involvement of the family sets the foundation for the family's greater control of their own problems and their ability to manage the challenges independently. The skills and learning acquired along the way must be debriefed with the family so that they are aware of the role they played in the successful outcomes in systems work. The practitioner needs to have clarity on the reason to involve the family and how to prepare them. Being mindful of the age, experience and special needs of the family helps.

Families on the SFT Pilot usually have had multiple interfaces with systems previously. Some may have had negative experiences although some might have been positive. Some families may respond with anger, mistrust and further reinforced helplessness to the rejections and these feelings might inform future interactions with systems. This accounts for descriptions of families such as 'non-co-operative', 'demanding and aggressive' and even 'unmotivated' by some systems that come into contact with these families. The systems may be unaware that the behavioural responses by families could "stem from low self-confidence, lack of awareness of eligibility requirements or even literacy at times" (Rothman, 1994).The social work practitioner can be instrumental in helping the family overcome emotional barriers such as frustration and fear when interfacing with systems as well as help the systems understand the families' past struggles (Frank and Gelman, 2004).

Systems provide the help component with the expectation of improved outcomes for the family. The family needs to be aware of this and the social work practitioner will need to discuss with the family on how he /she will work towards that and come prepared to contribute their part to problem solving.

Objectives

1. To discuss why families need to be prepared for systems intervention.
2. To highlight ways of preparing families for systems intervention.
3. To state ways of preparing the family for systems intervention.

How do you do it

Ways of Preparing Families

Preparing the family also means preparing them for the actual face-to-face meetings with the systems such as joint sessions or inter-agency case conferencing. Preparing the family is conducted at an emotional, physical and cognitive level. The emotional level involves processing their emotions about the interface with the systems and getting them ready and confident about this new interaction. The physical level refers to how families present themselves to the systems in their physical outlook and the physical care of their children. Preparing the family at the cognitive level refers to the facts of the matter and how they are fully informed of the process that will occur in their interaction with the systems, and the evidence and information they will need to share. Cognitive level preparation also means having meaningful conversations with the families to help them obtain clarity about what the request and the approach are of the systems. There is a lot of family capability building in-session involved for them so that they can articulate the challenges they face. This level of preparation involves role plays and coaching to help them look at the situation from the systems angle and how to address some of the concerns the systems might have.

Steps in Preparing Families

1. Spend time with the family to understand how the systems intervention will improve their situation and contribute to the family's resilience. There is a need to put the child in the centre of these discussions and talk through how the children's development and life chances are impacted.

2. Provide information on the systems (e.g. HDB, WDA, ICA, etc.) and their policies. This often helps to alleviate some pre-conceived notions, fears or frustrations. Information is power. To empower the family, the social work practitioner needs to have accurate and current information. The social work practitioner also needs to be aware of the latest policy changes and eligibility criteria.

3. Encourage the family to share previous experiences working with systems and working through their thoughts/feelings.

4. Explain to the family on how the upcoming systems work might be different (e.g. social work practitioner attending with them, and debriefing after the session etc.).

5. Develop a detailed case plan with the family and highlight how the particular systems work. This is an activity/ task that will help to prioritise needs in the case plan (please refer to the *Practitioner's Resource Guide* on *Working with Vulnerable Families* for an elaboration of this).

6. Create the session plan together with the family so they know what would happen in the session.

7. Role-play with the family possible scenarios for the session and talk through their responses/reactions. It is important that the practitioner also role-play possible hiccups that could occur in the session and how the family may wish to respond.

8. Develop a step by step flow of events when working with systems – guide the family to know what to expect next and what their role/ expectations are.

9. Be mindful of the family's thoughts/feelings during the session and check in with them. Help them to review how far they have come, and are involved actively in contributing to their own advocacy.

10. Encourage the family to share their thoughts/ views during the actual contact with the systems and give the power back to them.

Things to note

1. Remember that although we might have spent a lot of time preparing the family for an actual face to face interaction with the systems, their anxieties would still be present on the actual day of the interaction. What is helpful would be to give them a call or have a home-visit the day before to talk through the plan for the case conference. It is also important to meet the family before the actual session to encourage them and affirm them for being present.

2. Plan to meet the family earlier at the venue, and proceed to the session together. Summarise the plan before the meeting, and run through the seating arrangements (e.g., where they can expect the practitioner to be seated as they might want to have you in sight as an emotional anchor in the session, etc.).

3. In preparing for systems intervention / advocacy through a detailed social report, be aware that families may feel that we are intruding and decide not to share information. The rapport building and engagement skill of the social work practitioner builds the essential foundation of trust between the practitioner and the family. This then helps the family to persevere in the tedious process of information gathering. The gathering of large amount of critical evidence needed to make a good case of the family's needs takes time as the family has to spend time recollecting. The temptation to say they are unable to recall is great but it is important to persist and often, the family will provide the needed information and even make notes before the session when the commitment to help them get the facts right to support their case becomes clear to them.

4. One of the hypotheses behind the SFT Pilot is that providing assistance to vulnerable families that address their pressing issues (most often financial needs and housing problems) will enable them to work on their underlying social issues so as to improve family stability. The premise is that the pilot social workers would be able to focus on providing direct social intervention to help the families achieve more sustainable change after the help components have been successfully accessed. However, the pilot found that social intervention was at times necessary to help families stabilise, before they could even contemplate the notion of seeking systems help.
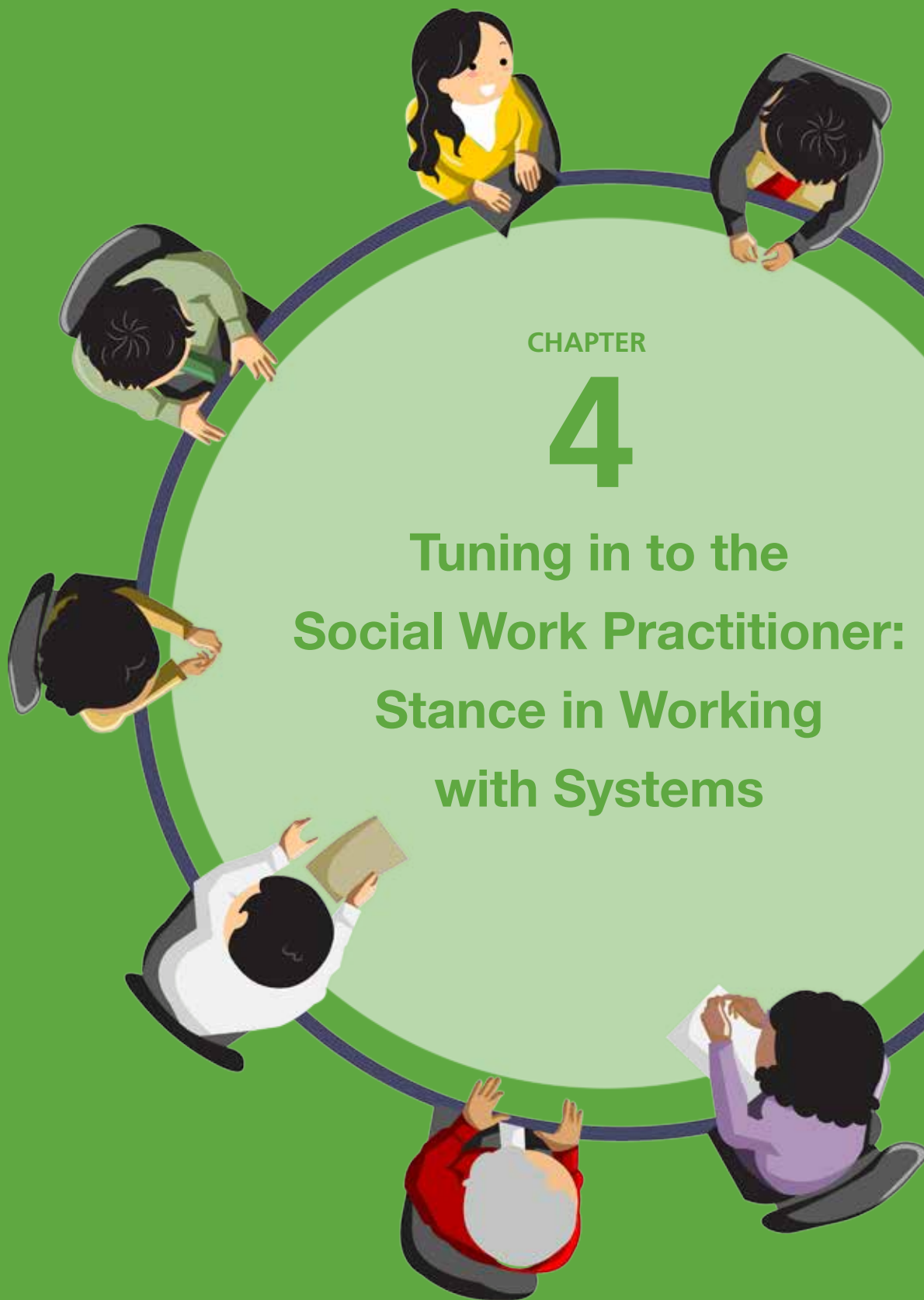
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Tuning in to the Social Work Practitioner: Stance in Working with Systems

Introduction

As social work practitioners, working with systems is part and parcel of the work with vulnerable families. To work effectively with systems, there is a need to approach the systems with the right stance. For example, a stance of wanting to first understand where the systems is coming from will allow the practitioner to have a more meaningful conversation with the systems, thus leading to greater mutual understanding and collaboration. On the other hand, a stance of blame will often increase tension and conflict, thus leading to more communication difficulties and challenges in seeking a positive outcome for families. In this chapter, you will find information on how to adopt a stance that will help you work more effectively with systems.

Objectives

1. To outline the stance social work practitioners need to adopt in working with systems so as to facilitate joint solution development and achieve a positive outcome for families.

How do you do it

Social work practitioners need to adopt the following stance when working with systems in coming up with joint solutions to support families. Practitioners can seek feedback from their supervisors, colleagues, family or other systems they interact with to find out what they have done well, and what needs to improve for the stance to be effective.

1. Be collaborative and inclusive

- Collaborate with shared, concrete and attainable goals to achieve a desired outcome for the family. Ask the systems what is needed to do so.

- Ensure collective responsibility and on-going decision-making among systems by keeping them updated of the challenges and the progress of the family.

- The adoption of a blaming stance is a hindrance to collaboration. Take note of personal reactions and its impact on the systems and the family.

- Build a win-win relationship. Help the systems see how helping the family would contribute to their organisation's goals.

- Ensure honest and frequent interaction through informal and personal relationships that facilitate teamwork and cooperation between collaborating parties.

2. Be flexible

- Be flexible and realistic in the request by understanding the constraints faced by the systems. When faced with a block or challenge, adapt and think of creative solutions that would help meet the family's needs.

3. Be responsive

- Ensure timely and targeted action.

- Ask the systems the role the practitioner can play to help them do their work.

- Remember to update and close the loop with the systems on outcomes and progress of the work with family.

- Reciprocity is important. Provide support for partnering systems when required.

4. Be respectful

- Ensure the family is treated professionally and with respect.

- Be respectful in your communication (both verbal and non-verbal) – do not ridicule anyone and avoid using negative labels.

- Listen and empathise with the systems.

- Thank and affirm the systems for the help rendered.

- Respect and appreciate everyone's contributions.

5. Be open and transparent

- Be focused and articulate the presenting and underlying problems honestly.

- Present the help required from the systems clearly.

- Ensure that the systems participate openly and willingly, and they feel safe to share their real concerns by creating a neutral safe space.

6. Be grateful

- Acknowledge and appreciate any form of support/help that the systems are willing to contribute in helping families.

7. Invest and value relationships

- Never burn bridges – always remember that a successful outcome with a current challenge with a particular system can benefit from the established partnership.

- Generate a positive culture of appreciation and support in the working relationships with partners. This is essential in the long journey of helping families.

Things to note

1. The social work practitioner needs to take stock of his personal view of authority. If the social work practitioner has had previous negative experiences with a particular system, it is important they discuss this in supervision. The supervisor and supervisee need to make plans about how there might be a need for a change in stance, and how the supervisee should go about doing this.

2. It is important that the social work practitioner does not give up when faced with rejections or challenges when working with systems. He or she needs to be persistent in approaching the issue in creative ways.

3. Avoid using jargons/ acronyms that other systems do not understand. Communicate simply.

4. Remember to process with the systems and the family on how they felt about being involved in this process.

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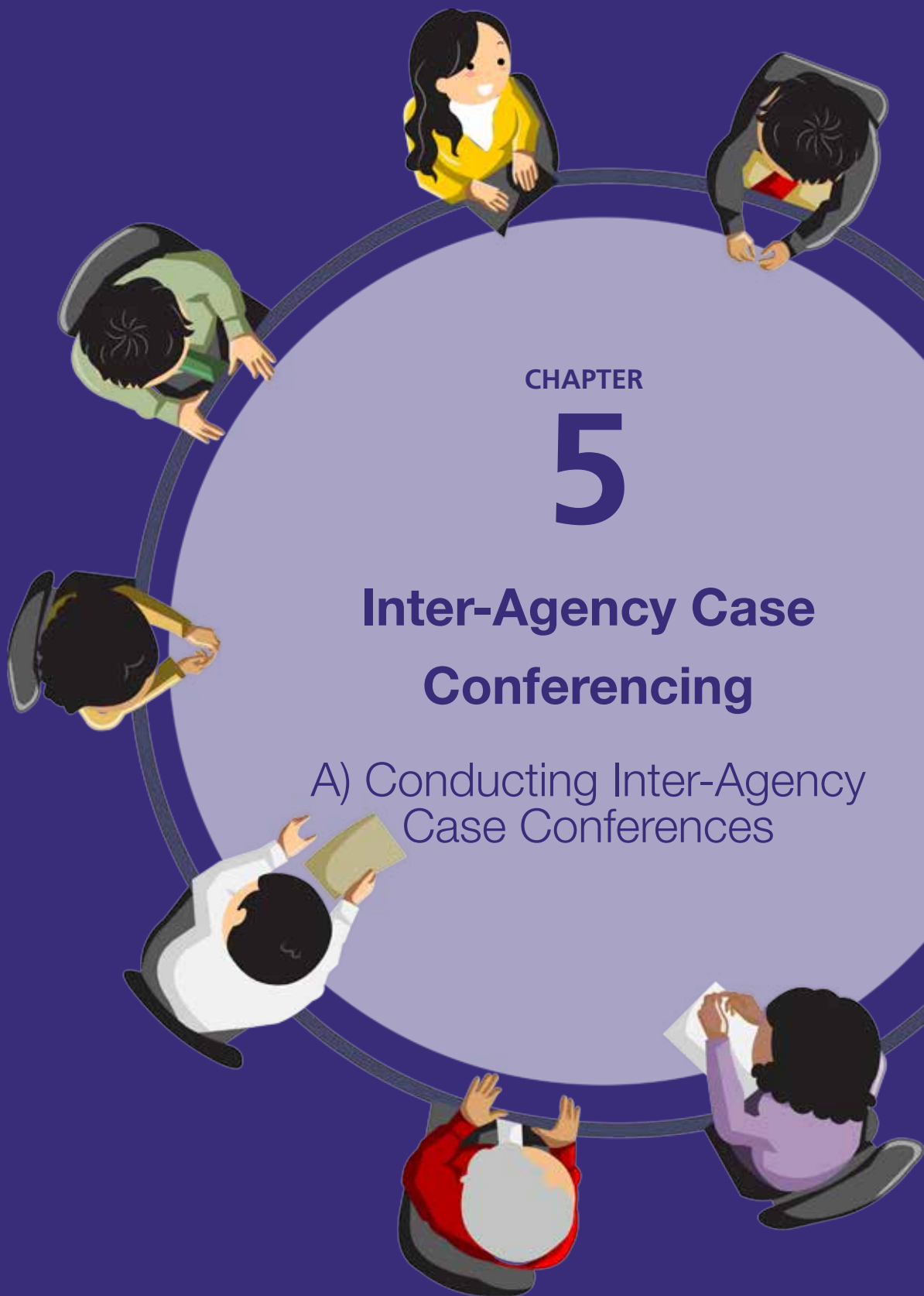
Inter-Agency Case Conferencing

A) Conducting Inter-Agency Case Conferences

Introduction

The practice of conducting inter-agency case conferences represents an integral aspect of case management as it helps to support and coordinate the assessment and intervention processes for the family. Case conferencing involves the gathering of two or more systems which are interacting with the family systems, to discuss and agree on collaborative ways of addressing the family's needs.

As much as possible, it is highly encouraged that the family system is involved in case conferences, in the spirit of inclusiveness, collaboration and transparency of the helping process. Including the family system in case conferences also helps to empower the family and create greater ownership for the solutions that are being worked on.

Objectives

1. To be able to identify when a case conference is useful in meeting the needs of the family systems.
2. To ensure collaboration and inclusivity amongst the various systems (including the family systems) when conducting case conferences.
3. To be able to decide when to include the family in case conferences and the intent for doing so.
4. To be able to plan and conduct case conferences.
5. To be able to formulate and follow up with time-limited tasks defined during the case conference discussions.

How do you do it?

1. Think through the following questions before convening a case conference

   - What are the goals and objectives for organising a case conference?
   - Why is there a need to convene a case conference?
   - What would happen if the case conference does not happen?
   - When would be most appropriate for the case conference to take place?
   - Who should be the facilitator?
   - Who should be involved in the case conference? (i.e. people with sufficient decision-making authority? Should the family be involved?)
   - What outcome would you like to achieve? (Meeting should be outcome-oriented.)
   - What pre-preparation needs to be carried out? How do you want to do it (e.g. case presentation, pre-meeting materials, etc.)?
   - What are the follow-up and documentation needed?

When to Organise an Inter-Agency Case Conference?

1. When multiple helping systems are interacting with the family system.

2. When there is a need to

   - Identify a key worker to coordinate services for the family, and function as the main point of contact.
   - Coordinate services to address various needs of the family system.
   - Engage the family system within a collaborative helping process with multiple helping systems.
   - Review or gather input from the respective systems involved.
   - Set common expectations among systems.
   - Iron out inter-agency miscommunication.

Principles of Organising an Inter-Agency Case Conference

1. Respect the family system

   - The facilitator is to ensure that clients are identified as persons in the system and not reduced to just a statistic or a label.
   - The family needs to be involved in the planning process, as decisions made would influence them the most.
   - The venue itself has to be safe and unimposing to the family.

2. Taking authority in the case conference

   - The chair or the facilitator needs to be assertive so as to retain control of the meeting and ensure it does not go off track.
   - A good starting point would be to ask "What would be a good thing that could come out of this meeting?"

3. Be inclusive

   - Be aware of the dominant contributors in the meeting, and give voice to those who may not seem to be contributing much (either by choice or not).
   - The family's voice would need to be heard and their opinions and contributions considered.

4. Responsiveness

   - The actions that need to be taken after the case conference are important. They need to be clear and time specific (e.g. social work practitioner will check whether the family is ready for rental housing by the following week), and these need to be documented (by an assigned note taker), signed off and followed up.

5. Focus on future steps

   - The case conference should not be hindered by past events within the family system or between the family and other systems (or between systems).
   - The key agenda should be how they could move on and what needed to happen by a specific time period.

6. Be prepared

   - Facilitators need to be aware of the family issues, history and their relationship with the systems in order to anticipate issues that may surface during the meetings.
   - Ensure that paperwork is sent out before the meeting, and all those who needed to be involved are present at the meeting.

How to Organise an Inter-Agency Case Conference?

1. Structure the meeting

   - Set the agenda and circulate this in advance together with relevant materials.
   - Invite other systems to propose agenda items. If it is not possible for all items to be included in a session, inform the systems that it will be carried forward to future sessions.
   - Make it a priority to ensure that all the essential parties are present (e.g. schedule for convenience, invite systems to host the conference, ensure key decision makers from the systems are able to attend, and be flexible).
   - Be mindful of the number of participants per system so that the family does not get overwhelmed and there is equal representation by all the systems.
   - Plan the seating arrangement such that all parties are able to maintain eye contact with one another, and ensure that family members are seated beside the social work practitioner whom they are closest to (Corey et al., 2004).
   - Ensure that the following are available when setting up the room:
     o Refreshments
     o Materials (e.g. laptop, projector, white board, markers, paper, tissue etc.)
     o Printed agenda distributed on the day (to refresh everyone's memory).
     o Structured forms for participants to pen down their thoughts/sharing – as per agenda. This facilitates the collation of the discussion learnings.
     o Use nameplates – set seating arrangements so that all participants are able to see one another.

2. Be prepared

   - Prepare a session plan on the details of the conference flow.
   - Consult supervisor or peers.
   - Understand the objective(s) of the meeting.
   - Communicate the objective(s) clearly (e.g., through the agenda).
   - Know the attendees (e.g., level of representation).
   - Understand the case history in detail, and review the case information before the meeting.
   - Review the family's strengths and areas that may require more support.
   - Decide whether potential safety issues need to be discussed.
   - Identify areas where support or other resources might be required.
   - Read meeting materials in advance.
   - Be present early to prepare.
   - Provide all participants with the address of meeting venue, particularly if various agencies are meeting for the first time.

3. Assign a competent note-taker (refer to **Annex A** for Case Conference Case Plan template)

   - Record concise and brief notes which include timelines and action party.
   - Capture the intent of the discussion.

4. Introductions - setting the ground is essential

   - Facilitator should introduce him/herself and set the tone for the meeting.
   - Note that a good clear opening sets the tone for the rest of the meeting.
   - Summarise the objective(s) of the case conference and run through the agenda.
   - Give everyone the opportunity to introduce themselves: where they are from, and what they hope to achieve from the case conference.
   - If it is the first case conference, invite everyone to share briefly how they have come to be involved with the family.

5. Ask hard questions that are being avoided

   • Bring difficult issues to the open, and do not be afraid to talk about the "elephant in the room".
   • Remind the group to critique ideas, NOT people.

6. Do not take on an "expert" role

   • Treat everyone with respect.
   • Give everyone a voice.
   • Work towards understanding everyone's point of view.
   • Work towards a joint solution.

7. Be assertive and focused

   • Do not get too emotional.
   • Be diplomatic yet firm in shifting the focus of conversations so that the agenda items are addressed as planned.
   • Get people to commit to the action needed.

8. At the end of the meeting

   • Summarize key discussion and decision points, including the follow up required. Follow-up plans should be clearly described, for e.g. who will be doing what activity by when.
   • Arrange a review session depending on the issues identified (1 week, 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, etc.)
   • Affirm participants for their efforts.

9. Obtain feedback on how the case conference had been for each participant

   • Has the case conference met each participant's objectives?
   • What is each participant's key takeaway?

10. Seek feedback on your facilitation

   • Feedback can be garnered from your peers, supervisor, other participants in the case conference and even clients.
   • Determine what had been done well
   • Find out the areas for improvement

11. In-between case conferences

   • Ensure that decisions and tasks are being followed up on in a timely manner.
   • Prepare for the next case conference.
   • Maintain close contact with systems (emails, phone calls, etc.)

Things to note ✏️

1. If the family is involved in the session, there may be a need to prepare them for the case conference. Families may need time to think about their participation. Supporting them, talking about the agenda for this meeting and allowing them to understand the value-add of attending and participating helps in their decision making.

2. Try to include the whole family unit (parents and children) in the session at an appropriate juncture (i.e. the family need not be expected to sit in from the beginning of the case conference).

3. It is also important to prepare all the participants on the reason(s) for the family's involvement. Check in with the systems to reach a collective decision that they are comfortable with and willing to have the family in the case conference.

Working Effectively with Systems to Support Vulnerable Families
Practitioner's Resource Guide

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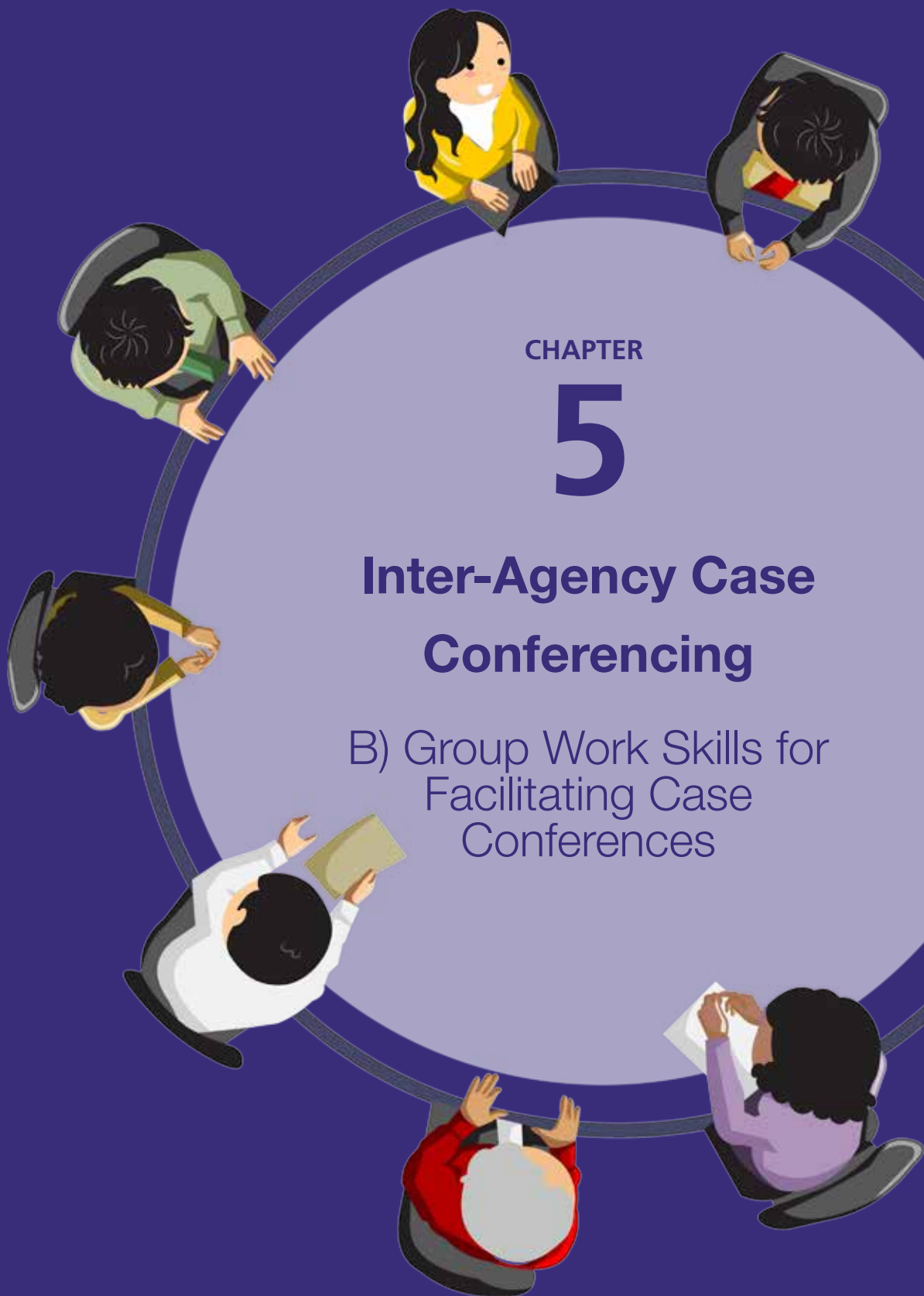
Inter-Agency Case Conferencing

B) Group Work Skills for Facilitating Case Conferences

Introduction

To facilitate effective case conferences, the social work practitioner needs to be equipped with evidence-based and practice-based group work knowledge and skills. Knowledge of theories on group work relating to different stages of group development, group dynamics and therapeutic forces are required. When conducting the conference, group work skills such as facilitation, conflict resolution as well as attending and focusing skills are useful in ensuring that conversations are in-depth, and the family's needs are attended to. The best practice guidelines developed by the Association for Specialists in Group Work can provide knowledge and skill handles for the social work practitioner to further enhance the use of group work processes within case conferences.

It is equally important for the social work practitioner to understand and embrace the following values which underpin group work:

• Participation and positive relations,
• Co-operation and mutual decision making – participatory democracy,
• Individual initiative,
• Freedom to participate, and
• Individuation

When the social work practitioner is mindful of holding these values when preparing and facilitating inter-agency case conferences, the representatives from the various systems and the family will experience the process as supportive, productive, and growth-promoting. Group work aims to promote the key element of instillation of hope. Yalom (2005), a group work guru, identifies this as one of the fundamental curative factors for therapeutic in-group work processes. This spurs the social work practitioner to ask the question of whether the case conference makes the participants hopeful about change and growth in the family.

The social work practitioner also needs to be well-versed in the ethical consideration in the group work processes and to be a competent case conference facilitator.

Objectives 🔍

1. To be aware of group work skills when taking leadership during case conferences.
2. To be aware of data gathering skills in order to concretely identify problems and issues, and understand different perspectives.
3. To be aware of action skills such as conflict resolution, reframing perceptions, and advice-giving.

How do you do it ❓

Group Work Skills in Facilitating Case Conferences (Toseland & Rivas, 2012)

1. Involve group members

   • Create space for sharing and invite each system to share their perspectives. Avoid letting any one system dominate the discussion at the expense of the quieter systems.
   • Encourage each system in the case conference to share their thoughts and opinions.

   • Share leadership with the systems by asking different members to take the lead in segments of the agenda.
   • Encourage systems to systems interactions by directing conversations to one another.
   • Use open ended questions to encourage participation.

2. Attending skills

- Take note of non-verbal and verbal behaviours.
- The non-verbal behaviours should communicate interest, openness and respect (e.g. sitting position, open posture, eye contact, lean forward, etc.).
- The verbal behaviour should communicate genuineness, respect, empathy, warmth (e.g. moderate tone, respectful language, etc.).

3. Expressive skills

- Promote systems to systems interactions by asking questions that link systems.
- Allow systems to express their thoughts and feelings about particular problems, tasks or issues facing the family.

4. Responding skills

- Amplify subtle messages, and soften overpowering messages.

5. Focusing skills

- Clarify processes by setting ground rules (e.g. one conversation at any one time, give every system an opportunity to talk, etc.).
- Put focus on a certain topic by repeating a particular communication.
- Suggest that conference participants limit discussion to a particular issue or topic.
- Reduce irrelevant communications to promote efficient work.
- Recognize individual dynamics, but focus on group processes.

6. Use group dynamics, norms and individual members to impact process

- Make group processes explicit.
- Set ground rules for the meeting and ensure that ground rules are followed.
- Take note who speaks first and the patterns of informal leadership.
- Take note of any hidden agenda and bring it up to the open.
- Jointly determine group goals and individual goals.
- Identify cliques and alliances that may be counter-productive.

7. Clarifying content

- Identify the content of participants' interactions.
- Check whether a certain message was understood by the family or representatives of the helping systems.

8. Identifying and describing

- Help systems identify and describe a particular situation to allow elaboration of issues that are affecting the problem.
- Obtain different points of view as concretely as possible.

9. Requesting, questioning and probing for information

- Clarify problems and issues, and collect important information.
- Ask clear and non-judgmental questions.
- Explore any fears and concerns of participants.

10. Summarising and partialising

- Summarise from time to time and bring the discussion back on track.
- Present the crucial aspects of the problem in an understandable manner.
- Allow further reflection on the issue by asking individual systems to share their thoughts and feelings openly.
- Break down problematic issues into manageable aspects that could be shared amongst the helping systems.

11. Analysing skills

- Make sense of the information and plan on how to proceed.
- Identify tasks or any further information that is required.

12. Action skills

- Formulate and ensure the action of each party with a timeline using the case conference case plan template in **Annex A**.

13.   Supporting participants

- Value everyone's opinions.
- Ensure a safe space for all participants.

14.   Reframing and redefining

- Look at problems from different perspectives and communicate this to the participants.

15.   Link systems' communication

- Encourage systems to share reactions to responses or comments made by others during the case conference.
- Get systems to respond to requests for help from each other.

16.   Directing

- Take leadership by clarifying goals and lead the discussion.

17.   Giving advice, suggestions and instructions

- Allow systems to generate solutions on their own first. Provide advice, suggestions and instructions when needed to guide the process.
- Ensure that the advice, suggestions and instructions are clear to all participants.
- Be sensitive to the language and culture of participants.
- Encourage the feedback loop by asking participants to share input to the advice, suggestions and instructions given, and make necessary adjustments.

18.   Conflict resolution

- Resolve disagreements before they escalate, through moderation and mediation.
- Set ground rules on how conflict should be resolved between systems.
- Encourage respect for different viewpoints.
- Separate the person from the problem.
- Point out shared goals and objectives to help systems focus on the solutions.

Things to note

1. It is very important for new social work practitioners to experience a process of education and skills development around the use of group work processes in case conferencing. Supervision, coaching and modelling are very crucial and new social work practitioners need to be provided with opportunities to observe their seniors planning and facilitating effective case conferences. A pre and post debrief to talk through the group work skills employed in the session is necessary. Before the case conference, obtain information about the nature of the family's relationship with the various systems being represented.

2. Promote cultural sensitivity for all participants (e.g. not arranging evening meetings during the fasting month of Ramadan which coincide with the breaking of fast).

3. Plan and prepare how you might deal with different scenarios which might occur (e.g., dealing with silence, managing conflicts and arguments).

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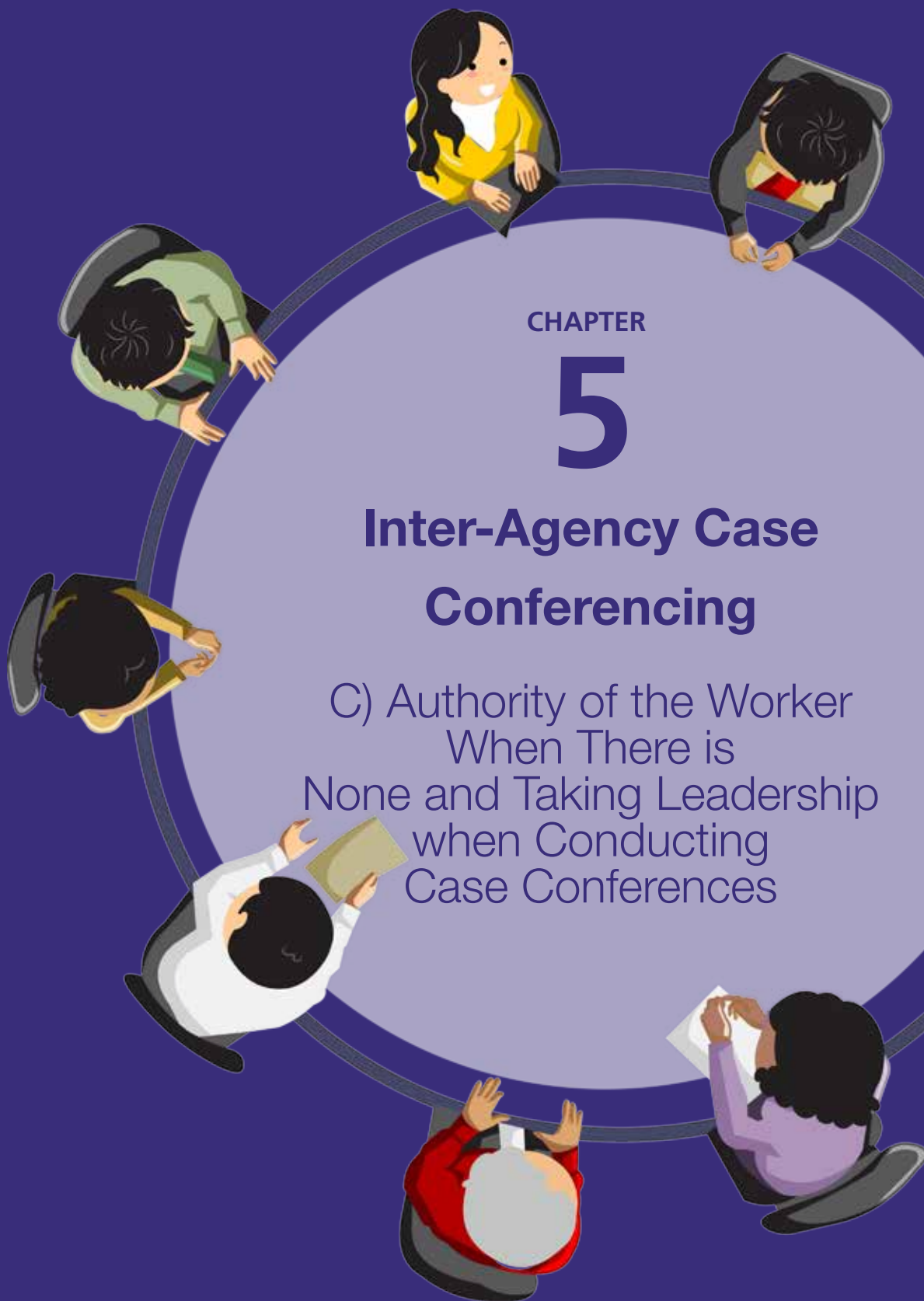
Inter-Agency Case Conferencing

C) Authority of the Worker
When There is
None and Taking Leadership
when Conducting
Case Conferences

Introduction

As part of the case management process, social work practitioners are often entrusted with the role of chairing case conferences. The power in this role is all the more crucial as they support the families by negotiating, contract setting, goals setting and helping families strengthen their case with official systems in order to improve the quality of life for themselves and their children. To do so, it becomes crucial for social work practitioners to use their authority, power and influence wisely and strategically. It thus becomes important for practitioners to broaden the repertoire of power bases and to become skilful in utilising them under different circumstances.

In this chapter the terms 'power', 'authority' and 'influence' are used interchangeably to mean the capacity or ability to change the beliefs, attitudes or behaviours of others. At this point in time, it is also important to consider and incorporate the use of leadership as a relational concept to power, authority and influence. In effective facilitation of case conferences, leadership is important to maintain and improve the in-session group dynamics and atmosphere. Leadership through the use of the right power bases will help ensure that goals can be seen through, and the group remains vigilant in their commitment to helping families.

Objectives

1. To be able to utilise the knowledge of power bases to enhance systems collaboration.
2. To be able to make reference to the French and Raven (1959) framework to analyse the source of one's power, and to discern when and when not to use this power to influence systems in a case conference setting.

How do you do it

French and Raven have developed a framework for understanding the extent to which one group member influences another by identifying five bases of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert.

Using Power Bases to Enhance Systems Collaboration (Johnson and Johnson, 2000)

1. Reward Power

Reward power is based on one member's (B) perception that another member (A) has the capacity to dispense rewards or remove negative consequences in response to one's (B) behaviour. It is assumed that members will usually work hard for someone with high reward power and communicate effectively with him/her. Likewise, reward power can backfire if members feel bribed or controlled and may eventually refuse to cooperate.

For example, it is important to provide appreciation for a system when they are able to make progress (however small) or go out of their standard operating procedure to help a family's request. This can take the form of providing positive feedback on their efforts through verbal appreciation, emailing them and copying their superiors in the appreciative message, sending them a text message, etc. The essence is to make appreciation conscious and to celebrate small successes while working towards bigger goals.

2. Coercive Power

Coercive power is based on one member's (B) perception that another member (A) can dispense punishments or remove positive consequences. French and Raven noted that the important distinction between reward and coercive power is that reward power tends to increase the attraction of (B) towards (A), while coercive power will decrease this attraction. In the event that (A) uses coercive power to settle a conflict, it often increases (B)'s hostility, resentment and anger. Therefore, whenever possible, coercive power should not be used to resolve conflicts.

In cases of conflict, it is then important to tap on the leadership vision to maintain and improve the social/emotional atmosphere with the family as focus. For example, it is often helpful to use effective listening skills and empathy to understand the reasons for systems to respond the way they did. From here, we can move on to negotiate calmly and rationally to help the family in the best way possible. The goal is to get past the mind-set of "We can't do it; it's never been done" to the point of "Yes, we can".

3. Legitimate Power

Legitimate power is based on the perception by one member (B) that another member (A) has a legitimate right to what constitutes proper behaviour for (B), and that (B) has an obligation to accept this influence. Some examples would include the fact that the aged are highly respected in some cultures, and they have the right to prescribe behaviour for others; a supervisor having the inherent right to assign work; and the election process legitimising a person's right to a position. With this, when a member attempts to use power outside this range, he/she risks decreasing the legitimate power of him/herself as the authority figure, and in turn decreases his/her attractiveness and influence.

With this in mind, social work practitioners have to take the lead to appreciate how legitimate power influences the behaviours and decision-making processes of systems. In case conferences, it is worthwhile to prepare oneself with the role each system plays, and to use familiar and mindful language so as not to downplay the reputation and authority of the systems.

4. Referent Power

Referent power is evident when one member (A) influences another member (B) as a result of identification. In this case, identification means either a feeling of oneness with (A) or a desire for an identity such as (A)'s. The stronger the identification of (B) with (A), the greater the attraction to (A) and the greater the referent power of (A). In referring to referent power, French and Raven note that (B) is often not consciously aware of the referent power (A) exerts.

In leveraging the influence of referent power in working with systems, it is important for social work practitioners to exude sureness and confidence in explicating clear goals and vision of families to each participant in the case conference. The charisma of the social work practitioner can be developed using micro skills from the clinical setting, mindfulness in one's positioning and language, and taking leadership in ensuring that the families and individual members' voices are heard and communicated accurately.

5. Expert Power

Expert power can be understood using examples in the medical setting where a patient accepts a physician's advice, or in the clinical setting where a family accepts a counsellor's suggestion. It is noted that experts can influence a member (B), only if (B) thinks that (A) the expert has the right answer and (B) trusts (A). The range of expert power is more limited than that of referent power because the expert is seen as having superior knowledge or ability only in specific areas. French and Raven states that the attempted use of expert power outside the perceived range will reduce that power as confidence in the expert decreases.

It is important for social work practitioners to recognise their limitations to expertise and to leverage on fellow professionals and colleagues for advice so as to decide on the best course of action for the families to embark. With this understanding, case conferences serve as important platforms for social work practitioners to strategically consider and invite key stakeholders who hold expert knowledge as well as decision making power to help the families' progress.

Things to note

1. A varied use of the above power bases is important in helping guide groups to optimal functioning, depending on the situation in the case conference.

2. Social work practitioners have the authority to influence even when there is none. It is the perception of the social work practitioner's power base that affects the behaviour of other members, not the actual resources that he or she possesses.

3. There are inherent power differences among the family, social work practitioner and systems, which the practitioner needs to be mindful of. As a social work practitioner, there is a need to be intentional in empowering the family in working through their issues and accessing resources. Don't set boundaries for ourselves and limit what we can do.
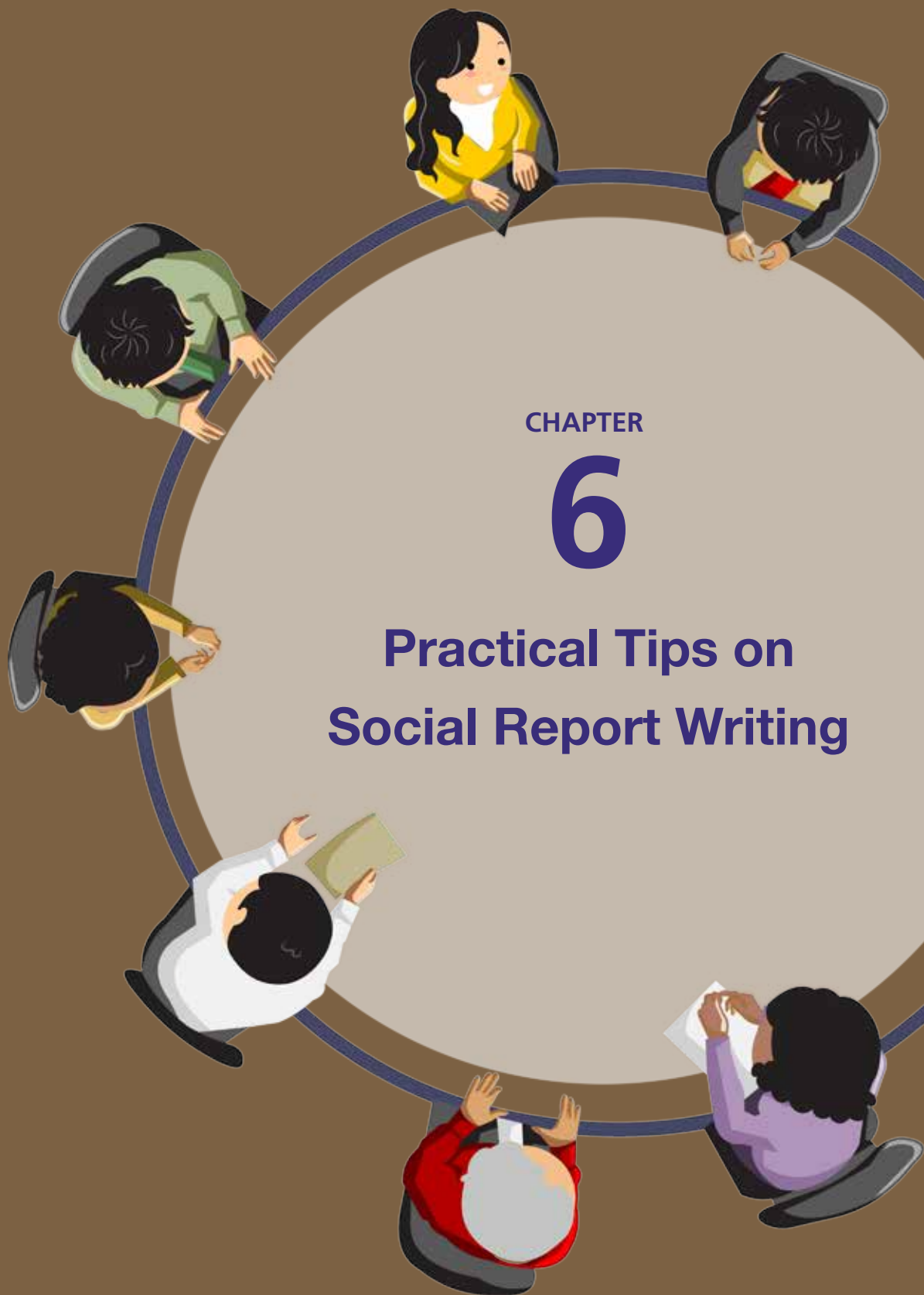
CHAPTER

6

Practical Tips on
Social Report Writing

Introduction

Social report writing is a key social work skill. As social work practitioners, writing reports is an integral part of professional practice. Social report writing serves to communicate information in an accurate and accessible way, and it allows practitioners to make informed recommendations to stakeholders to facilitate decision-making and access to help components.

Good social report writing allows the practitioner to formulate the information collected into logical and clear recommendations. Reports are often used to inform decisions that can significantly impact an individual and/or family. Therefore, it is vital that practitioners exercise professionalism and responsibility in social report writing.

Based on the evaluation done on the SFT Pilot, feedback had been received that the systems have found the comprehensive social reports written by the SFT Pilot social work practitioners to be very helpful in their decision making. This has facilitated the building of the social work practitioner's credibility.

Objectives

1. To be able to provide pertinent and succinct information of the individual or family to systems.
2. To enable systems to comprehend and appreciate the individual or family's circumstances.
3. To enable systems to make the best and/or timely decisions for the individual or family.

(refer to Annex B for Social Report template)

Systems	Useful Pointers for Referrals/ Social Reports

Housing	1. Level of family support, family dynamics and relational issues – e.g. illustrated by 3-tier genogram.
	2. Timeline to illustrate the family's housing history and circumstances that led to their current situation.
	3. Details of the family's current circumstances (housing – home environment and safety, financial – including CPF, employment, training/ skills upgrading, children's education, medical).
	   • Highlight if there are chronic medical issues/ special needs.
	4. Involvement of other organisations, the help rendered to the families, as well as impact on the family.
	5. Areas of intervention that the social work practitioner has done with the family.
	6. Assessment of the family on:
	   • Strengths of the main family and extended family.
	   • Stressors for the family.
	   • Plans and goals set by family.
	7. Recommendations by social work practitioner supported with summary of arguments in the report.
	8. Provision of at least two countersigning officer in order to provide different perspectives to the social reporting.
	9. Supporting documents to back up application (e.g. Deed of Separation for on-going divorce proceedings).

Training	1. Specific work arrangements that the family may require, arising from the family's circumstances (e.g. need for part-time work arrangements, geographical limitations). 2. Areas of intervention with the family, and how issues faced by family/ family members are addressed/ being addressed – to ensure sustainable employment. 3. Provide a holistic view of the family. 4. Employment timeline.
Immigration	[Mainly for applications of LTVP/ LTVP+/ PR] 1. Financial status of the family/ SC spouse. 2. Length of marriage. 3. Presence of SC children, and whether they were born of the current marriage. 4. Income of foreign spouse (if applicable). 5. Employment history of the SC and foreign spouses. 6. Length of stay of foreign spouse in Singapore. 7. Social work practitioner's assessment on why these families are vulnerable, and how the grant of immigration facilities would help them. * Note: wherever possible and relevant, social work practitioners need to verify the information put up in the social report.
Health	[Medifund Appeals] 1. Breakdown of the family's income and expenditure. 2. Details on the particular medical condition. 3. Supporting documents (e.g. bank book/statement, payslip, letter of employment).

Things to note 📝

(Bogg, 2012)

1. Be concise and succinct in the written reports. Avoid being overly detailed when it is not needed.

2. Use simple English.

3. Seek assistance from a supervisor or peer to proof-read and check for clarity.

4. Check and recheck to ensure there are no grammar and spelling mistakes.

5. Ask the systems for feedback if the information is sufficient or need to be fine-tuned.

6. Be clear of the target audience and position the report based on their orientation and the issue being advocated.

7. Do not repeat information in the social report.

8. Use headings to structure the report.

9. Ensure that all information provided is based on facts and have been verified.

10. Include a plan of action to help agencies understand that the assistance provided will be complemented with social intervention and goals to support families towards stability.

11. Sign and date the report. Obtain counter-signature from supervisor/manager if necessary.

12. Indicate how the inter-relatedness of issues impacts the vulnerability of the family.

13. Include the family in the formulation of the social report where appropriate.

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SFT Pilot Training

SFT Pilot Training: Working Effectively with Systems: (Part III) –Segments from the Fish Bowl format appreciative enquiry of systems work by experienced social work professionals – Corinne Ghoh, Lee Yean Wun and Mohammad Ali Bin Mahmood. Pointers from segment by MSF SFT social workers and MSF Principal social worker were also included.

SFT Pilot Training: Working with systems (2): Joining the dots – working together, for and with families by Neil Carver. Segment on inter agency case conferencing.

SFT Pilot Practice Circle Discussion (24 Mar 2014), SFT Pilot Policy Team Observations, and Sharing by Government Agencies.

Case Conference Action Plan

Client's Name	
Meeting Type	
Meeting facilitated by (name & agency)	

Date of Meeting	
Time of Meeting	
Place of Meeting	

Lead Agency	
Lead Agency Representative	
Lead Agency Contact No.	

Participants	Agency/Relationship	Phone	Email Address	Invited	Attendance (Y, N, A, R, O[1])

[1] Y = Attended; N = Did not attend; A = Apology received; R = Represented; O = Other

Discussion (include family strengths)

STRENGTHS:

DISCUSSION:

Issues	Goals	Actions	By whom	By when

Issues	Goals	Actions	By whom	By when

Other comments/ statements at closure:

Date, Time, Place of next meeting

Source: Neil Carver's Systems Training for SFT Pilot

Social Report Template

Name of social work practitioner		Date of report	
Agency		Contact no. / Email	

Family background

(Family composition and relationships; financial situation; employment; stressors, etc)

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Family genogram

1. Support network
(Both formal and informal networks)

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2. Summary of previous attempts to improve circumstances
(What has the family tried? How have the systems/community-based organisations responded, and what help have they rendered? What has the social work practitioner done with the family so far, prior to this referral?)

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3. Assessment of family

(How will these help components, together with help from other agencies, enable the family to achieve longer-term stability?; Income-Expenditure assessment; family strengths/resilience – how does the family cope in adversity; risk/protective factors; evidence of family's motivation and commitment to change)

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4. Intervention plans and timelines

(What are the plans of action from here – what are the short term and long term goals??

Areas of need	Intervention plan/ broad goals	Timeline *(e.g. 3-6 months; 6-12 months, and indicate the exact month if you know)*

5. Recommendation

(To be short, concrete and strong. What would these families require? How would these enable them to achieve short-term and longer-term stability? How would this impact on the family positively?)

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