

Solution Focused Practice Signs of Safety

Solution Focused Practice (SFP) is an approach that focuses on what people want to achieve rather than focusing on problems, difficulties and things that are not going well. The approach focuses on the present and the preferred future. Viewpoint ACASI questionnaires used together with Reflective Practice and Appreciative Inquiry can support this process.

SFP practitioners focus on helping people identify:

1. those things that are currently happening in their lives that they want to keep and continue with, and
2. the things they wish to have changed.

As a result people are able to construct a concrete vision of their preferred future. SFP focuses on what works (is working) as the key means of helping people deal with their current difficulties or problems. It focuses on creating change by building on what is working. The method creates meaning by drawing on stories of concrete success rather than simply solving an individual problem.

Solution Focused Practice focuses on two things:

1. supporting people to explore their preferred futures
2. exploring when, where, with whom, and how pieces or aspects of that preferred future are currently happening

SFP is supported by Appreciative Inquiry (AI) a process for facilitating positive change. AI employs a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that builds on individual strengths – ‘what’s working?’, ‘what’s good about what you are currently doing?’ AI involves the practice of asking questions that heighten positive potential. It is based on the understanding that people move in the direction of the questions posed. Studies indicate that people are willing to make the leap from possibility to probability and that once an event is judged as likely they make the further leap from probability to actuality.

Questioning

Particular styles of questioning support the process. For SFP practitioners ‘questions drive the journey’. These question styles are used in Viewpoint ACASI questionnaires and the associated practices can be used with young people in discussion of their responses.

Miracle question. A particular question used to help someone envision how the future will be different, a time when concerns or worries are no longer present. For example ‘Suppose when you go to sleep tonight a miracle occurs and your problems are solved. When you wake up what will be different to tell you that a miracle has happened?’ This may also help the establishment of goals

Scaling questions. These are useful to help a person identify differences and also help to establish goals. People are asked to identify resources ‘what is stopping them from slipping down the scale?’ exceptions – on a day when you feel one point higher, what would tell you it was a ‘one point higher day?’ and preferred future – where on the scale would be good enough?

Coping questions. These are designed to elicit information about a person’s resources that may have gone unnoticed. Even the most hopeless story from someone will have within it examples of coping that can be drawn upon. Genuine curiosity and admiration can help highlight strengths without contradicting a person’s view of reality

Problem free talk. This is useful to identify people’s strengths and resources. It can help relax people and help build rapport.

Signs of Safety

This framework was developed as an approach to risk assessment in circumstances where children have suffered abuse and builds on SFP¹. It brings together both a problem and a solution focus. It doesn't set a problems focus in opposition to a strengths and solution focus, it describes risk assessment as a 'constructive solution building undertaking'. It is simultaneously forensic – exploring harm and danger while at the same time eliciting and inquiring into strengths and safety. It is naturally holistic, bringing together everyone – professionals and family members to the assessment to combine professional knowledge with family knowledge and wisdom. The outcome is a one page assessment and planning protocol providing the organising map for child protection intervention from case management to closure.

At its simplest the framework can be understood as containing 4 domains for inquiry:

1. What are we worried about? (Past harm, future danger, and complicating factors)
2. What's working well? (Existing strengths and safety)
3. What needs to happen? (Future safety)
4. Where are we on a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means there is enough safety for child protection authorities to close the case and 0 means it is certain that a child will be (re) abused.

The SoS framework also has broader applications, for example:

- Use in domestic violence to build a 'safety network'
- Re-unification of children and parents
- Reviews of foster carers in relation to core competences
- Use in pre-birth risk assessments
- Decision making in Permanency Planning
- Understanding inter generational involvement with child protection services
- Use in strategy meetings prior to investigation

SoS Framework and Viewpoint ACASI

The Viewpoint methodology is a combination of computer based self interviewing and Reflective Practice incorporating Appreciative Inquiry. The questioning styles describes above can be used in relation to the young people's question responses.

The Viewpoint ACASI questionnaires engage young people in thinking about and describing their current circumstances across a range of dimensions. The questionnaires inquire about a wide range of circumstances and in addition to highlighting the most positive aspects of young people's lives enable them to identify particular areas for improvement and what they and others can do to achieve their preferred future.

Responses to the questions are scaled providing young people with the opportunity to identify differences: what is going well and where there are difficulties. The individual reports can compare previous responses showing what is improving and what is not. Young people can see their strengths being maintained or improving.

The responses create the opportunity for the practitioner to build on concrete successes, to highlight strengths and use coping questions to identify a young person's resources and resilience. Through Appreciative Inquiry practitioners demonstrate listening and learning without judgement.

Responses are scaled and practitioners can work out with a young person what is action is required to move up the scale, and what current positive experiences can be drawn on? Steps can be identified to move towards the young persons preferred future.

¹ The Signs of Safety: A Comprehensive Briefing Paper. Turnell A. 2010 www.signsofsafety.net