

Reflective Practice

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Reflections on Practice during a Pandemic: How do we Continue to Ensure Effective Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

My Role

In April 2019, I began my role in the Effective Child Protection Project as a practice mentor to social workers across the Children and Families Service in Gwynedd. This report considers my reflections on how communication has been affected in social work due to the pandemic.

My role involves offering individual and group support, and reflective opportunities to social workers. Initially, I began supporting a team of 12 frontline workers in a particular locality, with a view to extending across the county within the first year. In line with the project's vision, I now support 38 social workers across the Children and Families Service. The aim of this role is to ensure that workers have the opportunity to embed the effective child protection model into practice. The model focuses on four key areas: conversations; threshold; change; and measure. The aim is to bring these four areas together to provide workers with practical solutions to enable effective child protection practice. This involves engaging in better conversations with people; consistent decision-making regarding risk; a clear focus on the changes needed to prevent harm; and measuring progress to safer outcomes.

My role is unique, and given this, I felt that the transition to working from home due to the pandemic may have been easier for me as I am typically on my own a lot of the time. But as time goes on, I realise that working from home is challenging: it is tiring and lonely. And that is the message coming from all around as I speak to workers in different teams daily. Social workers find it difficult. Losing an office space and juggling working from home is one issue, but losing peer support is a clear matter for workers who I have spoken to, and is considered to be a challenge generally in practice (Ferguson *et al.*, 2020; Ravalier and Allen, 2020; Rees *et al.*, 2019). ‘Good communication underpins effective social work practice and is essential for working with people using the

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service and colleagues' (Social Care Wales, 2019, p. 7). Not having face-to-face contact with colleagues, hearing about their day-to-day work, has a direct effect on communication. Virtual meetings help, but they do not replace being with colleagues and chatting after a difficult visit.

Communication and Relationships

One element of the project focuses on 'conversations', primarily thinking about how we communicate with others.

Communication is a key element in building trust and relationships with families (Social Care Wales, 2017). I wanted to keep good communication with workers as the relationship and maintaining the flow of communication are also considered important to a mentoring relationship (Health and Social Care Board, 2014). But the pandemic presented a dilemma of not knowing when or how often to contact workers to offer support. Prior to the pandemic, building and maintaining relationships was easier as I would base myself with the different teams. This meant having conversations naturally in the office as situations unfolded, and being available to offer support for, and discuss issues with, workers flexibly. I was now worrying about when would be the right time to contact them. I was left wondering about my role. I questioned the value of the intervention that I could provide to workers, and the resource that I ultimately was for them. Social workers have been referred to as a key resource for intervention with families (British Association of Social Workers, 2018), and reflection helped me to see that I am a key resource too. I think uncertainty about how long the virus would be around left me feeling anxious about the timeline of the project and that anxiety made me question my value. My role is time-limited and I was quickly losing momentum with the work already done. I was also aware of the additional stressors already upon workers where they may not be able to see children on their own, or even face to face, and how they may be adjusting to different working conditions. I used supervision to help me identify my concerns and consider ways forward. Good, reflective supervision can enhance capability (Hay, 2007) and influence practice and outcomes (Morrison and Wonnacott, 2010). Communicating with my supervisor supported me to develop a clear plan of action.

Speaking to team managers gave me a renewed sense of purpose. They felt that reflective sessions were needed now more than ever. They respected the need for their workers to have a reflective time and space arranged for them to support their wellbeing and professional development (Munro, 2011; Thompson, 2013). I needed to be flexible and use my communication skills to listen to what workers and managers wanted (Whitmore, 2002). The pandemic has given me opportunities to create new sessions to reflect the current situation. Recognising that training is not as easily available meant an opportunity to adapt. Adapting to change in order to grow is important (Community Care, 2017), and this brought about some parallels with the work being carried out on the frontline, where workers support families to adapt and take ownership of the changes required to safeguard children. Through the project, we have put new processes and paperwork in place to try and improve our practice, with the aim of having better conversations about change to keep children safe.

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Reconnecting with workers has been great, but I worried about how workers perceived my role. I considered any power imbalance that there may be and how I may address this. I felt that using communication skills to re-establish working relationships would be most productive. I was instigating contact and I wondered if they felt that they had to meet with me, rather than that they wanted to. It is not a traditional mentoring relationship whereby the mentee may choose their mentor (Morgan and Rochford, 2017), and there is an expectation that they meet with me as part of the project. I thought about how my mood and the questions that I ask may affect our interaction. I reflected for action (Killian and Todnem, 1991) in order to plan and prepare the best sessions possible under the current circumstances. It made me consider how I was conforming because of the pandemic, and what I had to change about my work practice and home life. During the pandemic, we have been told by those in power how to live our lives. We are told it is to keep us safe, mirroring the work that goes on in child protection every day. Did I want to conform? Did I want to go against the 'rules' as I did not completely agree with them? The pandemic gave me this experience, and I feel that it will support me when working with families in the future as I have a deeper level of understanding of having a situation forced upon me.

One group session that I have developed focuses on strengths-based practice and its link to communication skills and relationships. I recall reading about the importance of relationships in practice (Munro, 2010). The pandemic made me think about how little consideration could have been given to a situation like this – an unprecedented situation whereby home visits are now not commonplace. How social workers talk to and engage with people is considered important (Department of Health, 2017; Forrester *et al.*, 2019), and I thought about the issue of power here. It may be harder for social workers to engage with and build a relationship with a family over the telephone. I thought about how their tone or the words that they use may be interpreted by families. I thought about how conducting a home visit in full personal protective equipment may pose a barrier when the parent or child cannot see your expressions. Yet, having electronic resources to support our communication also brings benefits. Social workers have discussed with me that they have had some of their best conversations with young people over video calls, which would not have taken place without the pandemic.

The project promotes collaboration to support working relationships (Tyrrell *et al.*, 2019), although it is recognised that meaningful collaboration can be challenging in this field when balancing risk and strengths (Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Oliver and Charles, 2016). Workers discussed with me the difficulty of conducting core group meetings and case conferences virtually, and their awareness of the power imbalance and how this could result in resistance (NSPCC, 2014). I thought about parents having telephone conversations with the chairperson without hearing directly what agencies are reporting about them. Or being invited to a virtual core group meeting where other members have access to a video call platform, yet they can only join in over loudspeaker on the telephone. Is it collaborative at all? How can we make it a better experience? Ideas were shared with managers and new ways of communicating in such circumstances are being trialled. We must continue to review procedures and arrangements in place because of the

pandemic. There is an opportunity here to consider changing processes and improve where we can.

Looking Forward

From the beginning of the project, we were keen to give a clear message to workers: ‘be kind to yourselves’. We know that a process of change can be difficult, and as workers and managers we may not always get it right the first time. I see parallels between my role of communicating with workers and how workers communicate with families, and I realise just how important the mentor role is in moving forward. Providing an arranged space for workers to reflect is considered critical to social workers' expertise (Munro, 2017), yet local authorities have not generally invested in this. I already have this opportunity, and the pandemic has made me step back and consider what means of support may prove most valuable to frontline workers in the future.

Social work is about building relationships, and communicating effectively is essential for this (Department of Human Services, 2009). My reflections have led me to consider that in order to support workers in promoting effective communication it is important that we focus on some key principles within the project and beyond. Firstly, using our listening skills to recognise stressors and gain insight into a person's unique situation. Secondly, remembering the power differentials in our work, and recognising ways in which changes can be imposed on a person. Finally, the importance of providing and accessing good-quality and reflective supervision to support development and understanding.

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