

 **PRACTICE TIPS – HOW TO ASK DIFFICULT QUESTIONS?**

Communication and engagement are key elements within social work, however asking questions and finding the right style can be difficult and requires practice, sensitivity and adaptability. One approach does not necessarily fit or work for each practitioner and/ or family, therefore there is a need to be creative and able to respond to the presenting situation with a range of tools at your disposal. – These Tips have been put together to help develop skills and confidence, as well as assist in the development of an accessible toolkit.

**Why do we need to ask questions?**

We need to ask questions in order to gather information, understand different perspectives and belief systems. Establish the facts. Gather wishes and feelings, and try to make sense of a series of events in terms of What? When? How? Why? And Where?

Asking questions helps to dispel myths and assumptions. It provides an opportunity to invite participation and sharing of worries. If done properly questioning can demonstrate compassion, respect and a desire to be of help with curiosity and clear challenge.

Questioning is not about interrogation. It is a means to hear a story and enable difficult conversations to take place. It is a process where relationships are formed, trust can develop and an understanding is made.

Effective questioning informs an assessment with regards to strengths, worries, risk, aspiration, motivation, insight, empathy and commitment. – With this in mind it is worth investing in developing different techniques in order that opportunities for engagement are maximised.

Avoiding conversations because they are too difficult is not safe practice. We start working with families from the premise of honesty and transparency, this includes having conversations that may evoke anger, fear, distress, frustration and retaliation. – It is how we deal with this situation and what we do with the information that is important.

**Preparation**

If we know a difficult conversation is going to take place then preparation is essential. It provides you with space to rehearse what you want to say, and also time to consider the possible consequences from such a conversation. These consequences could include –

* risk to you as the worker,
* risk to the person in leaving them after having had a difficult conversation and how they manage their emotions around this,
* risk to a child from preoccupation or distress from the parent following a conversation
* risk of upset, anxiety and fear following a disclosure
* risk to another person (partner or child) due to misdirected frustration, anger and distress from the person who had the conversation.

Always form a plan – be clear about the purpose of the conversation, and what you hope to accomplish.

**Musts**

You must be honest with the individual what the purpose of the interview is.

You must inform the individual what you will do with the information that has been gathered.

If the visit entails having difficult conversations about emotive subjects and there is a risk of conflict or violence you must request a risk assessment be completed by your TM.

Questions must be respectful and non-judgemental, or you run the risk of non-engagement and possible conflict.

The voice of the child, and their family must be clearly recorded in case notes and referred to in the assessment.

Agencies need to be accountable for what they say and do with families, and therefore must be consulted with and recorded in a manner that enables challenge and follow up should it be required.

You must seek to question and involve absent partners and family members

You must seek supervision and support following difficult conversations. – Be aware of your trigger points and what buttons may be pushed in you.

**Practice Tips**

Preparation is the key to having effective communication skills and relationships with families. Use supervision to explore different methods and techniques to achieve this. Practice and or role play can help develop skills and confidence.

Ensure risk assessments are considered prior to having difficult conversations.

Containing the person after the conversation is just as important as preparing them for a difficult meeting.

When beginning Difficult Conversation start with the principle of honesty, - families may not like this but they do tend to respect it.

Acknowledgement in terms of the person’s position, power and experience is important, as it demonstrates a desire to be inclusive and respectful. Acknowledgement of how the conversation may impact them should also be thought about, i.e. if they are a parent, the outcome and expectations will be different from that of a teacher who is working with the family. Enquire how they would prefer the difficult conversation takes place. As part of the planning with the individual ensure they have the means to ask for a break or time out should it be needed.

Closed Questions are good questions to use when seeking to clarify facts or events. They are not helpful at gathering information as part of a narrative.

Use open ended questions to enable free flow conversation, which is relaxed and inviting therefore enabling a conversation to take place. Acknowledge that the conversation may be difficult but we need to talk about ……., or I am trying to understand how……..

Using Open Discovery Questions, those which begin with ‘What’ or ‘How’ will elicit information more directly. E.g. “What do you hope to happen from this meeting”, “how have you been feeling”, What are you worried about”, “How can we help you to understand the information more easily”. These types of questions go straight to the centre of the persons world and gather more information about the individuals feelings.

Listen twice as much as you talk – we have two ears and one mouth, if you use them in that ratio, you allow the person to describe their strengths, weaknesses, worries and goals.

Strength based questions enable the individual to reflect on what they are good at, how they manage, what their dreams are. The questions are about them as opposed to a situation, you are drawing out their skills and abilities, plus keeping them relaxed for further engagement.

When talking about an incident explore the First, Worse and Last – this enables you to consider frequency and intensity and their perception of this.

Try Solution Brief miracle style of questions - Suppose that one night, while you are asleep, a miracle happened and the problem was solved. How would you know? What would be different?

**If** based style of questions enables individuals to share their wishes and feelings in a safe manner. The approach is open and enables the individual to expand their thinking and give you an insight into what and who is important to them. –

* If you could do/ be/ go/ …….what would it be?
* If you could tell/ save/ take one thing …?
* If you won…..?
* if you had 3 wishes…etc.

Experiment with **TED** style of questioning – **T**ell Me about …., **E**xplain who/how… and **D**escribe the….. These questions open up the person to tell a narrative and share facts without feeling threatened.

Phrases that demonstrate a genuine interest enable families to relax. –

* ‘I am curious as to how/what/who etc.
* Can you help me understand how…..?
* How does this….. work in your family?
* How do you manage when..?’

Positions of curiosity demonstrate respect, a willingness to listen. To not judge but to hear and appreciate what is being said. – Reflecting back what is heard ensures that the interpretation of what is being said is accurate, as well as displaying active listening and understanding.

Framing a question in a way that refers to others can help individuals talk, -‘In some families this… can happen’, ‘some of these questions may not refer to you but we need to ask them …..’

‘Why’ questions can be perceived as accusatory and blaming, they should be used sparingly and when a rapport has been established.

Hypothetical questions can be used to explore problem solving and responses to past or new events. Often this is easier to think about as its not real – ‘what would you tell your brother to do if….. ? how might this be different? What would you want to know about…? How can you make this ……’

Sometimes difficult questions and conversations can take place when referring to a 3rd object, a TV programme, an article, a book. These 3rd objects take the focus away from personalisation and enable a conversation to start before it reflects on their experience.

Recalling past conversations may help to move new ones forward – Do you remember when we …….. well today I wanted to …….

I statements and questions work well in terms of trying to understand a situation and gather a parents perspective –

* I’m not sure I understand ……can you explain how…..?
* I need your help, can you help me understand ……?
* I’d like to talk to you about…. But first I’d like to get your point of view on ….
* I have something I’d like to discuss with you that I think will help me understand how ….. can we ….?

Finally, keep calm, do not be afraid of silences and practice having conversations. – Lets Talk About ……

**Conversation starters**

The following are examples of how to start those difficult conversations -

* What are you worried about?
* What do you think we are here to talk about today?
* How would you like us to begin this meeting/session?
* What was it that made you call us?
* How can we help you to achieve that?
* What do you already do about that/ How have you been able to address that before?
* What do you do to cope with that/ How do you cope with that?
* What support do you have around you at the moment/.

 

**Appendix 1.**

 USEING THE QUESTIONING APPROACH OF – ELICIT, AMPLIFY, REFLECT & START AGAIN – EARS

The EARS approach is not as complicated as it may at first appear. The 4 strands provide a useful framework for engagement and participation with families in a supportive and inclusive manner.

Elicit – this style of questioning encourages the family to **tell, explain and describe** a story.

Amplify – these questions enable expansion of the facts – what, where, when, how, why.

Reflection – being the process of reflecting back what you have heard enabling the family to correct, expand or confirm what is being said

Start again – is the space given to a family to add is there anything else.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Questioning style | worries | strengths | Goals |
| Elicit – tell me about | Tell me a little about what`s worrying you Tell me more about the problemTell me about what happened | Tell me what you enjoy about…Tell me who you enjoy spending time with Tell me about a challenging situation and how you overcame it Tell me about your favourite… and what you do to be good at it | Tell me about the positive things do you find yourself doing in different situations? ( repeating patterns of positive actions)Tell me what motivates you.Tell me more about your favourite activity. |
| * explain
 | Explain how this situation came about | Explain why that makes you feel good | Explain when you discovered this |
| * describe
 | Describe your morning to me from the time you woke upDescribe to me how you were feeling when that happened Describe the situations that make you anxiousDescribe/point to where it hurts | Describe a time in the past when this situation was a little better, tell me about it and what was happeningDescribe what you like about… | Describe your perfect school dayImagine yourself a year from now, what would life look like if things were better?Can you describe how you feel when you engage in your favourite  |
| Amplify* how
* what
* when
 | How is that problem for you?How does the problem make a difference to your day?How worried are you?Who was there?How did that happen?Who else knows about this problem?How often does this problem happen/occur?What does the problem stop you doing?What happened?When/where did this happen? | What do your friends and other people like about you?When has that good thing happened? How often?Think of a time when you faced a very difficult challenge. What was happening? Who was involved? What was it in you that allowed you to be successful? What did others do to overcome the challenge?What other successes have you had in the past?Whom can you talk to and who listens to you? | What would you like to see happen?What do you imagine life would look like if you …?Thinking about what you did really well, how could you use that experience in this situation?If you woke up tomorrow and a miracle had happened and your wish had come true, tell me what you see.What is the least change that you would like to see? |
| Reflect* you hear
 | It sounds like…It seems as if…What I hear you saying is… | I get a sense that…It feels as though… | Help me to understand, on the one hand… and on the other… |
| Start Over / Again* repeat
 | Are there any other worries that we have missed? | Are there any other good things happening in this family that we have missed? | What question would you like to hear that I haven’t asked yet? |

 