

Hope for Children and Families

Building on strengths, overcoming difficulties

Intervention guide for practitioners

Working with families

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Module WF-M1

Promoting healthy family functioning, family communication and problem-solving skills

Content

- Setting up family meetings
- Facilitating more positive parent–child communication
- Discussing difficult topics using a communication hierarchy
- Teaching and practising communication skills to members of the family to improve positive relations among them.

Materials

- h Handout
- n Practitioner notes
- r Record
- w Worksheet
- Setting up family meetings [WF-1] n
- Whispers game [WF-2] n
- Speaker and listener skills and using the ‘floor’ [WF-3] w
- Communication hierarchy [WF-4] n

Main steps

Explain the purpose of arranging a meeting of family members, referring to the work done so far (see 'Setting up family meetings' [WF-1]).

Outline the advantages of meeting as a family to explore anxieties, emphasising the opportunity for everyone's voice to be heard, no matter how young or old they are.

Teach intent and impact

Present the basic intent–impact model of communication (see 'Discuss filters' below):

- The speaker has an 'intended message'.
- The message has an 'impact' on the listener.
- The message is affected by filters that the speaker has.
- The message is also affected by the listener's filters.
- The goal is for intent to equal impact.

Discuss filters

The speaker's 'intent' is what they want to deliver and make understood by the listener, and 'impact' on the listener is what they receive by way of information and message. These processes are affected by filters in both parties. Filters are influenced positively or negatively by a person's current mood, recent events, recent interactions with the speaker or listener and other factors (e.g. the person may be hungry or tired).

A playful way of demonstrating these processes is the Whispers game where any message can be used to start the turn taking (see 'Whispers game' [WF-2]).

Introduce speaker skills

See 'Speaker and listener skills, and using the floor' [WF-3].

The speaker can help intent to match impact in several ways:

- Be brief: keep the message to a few sentences.
- Be clear: make the message focused on one thing.
- Be 'filter-free': avoid mixing bad feelings about other things into the message by adding either 'mean' words or 'mean' non-verbals.
- Using 'I' statements can help: 'I feel XX when you YY', where XX is a feeling and YY a specific behaviour (and not a character trait, for example).
- Emphasise the importance of verbal and non-verbal aspects of the message.

n Setting up family meetings

Establish with the family a shared purpose for the meeting – for example, to address an issue, achieve a goal, create more understanding.

Establish the best location for the meeting – inside or outside the family home or worker's base or family centre.

Allow discussion about any hopes or anxieties about holding the family meeting with a professional or professional(s) – you may need separate discussions with family members.

Allow discussion about the usefulness of the worker seeing the family in action all together – family members hearing each other's points of view and ideas.

A key family member (probably a parent) may invite all family members but the professional worker may need to engage some members separately.

Meeting in the family home

Negotiate with the family and plan for the room to have a circle of enough chairs for everyone. Plan to avoid interruptions. Include the children. Have drawing materials available.

Meeting in a work setting

Use a quiet room and ensure there will be no interruptions. Have drawing materials and refreshments available.

Give clear information to all attendees (preferably in writing) about location, timings and purpose of meetings including how they will be managed and led, membership and frequency.

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31

WF-1

n Whispers game

This exercise highlights family members' listening and talking skills. It works best with four+ family members present – the more the better.

Copy Message 1 onto paper and ask the first person in the line to read it to themselves, then whisper it to the next person, who whispers to the next person... The last person says their whisper out loud, and the original version is shared out loud also.

Then repeat with Message 2.

Discuss with the family:

- Were there any changes of meaning?
- Were there any changes of words?
- Did the messages get shorter or longer?
- Which message was easier to deliver and why?

Depending on the ages of the children, any other message using several words could be substituted – the point is the changes in meaning and language that occur along the whisper line. The exercise is meant to be fun and can be a good introduction to the other talking and listening exercises.

Message 1

The most important thing about being a family is that parents should be loving, authoritative, calm, knowledgeable, approachable, a bit funny and – occasionally, if the family is very argumentative – a crowd controller.

Message 2

In any family, a parent needs to love, listen, laugh and organise.

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32

WF-2

w Speaker and listener skills, and using the 'floor'

1. Practise speaker skills

- Be brief.
- Be clear.
- Be filter free.
- Use statements starting with 'I' – e.g. 'When x happened, I felt... I thought... I noticed...'
- Notice verbal and nonverbal information.

2. Practise listener skills

- Make eye contact.
- Stay quiet until the speaker has finished.
- Summarise what you heard – no comments!
- Listen to the speaker's response to your understanding.

3. Practise 'floor' skills

- Allow each person to speak until they feel heard and understood.
- Use the 'floor' object to pass around and denote who has the 'floor' – i.e. who is the main speaker.

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33

WF-3

Introduce listener skills

The listener can also help intent to match impact:

- Make eye contact, nod and avoid negative posture/gestures.
- Say as little as possible until the speaker has finished.
- Summarise what the speaker has said without commenting on it.
- Allow the speaker to state whether the listener has understood correctly.

Discuss the 'floor'

Discuss the importance of establishing who has the 'floor', which means who is the speaker. Everyone will have a turn, but a key to communication is allowing one person to have the floor until they have been heard and understood. It can help to use an object, like a laminated card, to pass back and forth to indicate who has the floor.

Practise on neutral topics

Practise speaking and listening skills and use of the floor on a variety of easy topics. These can be practised one at a time at first, and then combined into a full discussion or conversation. Praise use of skills.

Creating a communication hierarchy

See 'Communication hierarchy' [WF-4].

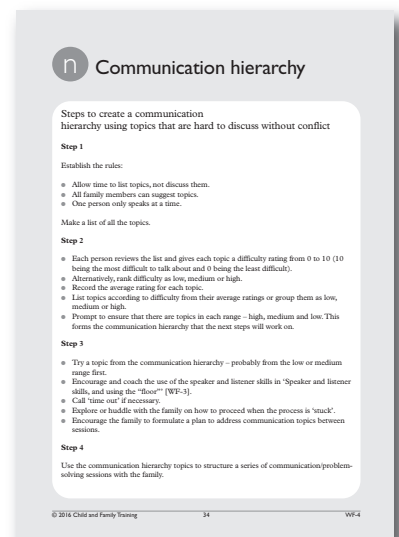
Work with the parents and children to generate a list of topics that are difficult to discuss without conflict. Set clear ground rules here:

- This is not a time to discuss the topics, just to listen to them.
- Each member has the 'right' to suggest topics – the immediate goal is not consensus.

Taking turns can help a lot. Reframe and/or summarise the topics. Ask each person to review each topic and give it a difficulty rating. Record the mean rating for each topic. Ensure that you have topics that are in the 'low', 'middle' and 'high' ranges.

Select topics from the communication hierarchy

Once skills are well practised, you can begin discussing topics in the communication hierarchy. This usually requires multiple meetings or sessions to work through the many items in the hierarchy, and it is common to set practice assignments. Begin by selecting items that are rated as easier to discuss, and gradually work towards harder items over time as skills develop.



Practise on hierarchy topics

Discuss a topic together, employing the new skills taught. Act as coach, referee and consultant, encouraging family members to use the skills, calling 'time out' when things are heading into trouble, and 'huddling' with the family to think through how to proceed when they become stuck.

Steps to problem-solving skills

- Stating a problem from the communication hierarchy
- Deciding on a goal
- Stopping and thinking
- Thinking of as many solutions as possible and the consequences of each
- Trying the best solution or trying others.

This process could set up a framework for a series of family sessions, working through the topics on the communication hierarchy.

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Whispers game

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Speaker and listener skills, and using the 'floor'

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Steps to create a communication hierarchy using topics that are hard to discuss without conflict

Step 1

Establish the rules:

- Allow time to list topics, not discuss them.
- All family members can suggest topics.
- One person only speaks at a time.

Make a list of all the topics.

Step 2

- Each person reviews the list and gives each topic a difficulty rating from 0 to 10 (10 being the most difficult to talk about and 0 being the least difficult).
- Alternatively, rank difficulty as low, medium or high.
- Record the average rating for each topic.
- List topics according to difficulty from their average ratings or group them as low, medium or high.
- Prompt to ensure that there are topics in each range – high, medium and low. This forms the communication hierarchy that the next steps will work on.

Step 3

- Try a topic from the communication hierarchy – probably from the low or medium range first.
- Encourage and coach the use of the speaker and listener skills in ‘Speaker and listener skills, and using the “floor”’ [WF-3].
- Call ‘time out’ if necessary.
- Explore or huddle with the family on how to proceed when the process is ‘stuck’.
- Encourage the family to formulate a plan to address communication topics between sessions.

Step 4

Use the communication hierarchy topics to structure a series of communication/problem-solving sessions with the family.