

SMCFA & SMFVRIC

Child and Family Working Group (0-10)

Morning Series Summary:

Building rapport with challenging clients

Thursday 3rd April 2025

Guest Speaker: Dr. Maxwell Fraser, Principal Practitioner at DFFH

Our Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country: We acknowledge the people of the Boonwurrung, Bunurong and Wurundjeri tribes of the Kulin Nation who are the traditional owners and custodians of the Aboriginal land of our region. We recognise their continued connection to the land and waters and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

We embrace diversity in all its forms, and respect everyone's strengths and contributions irrespective of gender, ethnicity, culture, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and political views.

Morning Series Summary: Wellspring for Women

Guest Speaker: Dr. Maxwell Fraser

For additional information:

What is the HEAR model? Developed by Emily Alison and Laurence Alison is a framework for building rapport with challenging clients, particularly those who are hostile or traumatised. It focuses on four key principles: Honesty (being transparent and authentic), Empathy (understanding the client's perspective without judgment), Autonomy (respecting the client's choices and avoiding coercion), and Reflecting (mirroring and summarizing to demonstrate understanding). This approach creates a safe environment for engagement by prioritizing rapport-building over immediate information-gathering or compliance.

Presentation Notes:

- Maxwell's working background is as a Mental Health Clinician. Max's presentation was drawn from his lived working experience and from a book called Rapport by Emily and Laurence Alison.
- The session will cover how to engage with families and clients who aren't wanting to engage with you and build a good rapport with them.
- Shared quote ***"No single strategy is of itself effective in protecting children. However, the most important factor contributing to success was the quality of the relationship between the child's family and the responsible professional"*** **Darlington 1995**. Max explained when service come into a family's life, we are stepping in at possibly the worst time in their life or at least a very difficult time. There may be feelings of anger, sadness, shame and they may be defensive toward workers and engaging with services, programs or suggested supports. Clients may have done these before or similar. Engagement with the family if to be ongoing may mean you need to earn your stripes. They don't know of have a sense of you yet. Maxwell suggested giving a prompt response to one of their needs aids to build up the trust, they will be able to tangibly see the work you have done for them. This may be relief items like vouchers or and item of furniture or other things available to meet a need.
- **General Practice Guidance:**
- Engagement is a process not an event.
- Initial engagement is often futile.
- Some families will readily engage during the first visit or interview...
- The relationship we build is dependent commitment from all parties.
- Strong engagement supports us being robust and direct.
- Indirect conversations can be vital to difficult content.
- Responding promptly to the child and family's practical needs builds the credibility.
- Working with vulnerable families can mean you need to work through systemic trust and dis trust. You will be taking on experiences of people you work with. When people have been through trauma and felt unsafe and particularly when safe people have betrayed them trust can be difficult to build.
- When people struggle to mentalise their own and others behaviour, or they are feeling unsafe and may have a history of trauma they may say things that they will not follow through on and behaviour may not match what they are saying. This can create difficult relationships of trust with the people around them going both ways, can they believe you, can you believe them?

HEAR Principles

- **Honesty, Empathy, Autonomy, Reframing/Reflection**

- Rapport requires investing your effort into listening to and understanding others rather than being focussed on your own agenda.
- Verbal experiences often mean less than physical things such as a cot for my baby. By showing families early you are willing to listen and provide help will help to build the trust rather than just saying what you will do. Meaningful engagement is going to mean more than any framework we follow.
- When people forced to do things to help them change, that change is likely to be fleeting and only present when that force is present.
- Ability to listen and respond, prioritise needs, and authentically connect with where they are at are cornerstone with building rapport.
- When we feel our boundaries being trampled on, we can retreat. Professionals need to be able to talk about painful things without emotion, so the client's emotions can come to the fore. They will feel someone is there to hold their emotion.
- Being honest sounds straight forward but sometimes honesty can be confronting. We want to communicate authentically not pushing and allowing for your vulnerability where appropriate.

- **Baggage Theory**

- We are often not the first service people have seen, could be a long line of people. Some of which may not have gone great. This can build up expectations of how professionals will interact. These building of expectations become baggage. We are more likely to remember bad experiences even if we have had more positives ones.
- There are 4 strategies to break through the baggage.
- **Honour the past-** Acknowledge past interactions families have had even if this is just intake acknowledge this. They may have gone over whole story and not be thrilled to have to go over it all again. Acknowledge that this is tiring and hard to do. We get the notes on background, but it is often not the same as hearing it from the family.
- **Start in middle-** Wherever possible, don't ask families to repeat things they've already told a professional. Catch up where you can from notes. Be overt about that tell them you are doing this. Trauma can impair interactions so try not leaving things unsaid, i.e. "I read that..."
- **Take Responsibility-** Lead the engagement process with the family by taking the initiative, modelling how you want them to communicate and using every rupture as an opportunity to demonstrate repair.
- **Subvert expectations-** Try to approach the family in a way that shows them early that you're going to do things differently to previous episodes of care. This can be by saying radically honest things and acting in refreshing ways.

- **Empathy**

Empathy is used often but frequently misunderstood – true empathy is not about showing compassion or warmth, but about trying to genuinely understand what a person is thinking and feeling. You need to uncover another person's core beliefs and values so that you don't just imagine how you'd feel if you were them but can think about how their view on the world and their life experiences also colour how they're responding to a situation. This means you can acknowledge how someone feels before explaining your position.

- **Empathic Principles**

- Interpersonal curiosity
- Discerning self-disclosures
- Pre-emptive validation
- Gentle Challenges
- Reassurance
- Be relentlessly curious about the interpersonal context (and thoughts) preceding any feelings and behaviours.

- **Contextualising Problems**

Historical- By talking to families about the barriers faced by parents and the intergenerational patterns they're caught in, we can help make sense of where deficits come from. Consider what patterns are showing up for these parents that came from an earlier generation – now is the opportunity to break that cycle. This reduces blame and increases parental insight around why they're stuck

Current- By talking to parents about the current factors that are making their life and parenting more difficult, we can help make sense of what gets in the way of progress. Effectively, what is currently getting in the way of the parents being able to provide the care and boundaries to their child that they want? Doing this reduces blame and increases give parents new options for agency.

- **Autonomy**
- *Encourages the worker to be as clear as possible about what is and what is not negotiable, and then to negotiate as far as possible within these boundaries.* – Barber (1991) in BICM Guide. This is an incredibly powerful feature of how we interact with others. Whether or not we feel someone is trying to control us has a huge influence on our behaviour. Freedom to choose appeals to an instinctive drive within all of us to be in control of our own destiny.
- **Being “in” but not “sucked in”**
- Joining the system means to become a part of it and feel in it. But not join it with for ourselves, rather for the family and in line with our process. “One of the great challenges is to respond in a way that is neither personal nor automatic but rather strategic.” Importantly, we must be relationally and emotionally connected to effect useful change but not lose our boundaries.
- **Negotiables and Bottom Lines**
- Be clear and honest with the family about the bottom lines but do so in a manner that is not cold and or indicative of a ‘power over’ stance. We want to ‘work with’ families and empower them to be the parents the children need to have. But we also need to be clear about what things aren’t up to the parent’s volition – things that would cause us to PA/Breach is a good starting point for these.
- **Reframing**
- This is repeating back in part or in paraphrase what someone has said to you. By using reframing, all you are doing is inviting the other person to expand and add more by ‘sending’ out the key words, feelings or values that you’ve just heard them say. Reframing is useful in both long and short interactions to improve communication. It also helps you sidestep some common conversational traps. A reframe helps a family see new possibilities in their current pattern and it builds insight by allowing everyone to see a problem differently.
- **Default Strategies**
- Demand, Sarcasm, Accuse, Dismiss, Confront.
- **Sonar Reframing-** The verbal judo of engagement – using the momentum of the person we’re talking to as a power to shift them into the position we want.
- Simple- Simple reflections are just that – a direct and often verbatim restatement of what has just been said. The important thing is to select the correct word/portion to reflect – what do you want to know more about? What is significant about what has been said?
- On the one hand- This involves summarising back to the person two conflicting views, conflicting emotions or conflicting evidence. Whatever you place at the end of the sentence is likely to be what they speak about more, so be tactical.
- No Argument- Rather than engaging in argument or rationalisations, explore the argumentative statement with reflection and do not argue back. So, statements such as, ‘So what you’re saying to me is ...’ or ‘Can you tell me more about that?’ are helpful and prevent tit-for-tat arguments.
- Affirmations- Actively and determinedly seek out positives to build on and ignore the negatives – you can go back to them later. Look hard for them even if they seem buried by negative statements or behaviour as they are the platform for change.
- Reflection- Reflect back what has been said using paraphrasing, summarising or by reflecting deeper feelings or values that you think might present. ‘Based on what you said, I think ____ is very important to you.’ This is often most effective when followed by a key question that then moves the conversation forward to the next topic.

“If you need something from somebody, always give that person a way to hand it over to you” Sue Monk Kidd

You can find Dr Maxwell full presentation under the Practitioner Wellbeing Tab on SMA Connect

