



PSDP—Resources and Tools: How relationship- based are you as a social worker?

Introduction

The term ‘relationship-based practice’ is commonly used in child and family social work. But how do social workers develop a relationship-based approach? What exactly is it? And how do social workers know when they are practising in relationship-based ways? This tool is intended to be an accessible guide and prompt to help you to consider what it means to practice in a relationship-based way with children and families.

You might find it helpful to use this learning tool when reviewing your engagement with families, especially when you feel ‘stuck’ and unsure of how best to proceed.

The tool contains a mixture of reflective questions, scenarios and exercises that will support your development of key relationship-based skills. Some of the questions and exercises, such as the free writing exercise outlined below, require you to do some thinking before meeting with a child and / or family. Others require you to reflect on your encounter after the event, alone or with a colleague. Some require both.

It’s all too easy to think you can’t afford to take the time for pre or post-reflection, but this tool will help you to see that doing so will ultimately save you time as your practice will become more focused and effective.

Identifying and working with relationship-based processes

Central to an understanding of relationship-based practice is the uniqueness of each encounter, with both the child / family member and social worker occupying distinctive contexts.

For all involved, it is important that a relationship-based approach recognises the impact of structural and societal inequalities (poverty, race, culture, religion, asylum seeker status, disability, sexuality, and so on) on engagement and relationship-building, and the impact of personal and psychological experiences on individuals' relational capabilities.

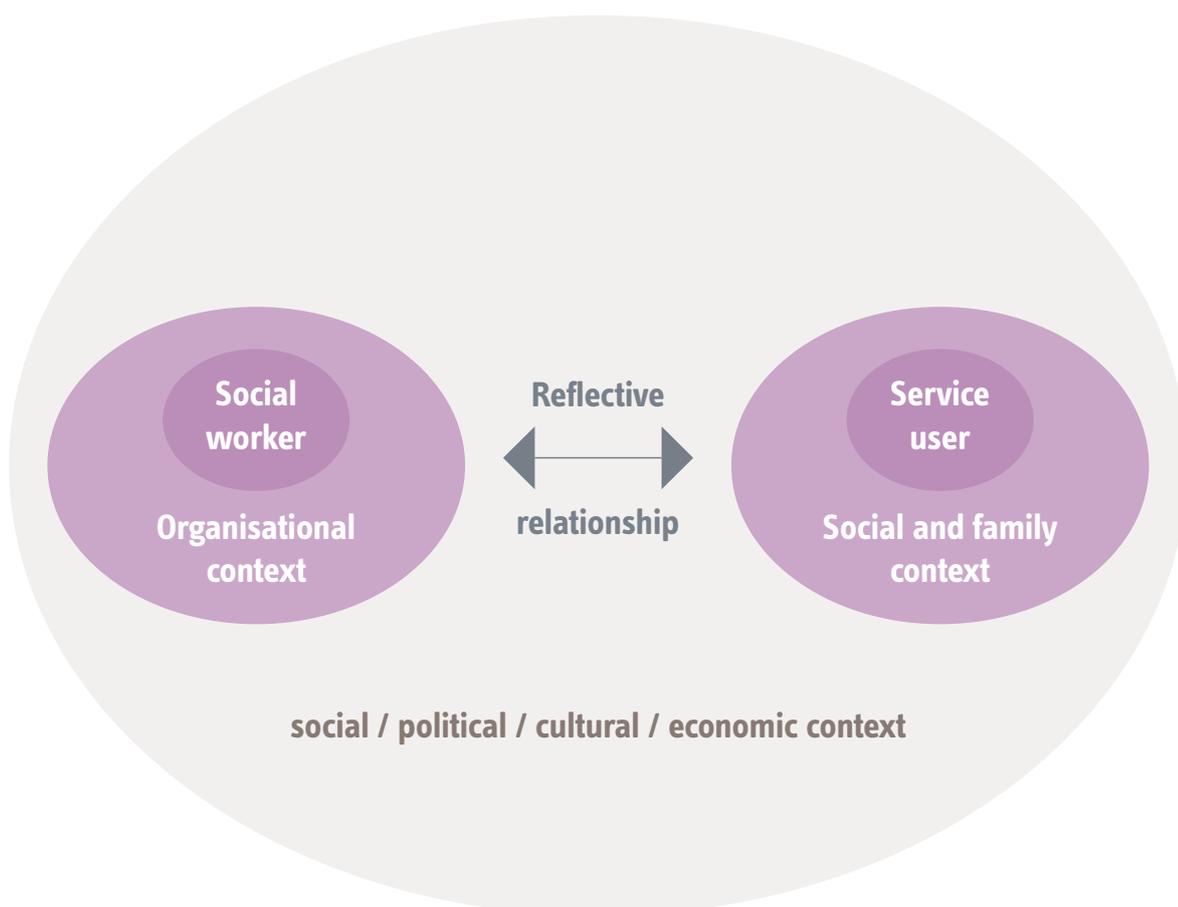


Figure 1.1 The context of relationship-based and reflective practice
Wilson et al (2011)

At the heart of these unique relationships are four key psychoanalytic processes. Each process is briefly defined below and followed by reflective questions and exercises to help you consider how these processes are shaping your work with individuals and families.

Transference

The unconscious re-enactment in a contemporary context of behaviours associated with earlier significant – usually parental – relationships.

Being aware of the emotional responses triggered by such interactions, and reflecting on (as opposed to reacting to) them is a core professional skill that social workers need to acquire.

Reflective questions:

When you prepare to visit children and parents, what do you think will be in their minds? What will they be thinking about you?

What do you think affects how children and parents interact with you?

How can you make use of the dynamics that shape your relationship with children and parents to support the work you are doing?

How confident are you in recognising and naming what is happening in the relationship you establish with children and parents? What would help to build your confidence and competence?

What part might a family's culture play in how they express their emotions and how they relate to you?

Discussions related to race, privilege and power (within a profession that prides itself on its social justice foundations) can elicit primal feelings of fear, shame, anger and despair. Which of these emotions do you find most challenging in yourself and others?

Splitting

This arises from an infant's earliest developmental task of reconciling oppositional feelings of love and hate, good and bad towards their primary carers.

If an infant has carers who help them to manage these powerful feelings, they will develop their capacity to accept that everyone has elements that are good and bad.

In situations where this developmental experience has not been so fully resolved, a more primitive 'split' response will prevail.

For example, in social work contexts, parents might only see their social worker as interfering and 'bad', unable to acknowledge that they are in some respects 'good' and endeavouring to offer support to improve their parenting.

Reflective scenario:

Think of a relationship with a parent(s) that you find challenging.

How do they make you feel?

How do their responses to you make you want to react?

How might you help the family to understand how they perceive you?

What would enable them to recognise that you represent both 'good' and 'bad' (i.e. you are supportive / caring but also have to exercise your statutory / controlling responsibility)?

Reflective exercise: free writing (20 mins max)

Think of a relationship with a family that makes you feel 'stuck' or unsure of what's going on. Give yourself five minutes and simply 'free write' your thoughts and feelings about the situation.

Start by writing the child or children's / parent or parents' names at the top of the page. Then, without removing your pen, write whatever comes into your head, however unexpected or seemingly irrelevant it might seem. If you run out of things to say then simply write 'I don't know what to write next' until something else comes to you.

After five minutes, pause for a moment then read what you've written out loud, underlining any words or phrases that particularly jump out.

Finally, reflect on what your writing has helped you to notice about how you experience working with this family. What feelings does it evoke? Does it tell you something about the family, or an individual family member? How can you use these insights in your work?

If the time and resource is available, you might want to adapt the exercise and do it with a colleague. Each person simultaneously produces a piece of free writing and takes it in turn to read it out loud to the other.

The person listening highlights the words and phrases that particularly caught their attention. This will prompt a reflective conversation and help to develop an awareness of thoughts and feelings that may not be fully conscious.

Projection

This involves difficult, unbearable feelings – like anger, fear, depression or hatred – being unconsciously relocated into another person, who may not always recognise them and can find themselves unexpectedly experiencing them or acting them out.

Reflective exercise (allow up to 60 mins):

In advance of a visit to see a child or children, pay careful attention to how you are feeling and write down a description of your emotional state (your pre-encounter description). As soon after the visit as possible, record your encounter in as much detail as you can recall (your descriptive record).

On completion of your descriptive record, read it back to yourself and, as you do so, in a column on the right hand side, make a note of what you recall feeling at the time, or feel in the moment as you read it.

Reflecting on the feelings you have identified from your descriptive record, consider which you recognise as belonging to you and which might have been ‘projected’ into you by the child.

For example, you may on reading your descriptive record recall at a particular point in the encounter that you suddenly felt very tired and wanted to ‘shut down’. In order to make sense of this experience, compare your descriptive record and commentary with your pre-encounter description.

Your pre-encounter description might say that you were tired having had a poor, interrupted night’s sleep, and so your experience during the visit might be attributable to that.

If, on the other hand, the wave of tiredness was totally unexpected, it might be a clue as to what the child was feeling, which they could not say in words but unconsciously communicated to you through a powerful projection, allowing you (if you are open and alert to it) to experience what they cannot bear.

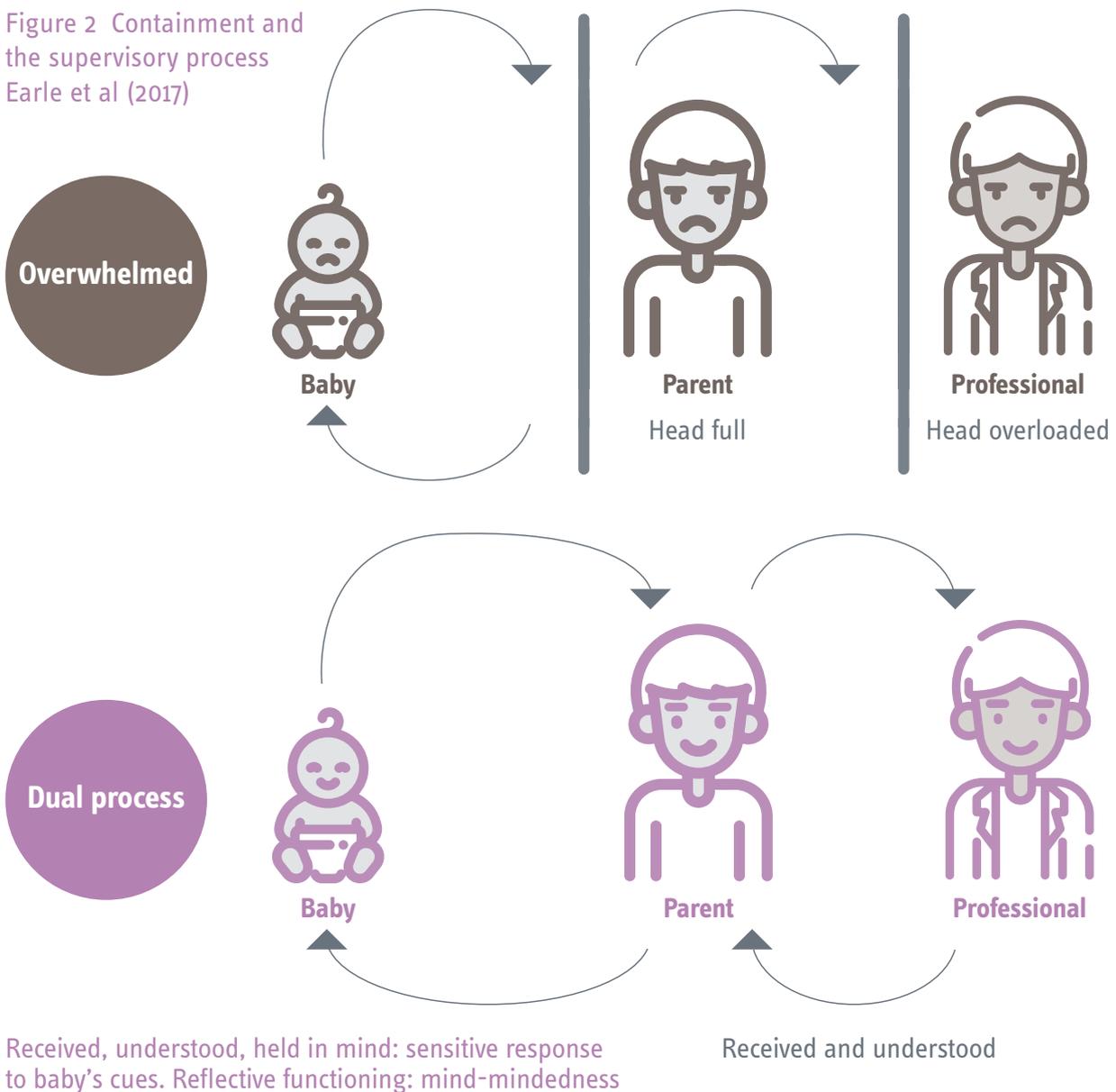
Make a brief note of the insight you have gained into the child’s experience from doing this exercise. The capacity to make unconscious dynamics conscious will contribute to a better understanding of the child’s experience, as well as more informed assessment and decision-making.

Containment

This refers to the need we all have for someone to help us process and manage – or ‘contain’ – difficult emotions, which is vital if we want to prevent the projections referred to above from becoming overwhelming.

Notions of being ‘full up’ or having a ‘head too full’ are useful metaphors for feeling overwhelmed and uncontained. The idea of a container refers to someone who can help an individual process these difficult experiences.

Figure 2 Containment and the supervisory process
Earle et al (2017)



Reflective questions:

What do you notice you do when you become anxious?

What helps you to manage your anxiety?

When you experience someone as containing your anxiety:

- > What are they doing?
- > How does it change what you feel?

Is containment expressed differently in different cultural contexts?

How does being contained impact on your work with children and families?

Conversely, how does *not* being contained impact on your work with children and families?

Other ways you can use this tool

In addition to the reflective questions and exercises in this learning tool being used by individuals as required, they can also form part of a regular team practice.

Use them in team meetings to develop skills in reaching 'beneath the surface' of practice to see what's happening at deeper levels.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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Research in Practice is a programme of
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