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# PSDP—Resources and Tools: The what works practice learning circle

  
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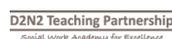
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## Introduction

In 2017, Norfolk County Council employed two ‘what works well’ leads to work on a one-year project that aimed to find innovative ways of supporting a learning culture in Adult and Children’s Services. The ‘what works practice learning circle’ was developed to enable practice supervisors, educators and leaders to replicate sessions run by the what works well leads after the project ended.

### **What works practice learning circle: an integrated approach to learning from successful practice situations**

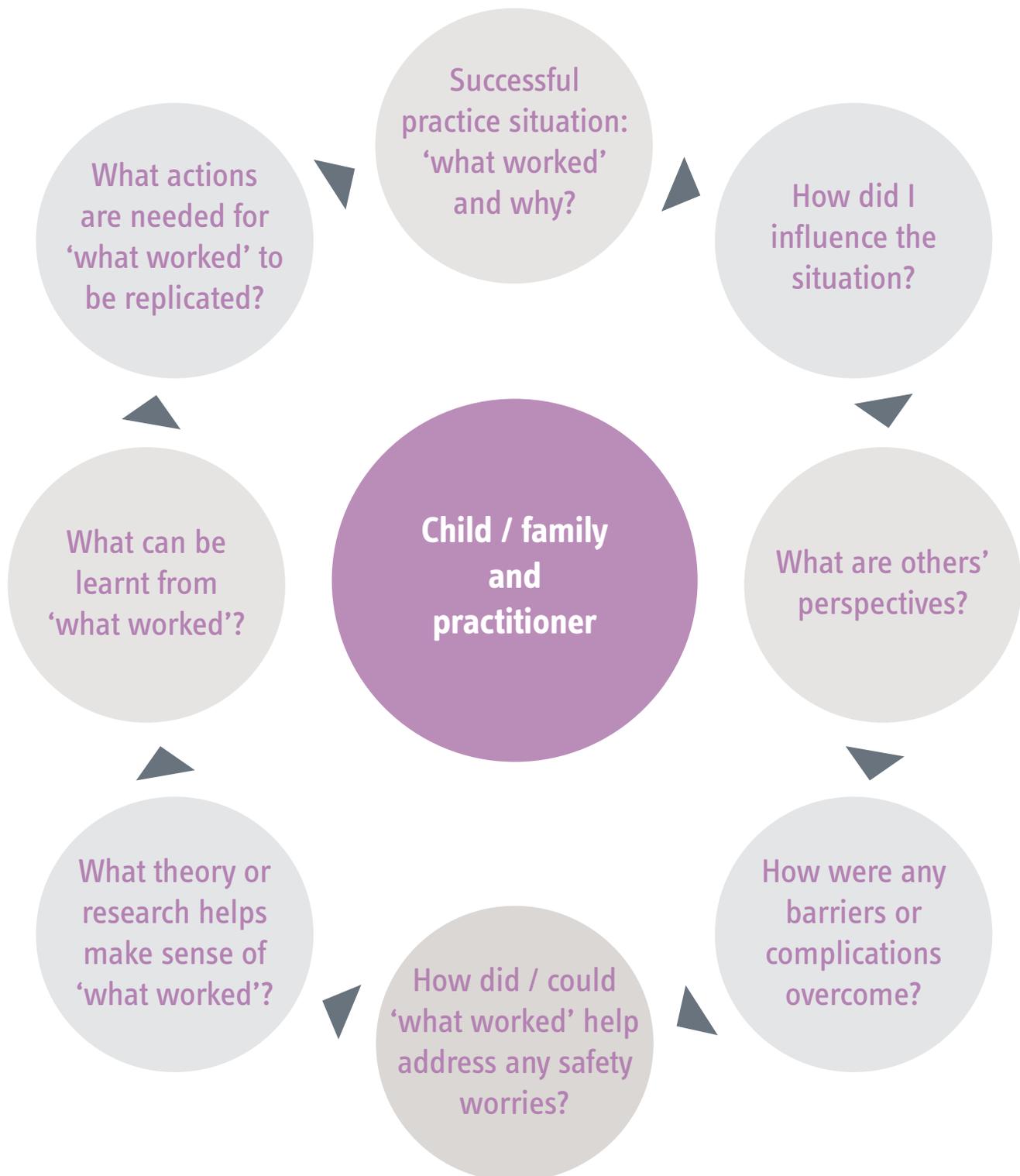
The circle frames questions positively and uses ‘appreciative inquiry’, a style of strengths and curiosity-based questioning that generates ideas for action (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

The circle’s structure supports practice supervisors to adopt the role of ‘appreciative encouragers’ and enables participants to dig deeper into their learning from practice experience. Consequently, this is a useful tool for reflective groups, training sessions, one-to-one supervision or individual reflection.

### **Key principles:**

- > the focus on positives and learning from success is consistent with many strengths-based practice models and frameworks
- > the promotion of ‘appreciative encouragement’ builds relationships, confidence, morale and emotional containment as part of a reflective supervision model
- > the questions are designed to keep children and families at the centre (alongside the practitioner), and prompt practitioners to consider stakeholders’ perspectives and embrace diversity
- > the questions promote empathy, reflexivity and critical analysis, and link theory and research to practice.
- > it’s essential to have a facilitator when using the circle, to plan, guide and support you when when you’re working with groups, and to make sure everyone participates and learns.

## What works practice learning circle



The circle can be used in a variety of ways by practitioners, students or educators. It can also be mapped to the PCF (Professional Capabilities Framework) and KSS (knowledge and skills statements).

This learning tool provides you with:

1. Points to consider when using the circle in different situations.
2. Guidance on preparing, structuring and following up a session.
3. Question prompt sheets to aid the curious questioner / facilitator.
4. Role cards / sheets to support using the circle in reflective groups or training.
5. A session recording sheet.

## 1. Points to consider when using the circle in different situations

### Learning from successful practice individually or with supervisor / peer / practice educator

Focus on a practice event, child, adult or family, theme or piece of research.

Individuals self-select an example of their best practice and critically analyse it.

Could be spontaneous with minimal preparation or could be planned to include feedback from others.

Take away learning / action points for own practice.

Could be linked to the PCF, KSS or learning outcomes to provide evidence for portfolios.

### Learning from successful practice group session

Can be used in a team meeting or reflective group.

Even if you have a facilitator as the 'curious questioner' all group participants should have a role.

Focus on a child, adult or family, theme or piece of research. Group members can self-select an example of their best practice.

Takes up to one hour (approximately) with minimal preparation.

Everyone offers feedback and takes away learning / action points for their own practice.

## Learning from successful practice collaborative session

Requires a skilled (preferably independent) facilitator as the 'curious questioner' and 'boundary setter'.

Focuses on a situation that has been agreed beforehand with the relevant manager or managers.

The views from children, families and others who were involved are gathered. Key people could be invited to participate.

Requires very careful preparation and consideration of ethics.

Any generalizable learning points are identified and shared.

## Learning from successful practice group training or reflective supervision session

More than one group working simultaneously through the 'circle'.

Requires a trainer / educator / facilitator.

In each group all participants take a role.

Focus on a practice example, theme or piece of research. The presenting practitioner self-selects an example of their best practice.

Takes up to one hour (approximately) with minimal preparation.

Everyone offers feedback and takes away learning / action points for their own practice.

## 2. Guidance on preparing, structuring and following up a session

In the planning stage, it is important to take particular care when preparing a circle session with others.

It is essential to ensure that this is approached and carried out ethically and anti-oppressively. Think about who else was involved in this situation, and how the views of the child, family and relevant others will be gathered to bring to the session. It is important to recognise any power imbalances when doing so.

Consider, for example, the possible implications of asking people to reflect on something that they, or others, might not view as 'successful'. Likewise, think about how you might share the learning points, and how you will handle issues of consent and maintain confidentiality.

Prepare materials: photocopies of the circle, prompt questions, role cards (if using with a group), recording sheet and paper / pens.

Remind groups about confidentiality. If necessary, check with the relevant personnel that the situation is appropriate to be discussed.

### Structuring a session:

- > Reassure participants that the aim is to create a positive experience of learning from 'success'.
- > Clearly set aims, boundaries and the time frame for a session.
- > In group sessions, assign roles to all participants to ensure everyone is included.
- > Use the prompt questions to ensure the questioning is strengths-based and consistent with appreciative inquiry, and consider the voiced / unvoiced or the visible / invisible aspects when framing questions.
- > Make a note of any theory, research or actions that come to mind so you can offer ideas.
- > Consider using scaling (1-10) questions to assist with capturing the value of the important points or different people's perspectives.
- > Prompt participants in groups to be 'appreciative encouragers' and ask them to tell the presenting practitioner something positive they noticed (about their practice).
- > End by gathering some reflective feedback about the session (What did people find positive? What could have made this even better? How will they use the learning?) and record any feedback from peers.

### Following up a session:

- > Reflect on the session, summarise the key learning points, and look up any references / links to theory and research.
- > You may wish to record your reflections and any feedback for the presenting practitioner to keep and use.
- > Consider letting the practitioner's manager know about their good practice for use in appraisals or as a morale boost.
- > Decide if you need to share any learning or action points and, if so, how you will do that.

### 3. Question prompt sheets to aid the curious questioner / facilitator

#### Successful practice situation: 'what worked' and why?

<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; To get a 'pen picture' of the person or people, or a practice example that had a good outcome (this could be an aspect of a piece of work, an interaction or a situation).</li><li>&gt; To keep focused on the positives.</li></ul>
<b>Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; It can be hard to identify and discuss our proudest moments - has someone given you positive feedback about something you did that worked?</li><li>&gt; What was the successful part of your work in this situation?</li><li>&gt; Why did you feel this was successful?</li></ul>

#### How did I influence the situation?

<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; To focus on strengths rather than deficits.</li><li>&gt; To encourage a reflexive stance by asking participants to think about their own values, experiences, attitudes, feelings and relationships.</li></ul>
<b>Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; What did you do to make an impact?</li><li>&gt; What positives did you bring to this situation?</li></ul>

## What are others' perspectives?

<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; To hear the perspectives of the different people involved in the practice situation.</li><li>&gt; To promote empathy by specifically thinking about the child or family's views.</li><li>&gt; To consider the views and opinions of people from diverse backgrounds.</li></ul>
<b>Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; What would your colleagues / managers / other professionals say was successful about your practice in this situation?</li><li>&gt; Have you had any feedback from the family or child? What do you imagine they would say you had done well?</li><li>&gt; 'What does the law say?'</li><li>&gt; 'What would the people who manage and appraise your practice find positive?'</li><li>&gt; How would people from diverse backgrounds (with different genders, ethnicities, sexualities, disabilities and so on) view this situation?</li></ul>

## How were any barriers or complications overcome?

<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; To keep focused on 'what worked' and how difficulties were overcome.</li></ul>
<b>Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; How did you draw on strengths to manage difficulties in this situation?</li><li>&gt; When things got in the way, what helped you to succeed?</li><li>&gt; What did you do to overcome any barriers?</li><li>&gt; How did you acknowledge or overcome any power imbalances or differences of opinion?</li></ul>

### How did / could 'what worked' help address any safety worries?

'Safety' could also be 'stability' or 'wellbeing', which could include past harm and future danger (do any of the identified safety issues need raising in the 'actions' at the end of the circle?).

<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; To keep reframing difficulties into positives and strengths where possible.</li><li>&gt; To let the person / group identify their own solutions.</li></ul>
<b>Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; How did you draw on strengths to address any concerns, worries or risks?</li><li>&gt; How could you / did you use something that worked to address safety worries?</li><li>&gt; How were things like legislation used constructively to enable a successful outcome?</li></ul>

### What theory or research helps makes sense of 'what worked'?

Open this question to other participants to add to the learning.

<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; To make links between practice and theory / research.</li><li>&gt; To share information between participants.</li></ul>
<b>Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Is there something you have read, or heard about, that helps explain this situation?</li><li>&gt; Do you use any models or approaches in your work setting? If so, how does this situation fit with that?</li><li>&gt; What ideas about working together, building relationships, promoting strengths, or identifying needs, can help you make sense of why this was successful?</li></ul>

## What can be learnt from 'what worked'?

<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; To identify a few key points and establish which are practitioner, practice example or team-specific, and which might be generalised.</li><li>&gt; To ensure that factors that worked from the child or family's perspective are identified and respected.</li></ul>
<b>Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; How could 'what worked' in this situation be useful in another?</li><li>&gt; Which elements of 'what worked' only apply in this situation or setting?</li><li>&gt; What have you learnt from thinking about your practice in this situation?</li><li>&gt; What have you learnt that could be used to benefit children or families receiving services?</li></ul>

## What actions are needed for 'what worked' to be replicated?

<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; To feed forward any learning into the action points.</li></ul>
<b>Prompts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>&gt; Who will be responsible for any action points? Who will track or monitor any actions?</li><li>&gt; How will things be taken forward? Who else needs to know or be involved? When will this happen?</li><li>&gt; How will you share the learning? How will you know the learning has been used?</li><li>&gt; How might you work collaboratively with children and families to share any learning points?</li></ul>

## 4. Role cards / sheet to support using the circle in reflective groups or training

### Practitioner

- > Choose an example of your practice that was successful in some way. This could be any successful practice or learning experience, or it could be just an aspect of a piece of work with a child or family member, interaction or situation.
- > Keep the child and family in your mind.

### Curious questioner

- > Ask the questions on the circle.
- > Do not forget to be 'appreciative' and strengths-based in your questioning. Take a conversational approach and allow the person sharing to talk freely.
- > Be curious and ask questions that will help you dig deeper, such as 'can you tell me more about...?'
- > Use the prompt sheet (which has aims and prompt questions) to help you if needed.

### Scribe

- > Using the sheet provided, capture the key points of the discussion.
- > Pay attention to the strengths and positive aspects.

## Boundary setter

- > Assist the curious questioner in managing the time by prompting them if necessary to move the discussion on.
- > Help people stay on task. This exercise is about success so if the discussion strays into negatives, gently bring it back to 'what works'.
- > Help the whole group to participate in the discussion as appropriate. For example, you may need to remind the encouragers to step back and allow the practitioner and questioner to talk, or you may need to step in and ask the group to assist (for example with making links to theory).

## Appreciative encouragers

- > This exercise is about 'what works'. Your role is to pay attention to the positive things.
- > If the curious questioner or practitioner seem stuck (for example identifying theory or research) you can assist them by joining in the discussion as appropriate. But please don't take over!
- > At the end of the discussion you will be asked to share your observations of positive practice, questioning, or sharing of information to the group.

Note that when using these prompts as cards you might need to print extra 'appreciative encouragers'.

## 5. What works practice learning circle recording sheet

Date of session .....

Pen picture of child(ren) and family

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Successful practice situation: 'what worked' and why?

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How did the practitioner influence the situation?

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What were others' perspectives? How do we know this?

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How did / could 'what worked' help address any safety worries?

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**What research or theory helps make sense of 'what worked'?**

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**What can be learnt from 'what worked'? Which points are situation-specific and which could be applied to more general situations?**

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**What actions are needed for 'what worked' to be replicated? What are the next steps in taking the learning forward? Who will be taking those actions? What will they do and when will they do it?**

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**Appreciative encouragers positive observations of participants**

This feedback is very important so ensure you allow enough time for reflection at the end of the session. Facilitators should model 'appreciative encouragement' and give their feedback to the group about the positive things they noticed.

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## Further information and resources

The authors of the 'what works practice learning circle' have continued to develop it. Information and more downloadable resources, including the most up to date versions of the guidance notes and the authors' contact details, can be found on [Padlet](#).

All feedback on the circle is welcomed and anyone can leave it (you don't have to be registered with Padlet).



**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.**

## References

Cooperrider D L and Srivastva S (1987)  
'Appreciative Inquiry in Organisational Life'  
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