



Child and Family Support System

Common Elements

Module: Building Engagement

Practice Guide: Checking for Understanding





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“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.

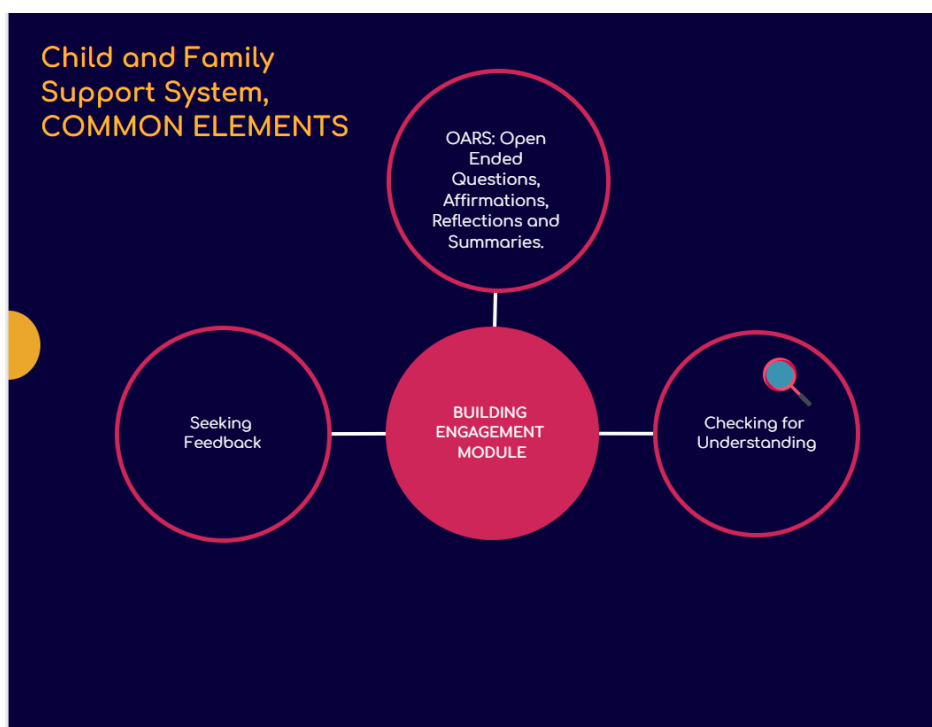
Each practice guide is comprised of an overview of the practice and its purpose, cultural considerations, key capabilities, practice strategies, outcomes, and practice points. It should be a practitioner's go-to resource, in addition to training and coaching in delivering these practices with fidelity.

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



Checking for Understanding refers to the practice of routinely checking that individuals have understood discussions, information, and/or decisions relevant to them. This guide can be used with adult individuals (parents, carers, and kinship relatives) and with young people from approximately 10 years of age (as developmentally appropriate).

Checking for Understanding is a practice within the *Building Engagement* module. This module focuses on building and maintaining a relationship to support collaborative work. *Checking for Understanding* is an important part of the practitioner–individual/family relationship to avoid communication problems and misunderstandings.

It ensures that children and families can fully participate in an informed way in actions and decisions that impact them. Empowering families to have voice and choice.

Purpose

This practice guide focuses on ensuring that individuals understand the information provided to them and the actions and decisions that impact them. *Checking for Understanding* can be used to prevent misunderstandings, help practitioners stay focused on child safety concerns and support conversations regarding change.

This practice should be used regularly and routinely, especially when:

- ✓ Information is complicated.
- ✓ Information is shared between multiple services/agencies.
- ✓ The individual is distressed (which can be a barrier to processing information).
- ✓ Summarising key topics, actions, or information shared at the end of a session.
- ✓ Cross cultural understandings may differ.



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, values and how one's own background and experiences influences these perspectives. When this is understood it creates space to layer additional knowledge, understandings, skills and embrace the shared true histories, culture, and Aboriginal ways of 'knowing, being and doing'. This is also known as allyship accountability.

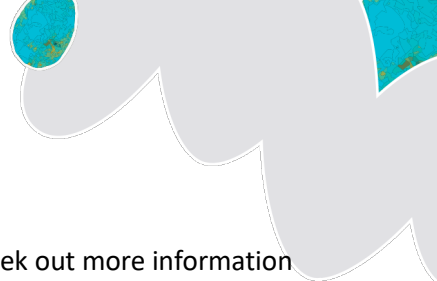
When *Checking for Understanding* with Aboriginal families it is vital that you understand Aboriginal communication styles, an example of differing communication styles and potential communication barriers as effective communication is key to successful outcomes for families. Aboriginal peoples may also utilize many different communication styles and it is important to understand how to support two-way communication for shared understanding.

An example of differing communication styles can be seen when an Aboriginal family member remains silent in meetings. Extended periods of silence during communication can give space to deeply listen or show consensus, this should be seen as a valid communication style and respected as such.

Practitioners also need to be aware that nodding or silence does not always indicate that the family understands, similar to a family answering with a 'yes', this may be used to hurry up or end an uncomfortable or disrespectful conversation, feeling forced into saying yes, feeling like the practitioner wants a 'yes' answer. Consider whether a cultural authority/decision maker could be involved in checking the family's understanding. Asking for further clarification of understanding or asking to explain the reason for their decision will create greater understanding.

Aboriginal family led decision making is critically important when working with Aboriginal families as checking for understanding may also include family and kinship relationships who may also take responsibility for ensuring the safety of children and young people.

It is always important to consider cultural safety and practitioner allyship when communicating. Take the time to build rapport and aim to create a trusting and comfortable relationship.



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

- The practitioner believes individuals are experts in their own life, families are heard and responded to with sensitivity, respect, and compassion to make their own decisions.
- The practitioner is willing to tailor information in a way that matches the specific needs of individual and families, inclusive of cultural needs.
- The practitioner provides information to individuals in a way they can understand. This is essential for collaborative work and to enable families to have an active voice in making changes to improve their own and their family's wellbeing.
- The practitioner believes it is part of their role to check that individuals fully understand the implications of key decisions that are made.





Practitioner Behaviours

Checking for Understanding is achieved by asking individuals to repeat back or summarise information, decisions or actions discussed or agreed upon in their own words. For example:

Practitioner: “Ian, considering the importance of this decision, I just wanted to check you have the same understanding as me regarding the court’s decision. Can you let me know what you have heard?”

If necessary, practitioners can repeat the information, provide the information using an explanation the individual may easily understand, or fill in any important gaps the individual may have missed. For example:

Practitioner: “Yes, that’s right. But they are also saying that if Kevin comes back to South Australia, he can’t live with you and the children are not to be unsupervised around him. You must be in the same room as the children at all times

Behaviours for practitioners to work towards when Checking for understanding	Behaviours for practitioners to avoid when Checking for understanding
	
<p>Before Checking for Understanding, the practitioner provides a rationale for doing it (e.g., “to make sure we are both on the same page”).</p> <p>Practitioner asks the individual to summarise, repeat or talk through the information in their own words.</p> <p>Practitioner re-explains, simplifies, or clarifies any knowledge gaps the individual may have.</p>	<p>Practitioner asks the individual to repeat information in a way that suggests their ability to learn new information is impaired, or the individual feels like they are being tested.</p> <p>Practitioner asks the individual to repeat information in vague terms or doesn’t ask them to recall the information in their own words at all (e.g., ‘Did you get all of that?’).</p> <p>Practitioner explains the details of the information using jargon.</p>

Practice Strategies

This section provides a step-by-step guide on how to use *Checking for Understanding* in practice, these are prompts that can be tailored to align with your communication style.

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
Provide a rationale	<p>Practitioner provides a brief rationale for checking for understanding, explaining why they are asking individuals to repeat information to avoid coming across as condescending.</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>“We’ve talked about a few strategies that you’d like to do in the morning to help get the kids to school. To make sure we are on the same page, can you tell me the two things you are going to try tomorrow morning?”</i></p> <p>Or</p> <p><i>“To make sure I have communicated this properly, who do you expect will be at the meeting tomorrow?”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s make sure we both understand – what is the main reason you have for getting a referral to the psychologist?”</i></p>
Provide information in chunks	<p>When there is a lot of information, the practitioner breaks information up into natural ‘chunks’ for the individual to digest. A chunk is a unit of information that is cohesive and can be delivered in a self-contained way.</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>“Okay, as I mentioned, I was going to take you through the concerns and worries about Shane’s care. We can go through the main safety concerns. How about I explain each one in detail first? Then I’d like to check in with you to make sure you understand what each concern is and get your take on it. How does that sound?”</i></p> <p>It is important to point out here that if a practitioner shares the same concerns they should be acknowledged after the practitioner is confident the individual knows enough information about the concern.</p>

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
Have individual recall information	<p>At the end of each 'chunk', the practitioner asks the individual to recall the information in their own words, emphasising that this is about checking that the practitioner has explained it clearly.</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>"Let's pause for a moment here. Gale, I just wanted to check in about the information I just shared. Could you tell me what that means to you in your own words?"</i></p> <p>It is important to note this is the most important part of <i>Checking for Understanding</i>.</p>
Clarify	<p>Practitioner clarifies any key information that is missing or has been misunderstood and invite further questions or clarifications from the individual.</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>"Okay, so from your point of view, Child Protection are worried about you leaving Ellie unsupervised. I just wanted to add that in the meeting, they specifically mentioned the fact that Ellie was very distressed to the point of choking while crying, she also had a very severe nappy rash causing some bleeding for a number of days that I understand they talked to you about. Is that what you understood?"</i></p>



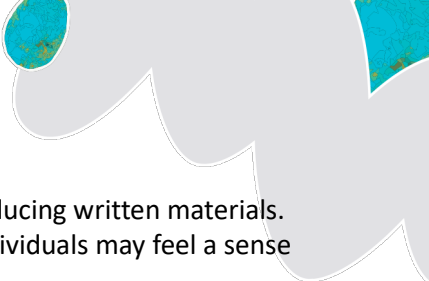
Outcomes

Practice level outcomes

- Individuals understand and retain information given to them.
- Individuals and families understand information shared and actively engage or lead in decision-making and planning that impacts their lives.
- Reduced misunderstandings between individuals and practitioners that may impact or damage trust in the relationship and engagement.
- Practitioners are better equipped to support individuals and families in decision-making that impacts their lives and tailor service delivery accordingly.

Practice Points

- The practitioner should match their communication style with the specific needs/style of the individual. For example, reflect the individuals own language in discussions and explanations.
- Avoid using jargon and acronyms. Use plain language whenever possible.
- Be prepared to address knowledge gaps or clarify information that has been misunderstood.
- For information that requires individuals to carry out specific actions or behaviours it can be helpful to practice the behaviour or write down what they need to do.
- Ask individuals what would help them to remember information or actions they will take. Help individuals to identify ways of remembering or retaining information. For example, the use of voice recordings or reminders on a mobile phone or other device may be helpful for some.
- It is important to apply a cultural and intersectional lens when working with individuals and families of different cultures, abilities, gender, religion, or sexual orientation to your own.
- Different members of the family may have different understanding of information, it may be important to check the understanding of multiple family members. If this is the case, think through the appropriateness of multiple people sharing together or individually.

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- It is important to consider the literacy level of family members prior to introducing written materials. Be aware that the issue of literacy should be handled sensitively and that individuals may feel a sense of shame about their literacy difficulties.

Reflective questions for practitioners

- What ways do you check for understanding?
- What is your bias around understanding and communication styles?
- What intersectional and cultural lens do you apply when considering if individuals and families have understood the communications?
- Reflect on a time when this has not gone well for you, what was your learning?
- As a practitioner how do you best hear and understanding information given to you?
- What have you taken away from this Practice Guide?

Notes

