



Centre for Evidence and Implementation

The common elements approach to service provision for children and families in South Australia

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Centre for Evidence and Implementation

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Purpose and scope

The South Australian government developed a proposal to create a cohesive Child and Family Intensive Support System (CFISS) which will bring together all in-scope government and non-government delivered services to create a connected, evidence-informed service system for vulnerable, medium- and high-risk children and families. The aim of CFISS is to facilitate immediate and strong intervention to disrupt the growing intergenerational problem of child abuse and neglect in South Australia. It will involve consolidating services and commissioning into a single Department of Human Services unit; investing in better services that are evidence-informed and best practice; building a connected system; supporting priority populations; applying cultural considerations; strengthening the workforce; linking to other service systems; focusing on outcomes.

In late 2019, the Department of Human Services undertook a co-design process with the child and family services sector to inform the design and delivery of CFISS. One approach that was identified as having the potential to be a building block of practice for the new service system is the common elements approach. Common elements are discrete techniques or strategies used to engage clients or facilitate changes in client attitudes and behaviours. They are evidence-informed (found across programs/interventions known to be effective, and/or supported by evidence from multiple sources) and designed to be used flexibly in response to client need.

This paper has been prepared by the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI), who are providing support to the South Australian Department of Human Services (the Department) in the design and implementation of the common elements approach.

The purpose of this paper is to resource the sector to understand what the common elements approach is, what practices the government is emphasising in this approach, and what the likely next steps are.

Appendix A provides answers to frequently asked questions about the common elements approach and how it will be implemented in South Australia.

Understanding common elements

Common elements are discrete techniques or practices that are grounded in evidence and can be used to build client engagement or facilitate behaviour change. They are practices that are found in various approaches and interventions (thus 'common') of demonstrated effectiveness. It can be helpful to think of common elements as the active ingredients within programs and interventions.

The common elements approach to child and family service delivery is flexible and responsive to the specific circumstances, problems, and needs of the clients being served. This means they can be used individually or bundled together to achieve particular objectives or work towards specific client goals. Training practitioners in the common elements builds consistency of practice within teams and agencies, and across the service system.

Identifying and prioritising common elements for implementation

There are a number of common elements that are supported by evidence, however not all of the identified practices are relevant or effective for every service or client group. The practices selected and used need to be well-matched to the target group, priority problem areas, and the system and local contexts.

In this section we describe the common elements that have been shortlisted for implementation in South Australia in child and family services funded by the Department. CEI have been working in partnership with the Department and key representatives from the child and family workforce and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to develop and prioritise these common elements, informed by the evidence.

A collaborative, multi-step process has been undertaken to identify the common elements shortlisted for implementation in South Australia:

- The Department led extensive co-design and consultation activities to inform the priorities for service system redesign
- CEI reviewed the co-design reports and other available data held by the Department to identify key areas or topics of focus

- CEI conducted evidence checks for each area/topic to identify what practices are supported by the available research evidence
- CEI identified ~30 elements, bundled into 12 possible modules, each designed to achieve a particular objective and/or address a specific problem area or challenge.
- This longlist was reviewed in detail by the Department and key stakeholders (including representatives from Aboriginal agencies), and in collaboration with CEI, a shortlist of 10 elements targeting specific problem areas/outcomes were shortlisted for implementation.

The shortlisting process has been in keeping with the Department’s Aboriginal co-design criteria.

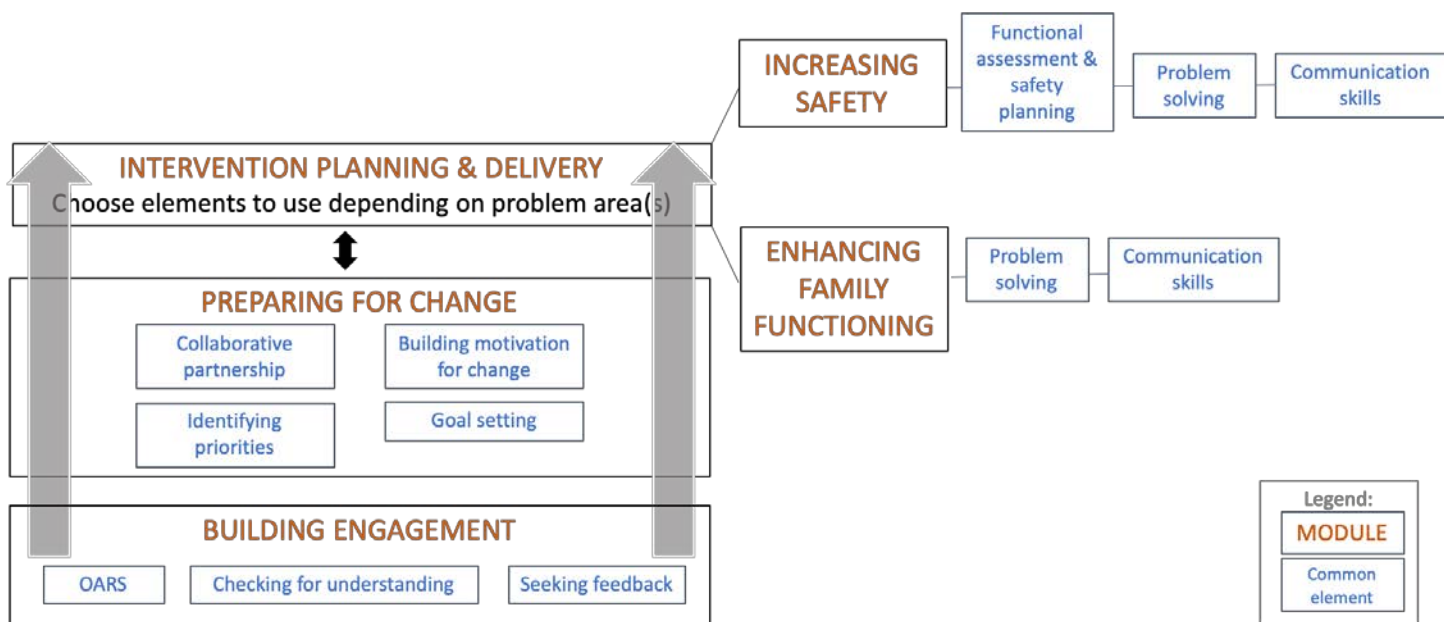
Consequently, this document **does not present a comprehensive list of all possible practices that could be used when providing services to vulnerable children and families**. It identifies and describes a small number of strategies that are well-supported by evidence, and that have been prioritised by the Department for implementation in the South Australian child and family service system.

All of the practices identified can be used by practitioners in a flexible manner as needed and in conjunction with other effective strategies that they are already familiar with and have mastered. For example, practitioners may have other evidence-informed strategies not mentioned here in their existing repertoire that they use when working with individuals or families experiencing family violence. The practices identified in this document can be used to complement and strengthen these existing approaches, ensuring consistency in core, foundational practices across the service system.

Common elements to be implemented in South Australia

Figure 1 illustrates how the prioritised common elements have been bundled together to address different target areas/outcomes, and Table 1 provides a brief description of each of the target areas and common elements shortlisted for implementation.

Figure 1. Illustration of the target areas/outcomes and common elements



NB:

- OARS = Open-ended questions; Affirmations; Reflection; Summarising
- Problem Solving and Communication Skills are practices that can be used to address both safety and family functioning. The model represents different applications of the same practices.

Table 1. Description of each module and common element shortlisted for implementation

Module Name	Module Objective	Common elements (practices)	Brief description of each element
Building Engagement	The purpose of this module is to provide key practices for a practitioner to ensure they are making every effort to authentically engage clients, and that good engagement is built initially and then sustained throughout all phases of their work together. This module contains practices to be used when first starting to work with a new client to ensure a good foundation from which to build from, but the practices can and should be used throughout a practitioner's work with a client to ensure engagement is not broken, or if it is, is restored quickly.	Open-ended questions, Affirming, Reflecting and Summarising (OARS)	OARS is an acronym that stands for: Using <i>Open-ended</i> questions to explore clients' current priorities, <i>affirming</i> their thoughts and strengths, <i>reflecting</i> what the client is saying and responding in an active manner and <i>summarising</i> their statements by restating what has been said demonstrating an understanding of clients' views and facilitating the 'moving on' of the discussion. OARS is cornerstone practice from Motivational Interviewing
		Checking for understanding	Practitioners work collaboratively with clients to reflect on discussions that have occurred, ensuring a mutual understanding and interpretation of conversations and/or next steps outlined. This requires encouraging clients to describe their understanding of the conversation/next steps, often by reframing close-ended questions to open-ended questions.
		Seeking feedback	Practitioners seek regular feedback from clients to ensure that their feelings, values, and preferences are being accommodated and can be incorporated into future sessions. This creates and maintains a client-centred focus as well as building practitioner-client trust.
Preparing for Change	The purpose of this module is to provide key practices to equip a practitioner to identify the priorities of the client, set clear goals, and build the client's own motivation for change. This module ensures the practitioner nurtures an environment for positive change, by collaborating with clients to ascertain their top priorities and major problem areas. This module	Collaborative partnership	Practitioners and clients seek and build a collaborative relationship and work together as equals in a mutually agreed upon and respected way. Client-practitioner partnerships are based on the understanding that each partner has complementary expertise: the client is regarded as an expert on their own particular circumstances, whereas practitioners are experts in

	<p>contains practices to be incorporated and adapted to each client's values and needs, and invites them as active decision-makers in their own lives while allowing practitioners to build a rapport with them. By reconceptualising the practitioner-client dynamic to privilege the voice and needs of the client, this module shifts the focus on static practices that may not work for every client, and instead fosters a collaboration, where the practitioner <i>consults</i> the client to gain a contextually accurate picture of their key problems and needs. This allows the client's needs to guide conversations and development of action plans. By working in partnership with practitioners, clients can also gradually gain confidence in independently replicating these steps.</p>		<p>their particular discipline, bringing skills and strategies to support the client. This process should also involve a positive reframing of problems as goals (e.g. high parent-child conflict or family tensions as <i>improved parent-child communication</i>).</p>
		Identifying priorities	<p>Practitioners work collaboratively with clients to identify and describe their top priorities and key challenges or problem areas. The client is an active participant in this process, and drives decision making with support of the practitioners. The identified priorities will be used as a basis for providing, or referring them to, services that can address priorities and identified needs.</p>
		Building motivation for change	<p>Practitioners identify clients' internal motivation for change by working with them in a collaborative, reflective style when exploring thoughts and feelings they have about particular behaviours. Some clients may be reluctant or unfamiliar with this practice of opening up to practitioners, and there are several techniques that practitioners can adopt to develop rapport and trust with clients. This can be done through expressing empathy, active listening and reflecting. The practitioner also works to increase clients' self-efficacy and self-determination for achieving sustainable change. Other useful MI strategies are included here such as identifying sustain and change talk and guiding the client in the direction of behaviour change. This process aims to build the client's motivation, readiness and commitment to change.</p>
		Goal setting	<p>Practitioners work with clients to identify and develop realistic goals for the client, to motivate and guide behaviour change. This can involve selecting mutually</p>

			<p>agreed goals - therapeutic or practical - and working towards achieving them.</p> <p>Additionally, to ensure that addressing their goals are a manageable task, clients are encouraged to work towards one or two goals at a time, or have a complex goal broken down into smaller, simpler steps.</p>
Increasing Safety	<p>The purpose of this module is to provide key practices to be used to increase the safety of individuals or families. This involves teaching clients skills to communicate in a less confrontational manner and stepping out methods to reduce the likelihood of problem escalation. A significant function of this module involves working with individuals who are victims or at risk of violence or abuse and developing safety strategies that align with their needs in the short and long term, taking a harm minimisation approach.</p>	Problem solving	<p>Clients are introduced to a structured approach, stepping out how to clearly define problems, brainstorm, and develop solutions in terms that make them manageable. In partnership, the practitioner and family will develop an action plan for how to address in-family problems. The focus of problem solving in this module is to reduce triggers for family violence.</p>
		Communication skills	<p>Practitioners strengthen clients' skills in communication with an emphasis on improving the way family members talk and interact with each other. Practitioner supports sharing feelings between family members in a more positive manner without resorting to fighting, yelling and other non-constructive forms of communication.</p>
		Functional Assessment and Safety planning	<p>A functional assessment is undertaken prior to development of a safety plan to measure impact of family violence on several domains such as communication, social interaction, domestic life, and mobility etc. Based on this assessment practitioners, collaboratively with victims of family violence, build a personalised and comprehensive safety plan which addresses the short- and long-term needs of the client/victim. Practitioners need to be aware and respectful of the client regarding the extent they wish to discuss safety planning.</p>

Enhancing Family Functioning	The purpose of this module is to provide key practices to be used to strengthen and build family functioning. Family functioning is a broad term that refers to the ways in which family members interact, communicate, make decisions and 'get along'. This involves working with clients on communicating in a more collaborative manner and providing/strengthening structures around the global family environment including adaptability, cohesion, conflict, communication etc.	Problem solving	Clients are introduced to a structured approach, stepping out how to clearly define problems, brainstorm, and develop solutions in terms that make them manageable. In partnership, the practitioner and family will develop an action plan for how to address in-family problems. The focus of problem solving in this module is to generate ideas and options to increase family cohesion.
		Communication skills	Practitioners strengthen clients' skills in communication with an emphasis on improving the way family members talk and interact with each other. Practitioner supports sharing feelings between family members in a more positive manner without resorting to fighting, yelling and other non-constructive forms of communication.

Next steps

The Department are currently undertaking a trial of the common elements approach in selected services and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. CEI are supporting this trial by developing practice guides for each common element (which can be tailored for implementation at each agency) and delivering implementation support such as training and coaching for practitioners in using the common elements (as described in Table 1) and supporting sites to undertake data-driven continuous quality improvement. The insights generated from this trial will inform how the Department moves forward with the common elements approach across the sector, including what kind of support agencies will receive to implement the common elements in their day-to-day practice.

Appendix A Frequently asked questions

1. Are the common elements supported by evidence?

Yes. Common elements are discrete techniques or practices that are grounded in evidence and are found in various approaches and interventions (thus 'common') of demonstrated effectiveness. Manualised programs designed to improve outcomes for children and families often contain the same (or very similar) common elements. Common elements can be bundled together to form evidence-informed 'modules' or 'programs.'

2. How are the common elements different to what we already do?

Many of the common elements are core, foundational practices. Some practitioners in some agencies may already be using these practices with high confidence and competence. For others, the common elements approach will be an opportunity to build this confidence and competence, enhancing the consistency in the way services are delivered across the sector.

3. Why do some elements appear in more than one module?

One of the benefits of a common elements approach is that it offers flexible, evidence-informed practices that can be used in different combinations to address specific target areas. Two examples of this from Figure 1 are Communication Skills and Problem Solving. These are two discrete skills that practitioners can apply in different ways to address different target areas (e.g. safety, family functioning).

4. Will the common elements replace all other evidence-informed practices we already use?

Not necessarily. This document does not present a comprehensive list of all possible practices that could be used when providing services to vulnerable children and families. It identifies and describes a small number of strategies that are well-supported by evidence, and that have been prioritised by the Department for implementation in the South Australian child and family service system. All of the practices identified can be used by practitioners in a flexible manner as needed and in conjunction with other effective strategies that they are already familiar with and have mastered. The practices identified in this document can be used to complement and strengthen existing approaches, ensuring consistency in core, foundational practices across the service system.

5. Do we need to implement all of the common elements described in this document immediately?

No. Agencies are being asked to demonstrate willingness to adopt a common elements approach to service delivery. There will likely be a staged roll-out of the common elements described in this document.

6. Will my agency be trained in how to use and incorporate the common elements into daily practice?

Implementation support will be provided to agencies so that relevant staff are equipped to adopt and sustain the common elements approach, incorporating the common elements into day-to-day practice with confidence, competency and consistency. The specifics of what form the implementation support will take will be informed by insights from the common elements trial.