Child and Family Support System

Common Elements Module: Enhancing Family Functioning and Safety

Practice Guide: Building Capacity for Family Led Problem Solving

Government of South Australia

human services

Contents

"The Aboriginal Cultural Lenses of Practice" Artist Sasha Houthuysen

Acknowledgment of Country

We respectfully acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners and occupants of lands and waters of this country, whose practices and dreaming are still living through Elder's past, present and emerging.

Further, we acknowledge that the spiritual, social, cultural, and economic practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples come from connection and maintained of lands, waters, values, heritage beliefs, languages and lore which are of ongoing importance. From the past, in the present, into the future, forever.

We acknowledge the impact of historical policies that were harmful and have contributed to intergenerational trauma. This includes policies and practices of colonisation that have had a profound impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's connection to country, culture, and one another.

We aim to continue to apply a cultural lens when we work together to promote a cultural evidence base that centres around self-determination, choice, and a healing approach, through Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. All while valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as strong, resilient people, and decision makers in their own lives.

About this document

The South Australian government is committed to creating a cohesive Child and Family Support System (CFSS).

One in three children born in South Australia (SA) are reported to the Department for Child Protection by age 10. Most of those children's families have multiple and complex needs.

Children and young people who are removed from their families and placed in care experience trauma that can continue to impact on their health and wellbeing throughout their lives and across generations. For Aboriginal families and communities, the intergenerational trauma from Stolen Generations and children being forcefully taken from their communities and culture both adds and gives context to the complexities.

The CFSS is committed to ensuring Aboriginal children remain front, centre and highly visible in our work with families and communities. The CFSS commits to understanding and valuing Aboriginal Cultural strengths, enabling self-determination and being honest about the truth of our shared histories, the hurts, the strengths, and the healing. It is only by doing these actions and being true and active allies will we see change.

The "Roadmap for Reforming the Child and Family Support System (CFSS) 2021–2023" outlines the steps that the South Australian Government (Department of Human Services) is taking to strengthen the CFSS workforce to intervene early, build positive relationships with families, improve family wellbeing, and avert the need for greater engagement with the child protection system.

The *Common Elements* is one strategy adopted to enhance the CFSS workforce. The *Common Elements*, once bedded into the CFSS workforce, will build greater consistency for families engaging in the CFSS, adds to the pre-existing skills amongst CFSS staff, enhance evidence-based practice and enable access to quality clinical supervision and mentoring.

The *Common Elements* are evidence-informed (the 'common elements' of programs / interventions known to be effective, and / or supported by evidence from multiple sources) and designed to be used flexibly in response to families' needs.

The *Common Elements* approach is being implemented by DHS in partnership with the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI). CEI is a global, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to using the best evidence in practice and policy to improve the lives of children, families, and communities facing adversity. Refer to the '*Common Elements: Background and Introduction* - Explaining the Common Elements' document for more information.
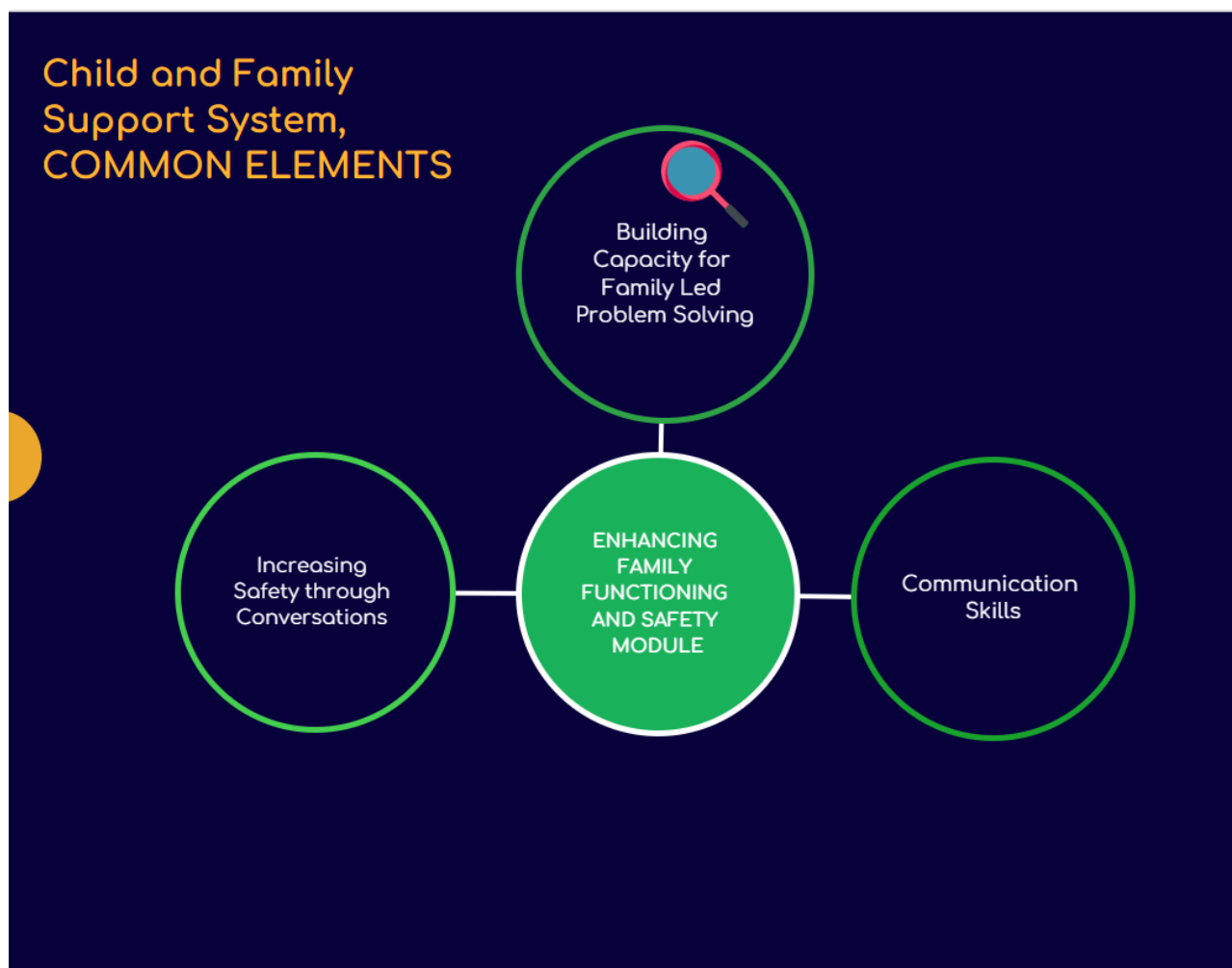
Each practice guide is comprised of an overview of the practice and its purpose, cultural considerations, key capabilities, practice strategies, outcomes, and practice points. It should be a practitioner's go-to resource, in addition to training and coaching in delivering these practices with fidelity.

The information in this publication can be provided in an alternative format on request. Please email EIRD@sa.gov.au

Authorised and published by the Government of South Australia.

In this document, 'Aboriginal' respectfully refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, acknowledging that we work in the context of Aboriginal lands and community © State of South Australia, Australia, Department for Human Services (June 2022).

Overview

People can often feel overwhelmed by their (self-identified) problems, especially when experiencing multiple problems or a problem they have been dealing with for some time. Feelings of anxiety and helplessness can get in the way of taking action to solve problems.

Building Capacity for Family Led Problem Solving is a practice within the *Enhancing Family Functioning and Safety* Module and is an essential part of outcomes-focused collaborative work between the individual and the practitioner. Goals should be used to drive collaborative work.

This practice enables practitioners to build the capacity of individuals to identify and break down complex problems into simpler, more manageable steps. The problem-solving process described in this practice guide can be applied to any problem in which the individual feels intrinsically motivated to solve.

This guide can be used with adult individuals (parents, carers, and kinship relatives) and with young people of approximately 12 years of age (as developmentally appropriate).

Purpose

Problem solving is a process that uses a structured step by step approach to help people clearly define problems, brainstorm potential solutions, and select the best solutions to overcome them.

This 7-step problem solving strategy can be used when individuals express a lack of confidence in solving their problems or when they struggle with similar problems repeatedly.

These steps can be introduced when an individual comes to a practitioner with a problem they are currently struggling with, or when a practitioner observes them making attempts to tackle a problem in their lives.

Supporting an individual to think through a problem and identify their own solutions is more likely to build motivation for change and lead to action than if a practitioner makes suggestions or gives advice about what an individual should do. Teaching individuals how to solve problems helps develop skills that can be used to address other issues, concerns, and problems they may face in the future.

This is especially important for working with Aboriginal families to help explore and evaluate strategies that acknowledge and privilege the role that kinship family and culture play when thinking about problems and their solutions, whilst consistently valuing, developing, or increasing capacity for self-determination.

Allyship Accountability
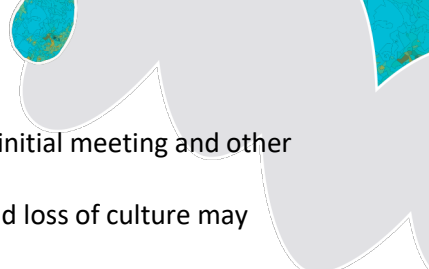
Aboriginal Cultural Lens Application

A cultural lens is the consideration and application of how we perceive our environment based on knowledge, values, attitudes, and the traditions of the group with which we most identify. Applying an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural lens means stepping back and considering one's own identity and values, how one's own background influences these perspectives and adding knowledge, understanding, and embracing history, culture, and Aboriginal ways of 'knowing, being and doing'. This is also known as allyship accountability.

Aboriginal values are based on enabling, amplifying, and deeply listening to Aboriginal voices across all levels of the kinship system inclusive of children and young people, women, Elders, and men. Aboriginal people are diverse people with rich and deep heritage, these many voices are considered strengths and provide cultural authority and decision making in problem solving.

Aboriginal family led problem solving is critically important when working with Aboriginal families as this practice assists practitioner to build partnerships with Aboriginal families to identify areas of concern and to take responsibility for ensuring the safety of children and young people.

It is also vital that practitioners are aware of Aboriginal family kinship systems and that family and family's roles, responsibilities and obligations may look different and need to be understood and respected. Undertaking cultural consultation can support practitioners' understanding of family systems.

Practitioners need to keep this in mind when working with Aboriginal families, applying an Aboriginal cultural lens to their work and practice, considering the role that government agencies played in the Stolen Generations and the displacement of Aboriginal families which can result in families being fearful or cautious when meeting with government departments. (DCP Practice Paper 2020)

It is important to understand that some families may be open and engage well at an initial meeting and other families may take some time before they are ready to engage, if at all.
For Aboriginal families the traumatic impact of colonisation, dispossession of land and loss of culture may affect willingness to engage with services and government departments.

This does not negate the importance of continuing to engage the family to support protective factors for the children and young people. We consistently see that practitioners who focus on relationship-based practices have a greater chance of building strong relationships with Aboriginal families; these are key factors in providing culturally responsive practice and positive outcomes for children, families, and community.

Applying a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Lens

When working with families from CALD communities, practitioners are advised to seek out more information to create a culturally safe and supportive environment. Liaison with community leaders and or culturally specific support services is encouraged.

Trauma in the CALD community is diverse and unique to the lived experiences and migratory journeys of individuals and families and may include intergenerational trauma. Trauma is often associated with pre migration experiences including human rights abuses.

Post migration these experiences of trauma are often made worse by other challenges, including settlement issues, racial and religious discrimination as well as the multiple losses experienced, loss of country, culture, and family.

Clear and effective communication is key to successful outcomes for families. If English is not a person's first language, then it is vital to seek out translation and interpreting services to ensure language barriers do not compromise service provision.

Key Capabilities

Enabling Attitudes

When using *Building Capacity for Family Led Problem Solving*, it is important for practitioners to embrace the following attitudes or stance towards the individual:

- The practitioner believes that individuals have the capacity to identify their own problems

- The practitioner believes that individuals have the capacity to solve or overcome their own problems.

Practitioner Behaviours

The objective is for the practitioner to teach and model a process for problem solving using a structured and stepped approach in a way that makes sense to the individual. In partnership, the individual and the practitioner will develop actions to address specific problems which will then be reviewed and updated regularly. The 7 steps to *Building Capacity for Family Led Problem Solving* are described in greater detail in the Practice Strategies.

Behaviours for practitioners to work towards when Building Capacity for Family Led Problem Solving	Behaviours for practitioners to avoid when Building Capacity for Family Led Problem Solving
The practitioner normalises the fact that everyone, including the practitioner, faces problems every day and acknowledges that some problems are bigger and more complex than others. It can be helpful to use statements such as, *"Solving our problems can make us feel good…"* or *"Not solving them can make us feel bad but there are some steps we can take to help us work out how to solve them."* The practitioner teaches each step explicitly using concrete, easy to understand examples (where appropriate) from the practitioner's daily life or examples from other individuals *(e.g., "Some individuals I've worked with before have decided to work on things like the morning routine or keeping the kitchen clean."* The practitioner uses the problem-solving template only if the individual finds it useful or would like to. If it is not useful, discuss other things that may help individuals remember the steps they will take to solve a problem (e.g., recording their own voice or putting notes, reminders into their phone).	The practitioner tells the individual what problem(s) they should work on. The individual does not get the chance to self-reflect on a problem they want to solve. The practitioner provides solutions for the problem rather than allowing the individual to identify their own potential solutions first. The practitioner skips the reviewing step because they are running out of time during a session. The individual does not get the opportunity to reinforce their understanding of this crucial step for future problem solving.

Practice Strategies

This section provides step by step guidance on how to use *Building Capacity for Family Led Problem Solving* with families.

Steps	Skills/Strategies
1. Provide an overview and rationale	The practitioner introduces the idea of problems being a normal, everyday part of life. The practitioner explains that there is a process that can be applied to any problem – big or small – and the process can be helpful to figure out what to do about it. Introduce the Problem-Solving Worksheet and ask if the individual finds this useful (see sample attached at the end of this practice guide and practice tips and considerations for its use). *e.g., "I have the steps for solving problems here on this sheet and it can be useful to write things down as we go so, we remember them. Is that something you would find useful to do? Would you like to use the sheet?"* If the sheet is not useful for the individual, then discuss some other ways that the practitioner may be able to capture the discussion. *e.g., "This sheet is just one way of keeping track, but there are other ways. For example, I know lots of people find setting reminders on their phone useful or recording themselves on their phones? What do you think is the most useful way to keep track of our discussion?"* Ask the individual to think of and name a particular problem they are facing right now. It may be helpful to discuss similar issues experienced by others to support the individual to identify or realise some of the challenges they may be experiencing.
2. Define the problem	The first step to problem solving is to define the problem or need that the individual wants to work on. It is best to define the problem as clearly as possible and it can be helpful to do this in terms of 'wants'. This helps to make the problem statement clear and specific and details what is happening and who is involved without blaming anyone. *The practitioner clarifies the problem with the individual in greater detail, they help the individual clearly define what they want to work on as concretely as possible so that the practitioner has a solid understanding to enable them to decide if problem solving will be useful.* *As a result of these discussions, the practitioner and individual agree on a description of a 'refined problem statement.' A brief clarification at this point*

Steps	Skills/Strategies
	will help the practitioner and individual decide whether to work on this problem or if another one should be chosen. Examples for adult individuals: The expressed problem: "*My son and I are constantly arguing and sometimes we end up screaming at each other. He ends up storming out of the house and I don't know where he is.*" The want: "*I want my son to let me know where he is and when he is coming home because I worry about him.*" The refined problem statement: "*I want to argue less with my son and don't want him leaving the house without telling me where he's going.*" Examples for children or young people: The expressed problem: "*Mum's always yelling at me, and I want to get out of the house, so I grab my stuff, get out and catch up with my mates … just hang with them!*" The want: "*I want my mum to back off when I've just come home from school and I'm in a bad mood. She expects me to answer all her questions but sometimes I just don't want to talk!*" The refined problem statement: "*When I come home from school and I feel very tired, I don't always want to talk to anyone until I feel more relaxed. When my mum asks me questions, I feel exhausted and frustrated, and we quickly end up fighting over me not answering her.*"
3. Brainstorm possible solutions	The practitioner has the individual write down/list as many possible solutions to the problem as they can. It sometimes helps to take turns to write down or talk out possible solutions. The practitioner encourages the individual not to be tempted to judge or evaluate any solutions yet. The only goal at this stage is to come up with a list of possibilities. For example: Practitioner*: "The next step involves brainstorming. Making a written list of possible solutions is important. It will help us think about ideas that you might not have considered. Let's list all the possible solutions. The goal is just to list as many as you can think of. Let's not worry about whether they will work just yet.*"

Steps	Skills/Strategies
4. Evaluate solutions	Next, look at the possible solutions and discuss the pros and cons of each. Have the individual go through the list of possible solutions and explain all the advantages of choosing that solution (pros) and all the disadvantages of choosing that solution (cons). Then have the individual rate each solution in terms of preference on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = least preferred, 10 = most preferred). In doing so, encourage them to think about how each solution may impact them and their family.
5. Choose a solution	Using the scores (on the *Problem-Solving Worksheet* if they are filling it out themselves), the practitioner encourages the individual to choose the best solution based on what might happen should they use the solution in a realistic situation. The solution should be one that is feasible to put into practice and will potentially solve the problem. Ask them to look down the list and see whether one solution is rated with a higher score and therefore emerges as the best choice. If the individual has not been able to find such a solution, then the practitioner needs to go back and look for different solutions. It could be helpful to talk to other family members to get a fresh range of ideas. For example: Practitioner*: "The next step is to select one or perhaps a combination of solutions to put into action. However, if you can't agree or there doesn't seem to be one that makes you happy, then we'll go back and try to come up with some more ideas."* If it is difficult to decide on a solution, engage the individual in a discussion about the pros and cons of the various choices. Often, several actions might be relevant but at this stage it is important to guide them to take small steps towards action. This is to increase the likelihood of them following through with actions to address the problem situation. Always remember that the best solution is one that the individual chooses willingly. The solution they choose may not be one the practitioner or others would choose. However, a solution that is imposed or coerced will not be successful.

Steps	Skills/Strategies
6. Plan for the solution	Encourage the individual to develop a plan for putting the solution into action. Discuss any barriers that might prevent them from using the solution and how they might overcome these. Try to gain a commitment so that they will do a specific task and activity in a specific way. For example: Practitioner*: "Once you've got a solution you'd like to try, we'll develop a plan together for putting it into action. Let's think about anything that will get in the way of doing the plan. If you think of anything, this is the time to try and resolve it"*
7. Implement and review	**Implement the action plan**. Ask the individual to try out their solution. The practitioner indicates that they will both talk about how things have gone the next time they meet. The plan should include a review date which is appropriate for the problem and solution. Consider the likely amount of time required for the solution to have an impact on the problem. For example, for a problem that has been occurring frequently, they might review after a two-week trial. For a problem that has been occurring infrequently, they might want to review after a longer review period, such as two months. It is important to reassure the individual that not all solutions that are attempted may work and that sometimes more than one solution will need to be tried. Part of effective problem solving is being able to adapt when things do not go as well as expected. For example: Practitioner*: "Now that you have your plan, let's put it into action and then check to see how it has worked. We can decide on a date to check how you are going. Because you stated this problem happens a lot, let's review your plan in the next two weeks. What do you think about that?"* **Review the action plan**. When the individual and practitioner return to the problem at the next session (and at the review date), ask what has worked well, what has not worked so well, and what could be done differently that might make the plan work more smoothly. It is important that the practitioner models these problem-solving skills when teaching this process. When individuals observe practitioners actively dealing with problems using this approach, they may be more likely to try it themselves There are three key areas to focus on in the review: • **Check-in:** What happened when they acted? • **Troubleshoot:** If there was no action taken, explore the reasons why and review the goal and problem. Identify any barriers to action and brainstorm possible solutions to these barriers.

Steps	Skills/Strategies
	• **Modify the action plan:** Are more actions required to address the problem? Is it necessary to go back to brainstorming and come up with additional solutions to add to the list of possibilities? Individuals should feel increasingly empowered each time they use the steps with new problems and practitioners should feel able to draw their individuals into the problem-solving process in a non-confronting way.

Step 1. What is the problem?

Step 2. Why is it a problem for you?

Step 3. Possible solutions	Step 4. Positives or Pros (P) & Negatives or Cons (N)		Rating 1-10
	P		
	N		
	P		
	N		
	P		
	N		
	P		

	N		
P			
	N		

Step 5. Choose the best solution

Step 6. Plan things to do

Step 7. Review	Date	Discussion

Building Capacity for Family Led Problem Solving Worksheet (simplified)

Step 1. Problems can happen to anyone at any time. It's a normal part of life! There are certain steps you can take to solve them. Can you think of one problem that you would like to solve (at home/with mum or dad/at school)?

Step 2. What's wrong? What is making you upset/angry/frustrated?

Step 3. What can you think of doing that may help with this?	Step 4. Positives or Pros (P) & Negatives or Cons (N)	Rating 1-3
		☺ 😐 ☹ 3 2 1
		☺ 😐 ☹ 3 2 1
		☺ 😐 ☹ 3 2 1
		☺ 😐 ☹ 3 2 1

Step 5. Which one have you chosen to use?

Step 6. Let's make a list of things to do!

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Step 7. Review	Date	Discussion

16

Outcomes

Practice level outcomes

- Individuals are more confident in their ability to identify and describe problems.

- Individuals can brainstorm solutions and apply techniques for more effective problem solving.

- Individuals have increased capacity for solving problems – both current and future problems.

- Practitioners are more confident and proficient in equipping carers with a process for solving problems.
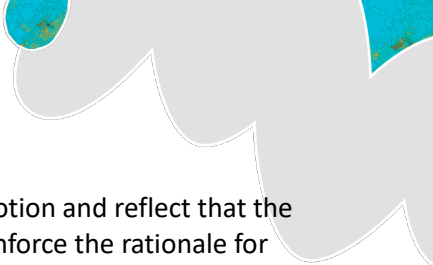
Practice Points

- With the help of problem-solving worksheets, individuals can be guided through the steps above (i.e., defining the problem, brainstorming for solutions, evaluating, and choosing a solution, and planning). If a practitioner is working with an individual with low literacy or if individuals do not find the worksheet useful, ask the individual how they would like to keep track of the steps in the problem-solving process.

  A simplified version of the worksheet that is more accessible for children, young people, or individuals with low literacy is also provided. These can be customised further by adding more degrees/ratings to think about pros and cons in greater complexity (i.e., rating it out of 1-5 instead of 1-3). Use of graphics can encourage individuals to participate in this exercise in alternative, creative ways.

- If the individual does not wish to discuss their problems, practitioners can encourage them to use a story or a problem of someone else known to them (i.e., a friend or family member). This is useful for children/youth and individuals who may feel that discussing their problems is too confronting when doing it for the first time.

- For young people consider drawing pictures instead of writing down solutions. These pictures can be accessed via a range of social work resources accessible via google or cut out and the discussion about rating possible solutions is done by sorting the 'cards' or pictures.

- If the individual gets stuck in talking about the details of the problem and does not easily move towards identifying possible solutions, consider using the following strategies:

  o Respond to 'change talk' (see Practice Guide: *Building Motivation for Change*) and explore what hopes they have for the future.

  o Explore the strategies they have used in the past to tackle this and similar problems.

  o Ask if they have noticed anything that other people do to address similar problems.

If talking about a problem makes them upset or angry, acknowledge the emotion and reflect that the problem is clearly causing distress. Use this as an opportunity to build or reinforce the rationale for engaging in problem solving.

Reflective Questions for Practitioners

Consider a family you are currently working with or have worked with in the past.

- How have you worked with the family to identify **their** main concerns (or problems)?

- How did you prioritise **their** concerns as they arose?

- Were the family able to come up with a plan to address the problem?

- How did you support the family to achieve their goals?

- What was the outcome? What would you do differently?

- Did the family's goals align with those identified in initial referral? If not, were you able to mitigate risk, whilst working toward the family's self-identified goals?

Notes