



Child and Family Support System

Common Elements

Module: Building Engagement

Practice: OARS

(Open Ended Questions, Affirmations, Reflections
and Summaries)





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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.

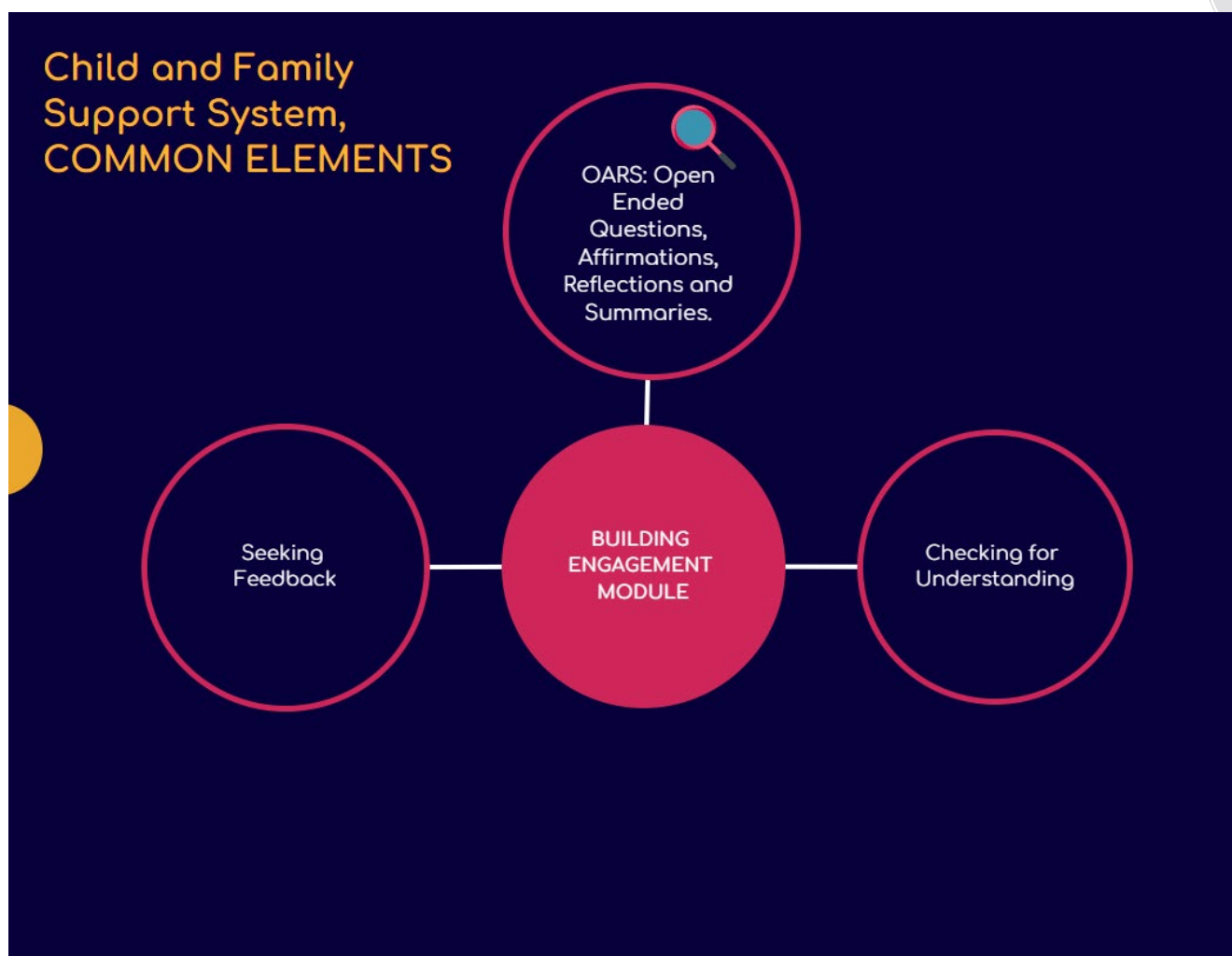
Each practice guide is comprised of an overview of the practice and its purpose, cultural considerations, key capabilities, practice strategies, outcomes, and practice points. It should be a practitioner's go-to resource, in addition to training and coaching in delivering these practices with fidelity.

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



This *Common Elements* practice guide outlines practical guidance to CFSS practitioners to support them in their engagement with young people and families. This guide introduces some strategies that supports culturally safe relationship-based practice by embedding cultural consultation and Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making as fundamental considerations and skills in practice.

OARS is a skills-based, person centred model of interactive techniques. These skills include verbal and non-verbal responses and behaviours that need to be culturally sensitive and appropriate.

OARS stands for *Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections and Summaries*.

OARS is a practice within the *Building Engagement Module* and outlines conversation techniques that practitioners use to support individuals who want to change their behaviour. Whilst **OARS** and engagement are important at the beginning of the working relationship with an individual or family, this is a relationship-based approach that can be utilised throughout a practitioner's work with families to build trust, support communication and maintain engagement. This practice can be used with adults (parents, carers, kinship relations) and with young people aged 12 years and older (as developmentally appropriate).



Purpose

The **OARS** strategies are helpful within the context of relationship-based practice, using these skills assists with building trust over time within the practitioner and family relationship as well as supporting families through a process of change.

OARS can be used to build and maintain positive relationships from initial engagement to service closure.

The **OARS** strategies can be helpful when:

- ✓ Exploring concerns with families and identifying family and individual priorities through Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making and a narrative approach.
- ✓ Raising child safety concerns and establishing the family's understanding of these concerns.
- ✓ Guiding information-gathering conversations (such as for assessment)
- ✓ Encouraging individuals to work towards goals and reminding them of their strengths when facing challenges.



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.

Consideration of communication barriers is of high importance as effective communication is key to successful outcomes for families. Aboriginal peoples may also utilise many different communication styles and it is important to understand how to support two-way communication. 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.

The **OARS** model centres on effective communication through *Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections and Summaries* and similar to narrative approaches is effective and culturally responsive. 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. Practitioners need to keep this in mind to apply the 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. (*Roadmap for reforming the Child and Family Support System 2021–2023*)

<https://dhs.sa.gov.au/services/cfss/resources/reports-and-publications/roadmap-for-reforming-the-cfss-practitioner-version>

It is for these reasons that open-ended questions where families can tell their story and change their narrative are vital. Aboriginal peoples may also have a preference to agree to a question or say 'yes', this may be because the question was not understood, to end the conversation, or simply because the topic is uncomfortable to discuss, whereas an open-ended question we can understand what is felt and meant not just said, which will lead to greater understandings.

Affirmations are also extremely useful when working with Aboriginal families. Practitioners who focus on relationship-based practices have a greater chance of building an understanding of Aboriginal parenting practices, lived experiences, trauma, shared histories and seeing the strengths in culture and families. It is important that affirmations come with a relationship to the family, so it is known to be genuine and not seen as patronising.

Reflections can also work two ways. It is important that non-Aboriginal practitioners undertake cultural consultation with an appropriate Aboriginal practitioner or cultural authority to reflect on both the family but also themselves as a practitioner, knowing themselves and continuing to grow in their work with families.

Consideration of communication barriers is important as 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.



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 **OARS**, it is important for practitioners to adopt the following attitudes or stance towards the individual:

- The practitioner believes that the individual has the capacity to make good decisions regarding their own change.
- The practitioner believes that the individual wants the best for their children and families.
- The practitioner is genuinely curious about the individual's point of view, even if it is counter to others.

Practitioner Behaviours

OARS are conversation micro-skills that practitioners use to gain an understanding of family's experiences, thoughts, feelings, beliefs and hopes for their future. These practices promote the self-efficacy of families and belief in their responsibilities for their own decisions and actions.



Reflecting what families say and summarising the conversation lets the person know that they have been listened to and understood. Even when a practitioner has a good working relationship with a family member, **OARS** are useful for maintaining and strengthening the partnership.

Families need to know they are being listened to and understood. This can be achieved by utilising micro-skills such as open-ended questioning which encourages families to share their thoughts and feelings.

Affirmations, Summaries, and Reflections demonstrate that the practitioner has heard the individual and understands their emotions and perspective. Utilising a narrative approach with Aboriginal families assists practitioners to engage meaningfully with families.

Non-Aboriginal practitioners need to listen deeply and meaningfully during these conversations and seek clarity if they do not understand the challenges faced by the family or the individual family context.

When applying **OARS** micro-skills in practice a few key tips are outlined below.

Behaviours for practitioners to work towards when applying OARS 	Behaviours for practitioners to avoid when applying OARS 
<p>Use open ended questions that focus on the individual's thoughts and feelings</p> <p>Use affirmations to highlight a person's strengths and self-belief</p> <p>Reflect feelings to ensure they feel heard and understood</p> <p>Use summaries to bring together key points of a conversation, highlight key points, or to move the conversation along and shift focus</p>	<p>Don't ask too many questions at once</p> <p>Don't provide the family with your own ideas or reflections on the family's situation</p> <p>Don't explain your views or reasons for the family's situation rather than giving them the chance to tell their own story</p> <p>Avoid using a lot of 'closed' questions that only require a Yes or No response.</p>

For example:

‘So, Heidi, tell me what you think about the plan we have in place?’ (open ended question)

‘How well do you think this will work for your family?’ (open ended question)

*‘I can see you have been working on the cleaning up the yard this week and that **you’re the kind of person who can really get things done**’ (affirmation)*

*‘It is so good to hear the children have been at school all week. I can see **you really care about their schooling.**’ (affirmation)*

Jayda, I can see that you are frustrated that child protection services have previously been involved, and I can hear that you are finding this really challenging (reflection of feelings).

‘You are frustrated that the school hasn’t responded to your request for support. You are concerned about Maya’s literacy and falling behind the others, and that is very worrying for you.’ (reflection of feelings)

I’ve heard you tell me that you’re using alcohol each day at the moment, but that you don’t think it is having a negative impact on your children? Is that correct? (summary)

It is good to hear the school got back to you, I understand that Maya is receiving SSO support at school, a mentor will do 1:1 literacy work with her and you are eligible for Smith Family support. Is that correct?’ (summary)

Practice Strategies

This section provides a step-by-step guidance on how to use **OARS** in practice.

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with a single word or phrase	<p>Asking open-ended questions is a good way to encourage an individual to explore issues in greater depth. This creates space for deeper discussions about issues that they feel are important. For example:</p> <p>Instead of asking <i>“Is Tom difficult to manage?”</i>, ask <i>“How would you describe your relationship with Tom?”</i> or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What... <i>do you think about the plan?</i> • When... <i>do you think you will be able to complete this?</i> • Where... <i>will you get the support you need?</i> • Who... <i>have you talked to about your concerns?</i> • How... <i>have you made decisions before about the children’s schooling?</i> • Tell me more about...? <p>The practitioner’s role is to ask powerful questions that help the individual make connections (linking values with behaviours) and come to their own conclusions and solutions to problems. Most questions should be open-ended rather than closed (75% open-ended questions is a good guide).</p>
Autonomy-building questions are questions that do not challenge, but instead highlight the central notion that the individual holds the expertise and wisdom about changing	<p>Autonomy-building questions:</p> <p>For example:</p> <p>Instead of:</p> <p><i>“I’ve heard that there have been child protection concerns raised about Lexi... it sounds like it’s an issue.”</i></p> <p>Use an autonomy-building question such as:</p> <p><i>“I’ve heard that there have been child protection concerns raised about Lexi...” What do you make of it all?”</i></p>

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
<p>Affirmations are statements that highlight and are supportive of a person's strengths, efforts, intentions, value or worth. It can also build engagement and motivation.</p>	<p>Affirmations are used to recognise and acknowledge what is inherently good, worthwhile, and valuable within the individual and family. They convey that the practitioner understands and empathises with their experience. Affirmations must be genuine and represent what is true about the family member. They build warmth and trust in the relationship and boost the family member's self-esteem, which is linked to motivation.</p> <p>Affirmations acknowledge an individual's strength, a positive behaviour or characteristic. It is different from praise, which often has a focus on what another individual may think. In general, affirmations do not start with 'I' (as praise statements often do) because this brings the focus on the practitioner rather than the individual. For example:</p> <div data-bbox="384 712 1388 1104" style="background-color: #f8d7da; padding: 10px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p><i>Practitioner: "You have been really honest today in talking about the difficulties you have with your Mum and Uncle."</i></p> <p><i>"You've come up with plenty of good ideas about why Danny is often missing school. This is going to be really useful down the track."</i></p> <p><i>"You care a lot about your family."</i></p> <p><i>"You've been successful in drinking less around the kids in the past. You have what it takes."</i></p> </div> <p>The context of an affirmation is important. If families or individuals think our attempts to make affirmations are disingenuous, they are likely to be ineffective.</p> <p>Affirmations are great for building engagement, and when aimed towards a change behaviour, they can build motivation for change.</p>
<p>Reflections are statements that reflect the words and feelings being expressed by an individual</p>	<p>Practitioners use reflections to respond to what the individual says by repeating, rephrasing, or reflecting what they have said or what they might be feeling.</p> <p>This lets the individual know that the practitioner is listening and attending to the meaning behind their words. As a rough guide, practitioners should aim for twice as many reflections as questions.</p> <p>Reflections show that the practitioner understands what the individual is thinking and feeling by reflecting it back to them in a statement (not a question). A simple reflection is simply repeating back, or slightly paraphrasing what the individual has said. A complex reflection adds meaning or emphasis, and the practitioner makes a guess at what else might be going on for the individual.</p> <p>Practice Point:</p> <p>You can reflect words, emotions, and/or behaviours:</p>

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
	<p>(Reflecting words) <i>Some of what I heard you say...</i></p> <p>(Reflecting emotions) <i>You are [feeling] ...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>sad</i> - <i>frustrated</i> - <i>excited</i> - <i>angry</i> <p>(Reflecting behaviour) <i>I noticed...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>tears in your eyes...something has upset you</i> - <i>your voice sounds shaky...this is a tough topic for you to talk about</i> - <i>you smiled when you said that...you are feeling proud of James</i> <p>For example:</p> <div style="background-color: #f8d7da; padding: 10px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>Individual: <i>"It doesn't matter what I say or do, it's as if he ignores me and I can't deal with it anymore."</i></p> <p>Practitioner: <i>"You feel you have tried everything to make him listen, but nothing works. You are exhausted."</i></p> <p>Or</p> <p>Individual: <i>"The kids have always been hard to control, they're just active kids."</i></p> <p>Practitioner: <i>"Your kids are full of beans and can be a bit of a handful. You'd like them to be a little easier to manage and supervise."</i></p> <p>Or</p> <p>Individual: <i>"I hate having to go up to the principal's office all the time about this."</i></p> <p>Practitioner: <i>"Jane's attendance is something you'd like to change, so you don't have to be at the principal's office all the time."</i></p> </div> <p>These simple sentences are examples of a reflection that is perfect for showing an individual that the practitioner is listening.</p> <p>These simple reflections are critical for engaging with individual and families.</p>

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
	<p>It can be tempting to turn a reflection into a question, but questions demand an answer. Reflections keep the conversation flowing by inviting a response.</p> <p>Practitioners can also reflect non-verbal communication:</p> <p>Young person (Taryn): [looks angry at something said during a meeting]</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>I noticed that something in the conversation has upset you, Taryn.</i></p>
Summaries are a special type of reflection where the practitioner recaps what has occurred in all or part of a conversation or session.	<p>Summaries can...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help move the conversation along or draw together the key points of a conversation before moving on to another topic • Be used to check that you are understanding individuals or families' goals and preferences. • Confirm your understanding of the key elements of an individual or families' plan. <p>Practitioners may find it useful to try and use the same language as the individual when using summaries.</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>"Okay, let me see if I have it all. One, you struggle to pay rent; two, you are fighting with your mother and she is the one that looks after the kids while you are at work; and three, you feel like the school is always breathing down your neck and this makes you feel intimidated. Have I got it all?"</i></p> <p>Practitioners can invite the individual to correct anything that has been missed (<i>"Did I miss anything?"</i>), assisting in building their autonomy.</p>

Outcomes

Practice level outcomes

- Children and families feel their voice is heard, understood, and respected.
- Practitioners demonstrate effective use of OARS techniques to actively engage families.
- Children and families feel supported and empowered to make decisions for themselves.
- Practitioners demonstrate genuine and respectful behaviours, supporting families and children to feel understood, respected, and optimistic.
- Practitioners engage with Aboriginal and culturally diverse families in a manner that families feel culturally safe, their connection to culture is respected and viewed as a strength, and decision making is collaborative, and reflects their goals and aspirations.
- Practitioners have a better understanding of the individuals and families they work with, their culture, their values, their motivation for change and their family circumstances.



Practice Points

- Understanding the impact of forced removal policies on Aboriginal peoples is essential when addressing child safety and protection concerns, as this places an emphasis on the power imbalance within family and practitioner relationship, and an emphasis on relationship-based practice.
- Understanding Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing is key to valuing culture as a strength for families and being able to understand these perspectives. Lived experiences and diversity in cultural connection and practice will assist practitioners in building culturally responsive relationships with families.
- In some settings such as child protection and child and family welfare agencies, the practitioner needs to build engagement with the individual while also having obligations regarding child safety. These obligations define the boundaries of the relationship. However, within those boundaries it is still possible for practitioners and families to work positively and develop trust and understanding. Acknowledging and being aware of the inherent power imbalance is important at all stages of engaging with families. Asking permission promotes autonomy and choice in these circumstances.
- Effective engagement involves establishing professional boundaries and expectations around the practitioner and family members. It is important to review your professional bodies and your organisations code of ethics specific to establishing and maintaining professional boundaries. If professional boundaries are breached, then this needs to be identified and discussed – An effective way to manage this is to be transparent and state calmly and warmly what the practitioner has observed or feels might be happening, while being respectful and seeking permission to discuss a challenging topic for example,

“I’m feeling concerned about what happened when you asked if you could come to my home so our children could play.

It is important we have some clear boundaries around our work together. Would you be able to help me understand more about what you were thinking?

I value you, and our working relationship, so it is important we are on the same page about my role in your life. My understanding is that I am here as a support worker for you and your family during this tricky period of time in your life but I’m not here to become your friend.

- Pausing or ‘sitting with the silence’ can be an effective skill to use in conjunction with **OARS**. If an individual provides a brief response or is lost for words, it is important to consider the option of not responding verbally straight away, allowing space for the person to think of more to say rather than prompt them with an affirmation or another open-ended question.
- Simple positive body language (e.g., a simple nod, or “uhuh”) can also be helpful to acknowledge thoughts and feelings and encourage conversation without interrupting.
- An awareness of non-verbal communication is important to practitioners engaging with Aboriginal and culturally diverse families, it is important that cultural consultations are undertaken prior to engaging with families.

- A skilful practitioner is one that reflects on their practice and acknowledges when they need to take immediate action regarding child safety and/or engagement. This might require newer, more effective ways of using **OARS** to help individuals connect with their thoughts and feelings. Using **OARS** during difficult conversations also increases the potential for practitioners to maintain engagement with families and continue working with them into the future.
- OARS helps the practitioner unpack and understand the perspective of the individual, so they feel heard and understood. This is particularly helpful in strengthening the relationship with families given there may be difficult conversations about changing behaviours.
- OARS are typically used when having conversations regarding child safety (e.g., making a report regarding increased risk to the child) which includes the parental behaviours needed to keep children safe.
- Keep in mind that change is a process that comes from within – we cannot force individuals to use behaviours that uphold child safety. This does not mean that we should avoid raising concerns with individuals and exercising your mandated notifier responsibilities by making a formal report to the Child Abuse Report Line (in support of change), it simply means that this technique may help us keep children and young people on the agenda in a way that families might find acceptable.

Reflective questions for practitioners:

Consider a family you are currently working with:

- What are the key communication strategies you employ with this family?
- Are you able to engage with the whole family unit?
- If not...what are the barriers?
- What is the children's view of their situation?
- What strategies do you utilise when engaging with the children? How does it differ to your conversation with the adults in the family?
- How do you reassure the family that you are listening and have understood their concerns regarding your engagement with their family?
- If an Aboriginal family, how do you know they have understood the reason for your involvement? Who are the primary decision makers in this family?

Notes



