

Dear Students of Social Work,

One common topic among professionals is the discussion around family-centred practice. And while each social worker is expected to be able to practise family-centred work, it does look like what is often practised is family work which may not tantamount to family-centred practice.

So what exactly does family-centred practice look like?

Family-centred practice includes three key elements: (1) an emphasis on strengths, not deficits; (2) promoting family choice and control over resources; and (3) the development of a collaborative relationship between parents and professionals. It sounds logical but not necessarily intuitive.

The approach for family-centred practice hinges on a way of working with families. It is a systematic way of creating a partnership with families that (a) treats them with dignity and respect, (b) honours their values and choices, and (c) provides supports that strengthen and enhance their functioning as a family¹.

Most social workers today start from a strengths-based practice as distinct from the traditional problem-focused approach. But attaining a competency of family-centred practice requires mindfulness about building partnership and sharing power in working with families in a family-centred way as compared to applying a set of specific skills in a professional centred way. There are six core intervention components in such a practice. These are family engagement, teaming, assessing, service planning, intervening and tracking/adjusting or closure. They may be taught or called different names but these in essence are involved in the intervention.

Skills required for each stage of intervention

1. Skills needed for family engagement or setting goals with children, youths, families.

Social workers work with families to set mutually acceptable goals by developing an initial working agreement with families about the issues to be addressed. They also identify with the family what success will look like so that the family will know what is expected of them and when they have achieved the goals. In order to do this, social workers apply a range of skills at this stage and primarily use rapport building and relationship building skills which are part of engagement.

2. Skills to help facilitate and participate in family team meetings.

Effective facilitation is key to getting a family to work on goals that they share. Facilitators must have specific skills that reflect the value base of family engagement and teaming in order to carry out these activities.

- Preparing for the team meeting
 - Preparing families in person, in advance of their first team meeting.
 - Asking families to identify who they want to participate on the team.

- Facilitating (not directing) the team meetings
 - Helping the family to set the agenda.
 - Understanding the structure and process of family team meetings.
 - Engaging the family in the assessment process.
 - Engaging the family in creating a comprehensive and effective plan for the child/ youth/ older person/ family that is tailored to the family's expressed needs.



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¹ Carl J. Dunst, Carol M. Trivette and Deborah W. Hamby. (2007). Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews. Meta-analysis of family-centered Helping Practices Research. Volume 13 (Issue 4), pages 370–378.

- Recognizing, supporting and building the family's capacity to protect and care for the child/youth.
 - Identifying with the team family-specific natural support.
 - Addressing the power imbalances and this may be between family groups and staff of protection services.
 - Ensuring that children/ youths/ older persons/ families are respected and heard during the meeting.
- Ensuring follow-up
 - Partnering with the family in the follow-up of their plan.
 - Being aware of the range of services and supports and their effectiveness.
 - Collaborating
 - Engaging and organizing the informal and professional support and service agencies in the families' lives to be part of the family's plan.

Team members, other than the facilitator, must play their roles in the team as well. They need to have the skills to listen, contribute to the meetings, participate collaboratively, and offer follow-up assistance with families.

3. Skills needed to conduct assessments, develop service plans and engage in purposeful interventions with children, youths, older persons and families.

To conduct strengths-based family assessments, develop individualized service plans, and intervene effectively, social workers will need strong skills in interviewing, analyzing, documenting, collaboration and follow-up. These skills will vary greatly from one family to the next and from one situation to the next. For example, they may range from finding a placement in a school to changing a deeply embedded, multi-generational pattern of thinking and behaving.

- Interviewing skills
 - Engaging the family in a trust-based relationship and shared decision-making.
 - Asking questions in a strengths-based, non-threatening manner.
 - Involving the family in the assessment of their cultural beliefs, values and practices that bear upon strengths, needs and resources.
 - Listening well and hearing the underlying conditions, as well as the immediate issues.
 - Staying focused on the family's goals. Making visits with families and children purposeful.
 - Providing the opportunity for children/ youths/ older persons/ families to share their concerns.
- Critical Thinking Skills
 - Critical thinking and knowledge of practice in the social worker help families and children reframe their issues and translate problems into needs and wants.
 - Incorporating information from multiple assessments such as intake, safety, and risk assessments, as well as mental health, substance abuse, education and other assessments. Using these assessments to provide a broad and deep picture of family issues.
 - Helping families make decisions based on the comprehensive family assessment, as to what has to change to achieve outcomes.
 - Facilitating access to services by working collaboratively including coaching families to interface with service agencies.

- Documentation/Writing Skills
 - Documenting the information obtained during the assessment process in a clear and concise assessment report.
 - Creating assessments that are unique and individualized and NOT interchangeable. Do not prescribe similar sets of services and supports to multiple families.
 - Describing feelings, behaviours, and events as specific strengths or needs.

- Collaborative skills
 - Accepting the family's definition of the problem, the behavioural changes that must take place and practical solutions.
 - Sharing the assessment information and the worker's understanding of the family with the family, the team and other professionals involved with the family.
 - Referring to other agencies for specialized assessments and services.
 - Workers must have a good understanding of the services available in the community and be willing to advocate with families for appropriate services.

- Follow-up
 - Conducting re-assessments at particular points in the casework process.
 - Evaluating the family's progress continuously.
 - Workers may be required to identify and even help create services, when appropriate ones are not immediately available.

Rebuilding expectations and hope in Families

So skills are needed to carry out good assessments, develop service plans and to conduct purposeful interventions with children, youths, older persons and families. These skills are necessary for effective work with families and family-centred practice. To embrace family-centred practice, the strengths of the family must be valued, emphasised, and acted upon. The worker encourages and respects the families' choices and their decision-making. The worker engages collaboratively with the families, recognising them as equal partners in supporting the goals that are set out. Effective family-centred practice is characterised by sensitivity, diversity, and flexibility.

Family-centred practice is one approach in intervention and it is a specific and systematic way of working with families that has a thorough rationale, advantages and benefits that have been researched. It applies a body of knowledge and skills and in particular a family-centred approach vs a professional-centred approach in working with families with the worker being competent and skilful in sharing power and being confident in the capacity of the family to rebuild expectations and hope.

Ang Bee Lian
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