



DCP Practice Approach

Foundational Theories and Knowledge Relationship based practice Practice Paper

1. Introduction

This practice paper contributes to the understanding of the Department for Child Protection (the department) staff of the principles of relationship based practice.

While this practice paper focuses predominantly on the work of field practitioners, building effective, respectful, and collegial relationships with others is essential for all departmental staff. These relationships include (but are not limited to):

- the relationships that practitioners and residential carers have with:
 - children
 - young people
 - their families
 - communities
- relationships between government and non-government agencies.

Positive relationships are crucial and can have a substantial impact on the effectiveness of the department's work.

2. Why is relationship based practice so important to good outcomes?

Positive outcomes in child protection are best achieved when practitioners develop genuine, respectful, and supportive relationships with children, young people, families, and carers. Building sound relationships allows practitioners to:

- engage more effectively with families
- conduct comprehensive assessments of the needs of children, young people, and their families
- collaborate more successfully with families and carers.

Practitioners who have strong relationships with children, young people and their families achieve better outcomes because relationships are a necessary foundation for all intervention.

In the complexity of child protection practice, building relationships requires dedicated effort and perseverance by practitioners. It also requires practitioners to:

- engage in ongoing professional development and reflective practice





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- identify their own strengths and areas for improvement
- continually develop and enhance their interpersonal skills.

Further, it requires quality supervision to allow practitioners to reflect on their skills and developmental needs in a supportive environment. Professional supervision also depends on the development of a trusting relationship.

The way practitioners communicate with children, young people, families and carers sets the foundation for the relationship that will develop. From the first contact practitioners have with children, young people, families and carers, efforts must be made to engage in a transparent and respectful way. While this can be challenging at times, the more respectful and empathic practitioners can be when interacting with children, young people, families and carers, the more likely positive outcomes will be achieved.

Practitioners should approach all children, young people, families, and carers, with the view that they may be working together in the longer-term and begin the relationship in the way they would like it to continue. Practitioners must assume responsibility for the development and maintenance of the relationships they have with children, young people, families, and carers. Even when relationships become challenging, rather than viewing others as 'disengaged' or 'difficult', practitioners should reflect on what they themselves can do to improve engagement and heal tensions.

3. Challenges in relationship based practice

Some families (including carer families) will be open and engaging with practitioners from the first meeting. Other families may take some time before they are ready to engage, if at all. There can be many reasons why a family may not be willing to engage with the department, including:

- previous poor experiences with the department
- apprehension about the department's current involvement
- current stressors such as mental health difficulties.

Victims of domestic and family violence may be fearful that their engaging with the department will anger the perpetrator and place them or their children at risk of greater harm (refer to the [Domestic and family violence Practice Paper](#) for further guidance).

Engagement with families can fluctuate during the working relationship, this is to be expected given the nature and complexity of child protection work.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, the traumatic impacts of colonisation, dispossession of land and loss of culture may impact on a willingness to engage with government departments. The traumatic effects of these events and practices, coupled with institutionalised racism, have had an enduring impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, and communities.

The role that government agencies played in the Stolen Generations and the displacement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may cause Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children, young people, and families to be cautious or fearful when coming into contact with the department, affecting engagement.

To support relationship building practitioners should:





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- be mindful and respectful of these issues when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants children, young people and their families and community
- ensure that their practice is culturally safe and responsive
- focus on applying the principles of relationship-based practice
- Engage in efforts to apply elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. Refer to the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper](#) for further information.

More broadly, cultural differences in communication styles can also affect engagement. A person's engagement can be affected by cultural norms and expectations such as:

- the pace and structure of conversation
- eye-contact when talking
- body language
- appropriate venues for holding conversations
- deference or tendency to acquiesce to authority.

Cultural differences in gender roles (for example, deference to male Elders in a family) may inform how practitioners should respectfully first approach families. Differences in language (specifically when English is a second language) can also affect engagement.

Practitioners must be aware of cultural factors when working with children, young people, and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This includes experiences of government practices in other countries and traumatic events that have occurred in their country of origin. Differences in parenting practices and perspectives about child protection issues must also be considered.

Practitioners who prioritise developing their cultural awareness and responsiveness, and who seek cultural consultation, will be better able to develop effective working relationships. Consultation with the department Multicultural Services can contribute to increased cultural competence and more effective engagement. Refer to the [Working with cultural diversity Practice Paper](#) further information.

The power imbalance that exists between practitioners and families must also be recognised as a potential barrier to engagement, particularly given the involuntary nature of statutory intervention. Families are typically aware of the authority that the department has to remove children and young people from their parents' care. Therefore, families who come into contact with the department can often feel disempowered and vulnerable in this context.

Families may evade the department, or be reluctant to be truthful with practitioners, due to the fear of removal of their children or legal and /or Cultural ramifications. Some families may seek to regain some power and control with the department by behaving aggressively. Practitioners who employ the skills of relationship-based practice from the first contact with families will be better able to develop trusting, balanced relationships.

Childhood and other significant experiences that have shaped a person's development and functioning can interfere with a person's ability to engage. This is particularly true if their experiences have led them to develop difficulties with emotional regulation, or personality traits that act as a protective strategy.

Disruption to a child's attachment relationships can be particularly harmful to their development. These experiences can lead the child or young person to view relationships as threatening, unsafe, or unrewarding negatively affecting their engagement.





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The more emotionally vulnerable or dysregulated an individual is, the less safe and stable they will feel during contact with the department. Practitioners should not see this behaviour as personally directed at them as individuals, rather as the person's fear and anxiety, towards the department.

Relationship based practice is a foundational principle of trauma informed practice. Individuals and families who have experienced trauma will likely struggle to manage the complex and emotionally challenging task of engaging with child protection services. These families are more likely to have smaller windows of tolerance, have heightened stress-arousal response systems and be more easily activated into fear and states of fight, flight or freeze. Refer to the [Trauma lens Practice Paper](#) for further information.

Practitioners should show compassion and empathy in their efforts to form genuine working relationships¹. Practitioners who focus on relationship-based practice and use the skills of relationship-based practice from the first contact with people will have a better chance of developing sound working relationships.

Practitioners should not assume that because a family is presenting as reserved or defensive, they are not able to be effectively engaged and make lasting change. Instead, practitioners should focus on seeking to understand the family's perspective and be proactive and persistent in building trusting and respectful relationships.

The most effective way practitioners can support families to engage is to model the behaviour that they would like to see in others. That is, practitioners must be respectful, calm, empathic, transparent, responsive, and clear about their intentions and actions. In doing so, practitioners will also offer families an experience of relationships that they might not have had before, which can be therapeutic for families.

4. Important elements in relationship based practice

There are many skills and elements involved in building effective relationships. Some of these are summarised below. It is important that practitioners understand why these skills are important and reflect on the degree to which those skills are used in their interactions with children, young people and families, colleagues, partner agencies, and other professionals. Each interaction that the department has with a child, young person, or family impacts not only on that interaction, and may impact on how children, young people and families will feel about future engagement, with the department and other agencies the family may work with. Additionally, some skills require practice and reflection for practitioners to begin to incorporate them more consistently into their interactions with others.

4.1 Invest time in the relationship

Investing time to get to know children, young people, and the families the department work with is a foundational element in developing relationships. By spending time with children, young people, families, and carers, we show our commitment to them and our sincere desire to understand them. This in turn enables us to develop more genuine relationships.

The more practitioners can dedicate our time to being with others, learning about their experiences and seeking to understand their views, the stronger those relationships can be. Spending time with others is also a simple yet effective way to demonstrate that they are important and valued, which contributes significantly to fostering relationships.

¹ [Trauma lens Practice Paper](#)



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When practitioners establish a genuine connection with children, young people, and their families by investing time in the relationship, this enables the relationship to withstand and repair after ruptures or difficulties. Investing in relationships might involve:

- taking time to learn about a child, young person, and their family’s experiences, based on the information available to the department, before going to meet with them
- scheduling time when first meeting with a child, young person and their family that is dedicated to talking about their experiences
- asking questions of children, young people, and their families about their experiences in a way that shows genuine desire to understand and is free of judgement or appraisal
- re-visiting themes or discussing events that have previously been raised with children, young people and their families as being important to them
- checking in with children, young people, and their families outside of scheduled review meetings to see how they are travelling and what needs they might have
- collaborate with Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations to further support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

4.2 Be empathic

Empathy is the ability to understand what another person is feeling and experiencing from their perspective. It is the ability to put oneself in another person’s position and to see the world through their eyes. Highly empathic people are:

- good active listeners
- are attuned to the non-verbal cues of others
- give attention to how people are feeling (rather than focussing solely on their words or behaviour).

Engaging with children, young people, their families, and carers, with empathy helps them to feel understood. The more people feel understood, the less defensive they will be, and the easier they will be to engage.

Regular reflective supervision supports practitioners to develop their emotional regulation skills and capacity for empathy.

Being empathic involves:

- focusing attention on the emotional needs and expressions of others. This involves not only identifying the emotional expressions of others, but also trying to understand the emotions that are driving someone’s behaviour
- offering empathic statements. For example, if the person you are talking to has told you of a recent death in their family, you might say *“I can see how upset you are about this. It must be a very difficult time for you”*
- being curious about others’ emotional experiences. For example, if the person you are talking to has hinted at feeling depressed, you might say *“I wonder if you’ve been feeling down lately?”*





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- practitioners to be self-aware of their own emotions, body language and reactions. It is not always easy to be empathic towards people who have, for example, harmed a child. Empathy is still necessary in these circumstances for practitioners to be able to fully understand the families with whom they work.

Without sharing too much personal detail, practitioners can share experiences with others to show empathy. Care must be taken not to condone or excuse any harmful behaviour. Practitioners must also ensure they re-focus on the other person's experiences after any self-disclosure to further the conversation.

Practitioners can be empathic while still being clear about concerning behaviour and maintaining focus on the child or young person's need for safety. For example, if a parent discloses that they smacked their child in a moment of frustration during a turbulent day, a practitioner might say *"I can hear how stressed you were feeling that day. It certainly sounds like you were struggling with managing everything that was happening. I wonder if this contributed to you hitting XXXX. While I understand what might have contributed to this, this is not okay, and XXX has been harmed. So, from here on in, we need to find a way to keep XXXX safe"*. In this way, the parent's behaviour is understood without being condoned. Empathy is shown which can keep the parent engaged in the conversation without becoming defensive, and the needs of the child are highlighted.

When working with perpetrators of domestic and family violence, while empathy is always important, it is also important to understand that perpetrators of domestic and family violence may attempt to manipulate practitioners to avoid responsibility or as a tactic of their use of coercive control over the victim. They may be adept at using emotion to encourage practitioners to side with them. Empathy for the perpetrator's experience and emotions must be balanced with a clear focus on the child or young person and victim safety for further guidance, refer to the [Domestic and family violence Practice Paper](#).

4.3 Be clear

Families can understandably feel anxious when the department engages with them, and this can lead to misunderstandings. Practitioners must ensure that they are clear in their communication, this applies to all aspects of practice, not just about the reason for the department's involvement. Being clear about roles, processes, intentions, and the rationale for decisions, helps others feel less anxious about departmental involvement, builds trust and ensures accountability for actions.

Practitioners can be clear by:

- giving their name, job title, and contact details on first meeting with people
- telling people (including children and young people) exactly why they are there to talk with them, including the purpose of the conversation and what they hope to achieve from the conversation. Being clear about the concerns maximises the chance of engagement. It is imperative that practitioners approach all families with the intention of forming a collaborative relationship with them (whether the working relationship is likely to continue or not)
- being clear about the limitations of confidentiality, especially when engaging with children and young people who might be worried about what will happen with any information they share. Similarly, being clear about limitations of confidentiality and information sharing practices when talking with other agencies is essential for building trust and cooperative relationships
- understanding the rationale for the decisions they have made about case direction, before sharing this with others. The more practitioners understand the purpose of their intervention and the reasons why





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certain decisions have been made, the more clarity they can offer children, young people, families, carers and others, and the more confidence they will have in delivering the information to others

- summarising conversations with children, young people, families and carers, what has been discussed and what actions will be taken
- providing key information in writing
- where information is complex or sensitive, the use of interpreters are strongly recommended for children, young people, families and carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- using clear and concise language to ensure clarity in communication with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children, young people, families and carers.

4.4 Listen

Taking the time to listen actively to what children, young people, their families, and carers are saying can go a long way to building respectful and positive relationships. Listening carefully to colleagues and partner agencies can be effective in developing collaborative relationships to achieve good outcomes for children and young people. When practitioners invest in listening to the experiences and views of others, rapport can be more easily established and genuine understanding of perspectives can be achieved.

While practitioners often have an agenda to work through when meeting with children, young people, families, and carers, more can be achieved when we invest time in listening to and validating their experiences.

Active listening involves:

Being comfortable with silence	Being able to sit and listen silently, with only the intention of hearing what the other person is saying, is important to allow others the time to say things at their own pace without interruption.
Being attentive	Includes being attentive to what others are saying as well as their non-verbal communication. For example, what are the person’s body language and facial expressions telling us about their experiences?
Being curious	Being genuinely curious about someone else’s experiences, both about what has happened and how they felt about it, can greatly contribute to our relationships with others, as well as our understanding of situations. For example, practitioners might ask <i>“How did you make sense of that?”</i> or <i>“How might that have been understood by your child?”</i>
Asking open-ended questions	For example, instead of asking <i>“Are you okay?”</i> which has a yes/no answer, practitioners might say <i>“Tell me about ...”</i> which can have many different responses. Open-ended questions promote richer conversation.
Asking clarifying questions	This both helps to ensure that you have understood what is being said and helps the person talking to feel heard and validated.





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Paraphrasing or rephrasing	Paraphrasing or rephrasing what you think the other person is saying in your own words helps with clarification and validation.
Deferring judgement	Avoid assigning value to what is being said or making assumptions. Instead, listen with the purpose of trying to understand.

4.5 Strengths based

Practitioners must always seek to find and reflect on the strengths of children, young people, their families and carers. By identifying or reminding people of their strengths, practitioners can create an atmosphere that is encouraging and supportive. While problems have to be identified and managed as part of working towards safety for children and young people, highlighting and building upon strengths is also helpful for achieving safety. By focussing on strengths, practitioners can perceive other individuals as more than just their problems, which in turn can engender hope for the future.

Being strengths based also means encouraging children, young people, families, and carers to rely on their supports as needed. For example, parents with intellectual disabilities may have difficulty following complex conversations with practitioners. Encouraging those parents to have a support person with them to help them understand what is happening promotes parent’s optimal engagement.

Similarly, practitioners should encourage the use of cultural supports, particularly when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children, young people, and their families. This is also required when working with children, young people and their families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. For further guidance, refer to the [Strengths based practice Practice Paper](#).

4.6 Manage conflict

Conflict is unavoidable, even in the best of relationships. There will always be times when differences of opinion, different needs or goals, and different ideas create tensions between people. This is especially true in the context of child protection, when practitioners will have different perspectives to the children, young people families and carers with whom they work. Conflict can also arise between practitioners of the same agency, or between agencies, when different priorities or views are expressed.

If conflict is managed well, it can result in stronger relationships being formed. But if conflict is poorly managed, it can damage relationships, lead to setbacks, and detract from the needs of the children and young people.

Good conflict management involves:

Clearly identifying points of difference	At times, conflict arises from confusion and misunderstanding about what people are trying to achieve, and sometimes conflicts can be easily resolved by clarifying everyone’s intentions.
Listening	The best way to manage a conflict is to allow people the chance to talk, to air their grievances, feel heard and by acknowledging the other person’s perspective.





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Finding points of agreement, wherever possible	The more common ground that can be found, the more chance practitioners will have of repairing the relationship and getting back on track.
Repair	When a relationship experiences a rupture, practitioners should actively work towards repairing the relationship, by engaging all the relationship-based practice skills that have been outlined. Practitioners need to be proactive in seeking to repair relationships and not wait for others to reach out to fix things.

Practitioners can minimise the chance of a conflict or the effect it has on a relationship. They can do this by being open and honest about their actions and intentions and by preparing people as much as possible prior to potential rupture. This may include explaining to children, young people, their families, and carers early into the relationship that they will not always agree but, when that happens, they will work through it together. The same approach can assist when conflict arises between agencies.

4.7 Maximise a sense of safety wherever possible

People are more willing to be open and vulnerable when they feel safe. Practitioners should consider how they can create a sense of safety when interacting with children, young people, families, and carers to maximise the chance of building positive relationships.

Practitioners can help create safety by:

Being clear and explicit	About the goals and expectations for families and carers and being prepared to repeat this conversation often.
Being predictable	For example, practitioners could consider contacting the child or young person, family or carer on the same day each week.
Being consistent	Practitioners can show consistency by ensuring their words match their actions or by ensuring the same practitioner works with the family or carer as much as possible.
Preparing for change	Change is unavoidable and can often cause people to feel anxious. When change is needed, practitioners should prepare families and carers for change as much as possible. If change is sudden and preparation cannot happen, practitioners should make time to explain the changes and the reasons for the changes to those impacted.
Being calm	Quite often, the children, young people, their families, and carers with whom practitioners work do not have the psychological resources and skills to regulate their emotions and keep themselves calm. Joining others in their distress is never helpful. Practitioners should attempt to <i>'bring the calm'</i> to all interactions. The calmer and more regulated practitioners can be, the more they can help those they work with to remain calm.





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Being courteous	By being considerate of the experiences and views of children, young people, their families and carers, practitioners can contribute to an atmosphere of respect, which can help to foster feelings of emotional safety. Being courteous can be as simple as referring to people by their formal titles (for example Ms Smith) until invited to be less formal, or by waiting to be invited into someone's home before entering (unless entry is a requirement to ensure the safety of a child or young person).
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4.8 Cultural safety

Practitioners must be aware of the importance of cultural awareness and when developing relationships with children, young people, their families and carers to contribute to a sense of safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse families. Disregarding cultural differences can harm efforts to build relationships.

When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, carers and communities, practitioners should give consideration to how they can begin to build a relationship before even meeting with the family or carer. It is recommended that practitioners seek advice from the Principal Aboriginal Consultant as to the best way to build relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, carers, and communities. For further guidance, refer to the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper](#).

The department's Multicultural Services can provide support for practitioners working with children, young people and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. For further guidance, refer to the [Working with cultural diversity Practice Paper](#).

Practitioners are also encouraged to seek cultural consultation as to the significant people within the family or community with whom the practitioner should also seek to build relationships.

[Family led decision making](#) is also critically important when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Family led decision making assists practitioners to build partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to identify areas of concern, and to take responsibility for ensuring the safety of their children and young people.

Other factors for consideration that may help to build relationships with Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse children, young people, families and carers include:

- the timing and location of appointments (with respect to the adversity Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities have experienced due to racist past government policies and practices)
- The appropriateness of entering a person's home
- introductions (seeking clarification about a person's cultural background, language, and kinship networks)
- the appropriate use of names, especially how to refer to deceased individuals
- the appropriate use of eye contact and body language
- seating positions (with consideration to gender and status of initiated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women)
- silence (which may be appropriate as people consider the discussion, rather than viewed negatively)



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- shame (which can occur when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are spotlighted with questions, or asked culturally inappropriate questions)
- narrative conversational styles rather than direct questioning
- Cultural vouching (the process of having someone known to and respected by a family engage with the family on your behalf and 'vouch' for you, prior to you meeting with a family or entering a Community for the first time).

5. The importance of professional relationships

Strong relationship-based practice among professionals contributes significantly to efforts to ensure best outcomes for children and young people. When professionals foster respectful, trusting relationships, there are greater opportunities for collaboration and cooperation, resulting in better outcomes for all.

The importance of supervision and the supervisory relationship is also significant. When practitioners feel safe and supported by their supervisor, they are more willing to be vulnerable about their developmental needs, mistakes, and worries. When practitioners are willing to be open about these issues, meaningful learning and growth can occur. Strong supervisory relationships allow practitioners to:

- develop resilience
- reduce their anxiety
- focus on fostering sound relationships with children, young people, and their families.

To develop good supervisory relationships, supervisors should endeavour to develop and put into practice all the skills that support relationship-based practice.

Supervision is a critical element within the departmental Practice Approach, and further information regarding supervision can be found on the [Professional Supervision intranet page](#).

6. The importance of reflective practice

Practitioners are better able to develop skills when they engage in reflective practice. Practitioners are encouraged to seek feedback about their performance with regard to relationship-based practice, and to reflect on and discuss this feedback in supervision.

Asking children, young people, their families, and carers for feedback about their interactions and how communication could be improved, fosters respectful relationships. This and other feedback from peers and supervisors, partner agencies and colleagues, can be useful in helping practitioners to advance their skills.





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