

Component 1:

Relationships Between Workers and People They Support



Professional Friends

Throughout the research interviews, it became clear that the relationships between practitioners and people who access services were of pivotal importance. This was seen throughout the research interviews, shown in descriptions of how positive, nurturing relationships can help people receiving support feel secure and comfortable. When asked to explain what made a specific relationship 'good' or 'successful', participants gave a wide range of answers, including descriptions that appeared to **be an almost unquantifiable quality – an inherent part of people's nature.**



It takes a belief in change. Optimism and hope and belief in families.

PRACTITIONER

As part of the research project, we attempted to interrogate these notions of 'a good relationship' further to gain a deeper understanding of what that means in practice.



If they [workers] are trying but then you're not giving them the same hundred percent then they just kind of give up with you and then that's how you go downhill.

YOUNG PERSON

It works best when they are ready

Discussion around power dynamics came up frequently during the conversations. People who used third sector services understood very clearly that there is no obligation or compulsion for them, or their family, to accept the support or services offered. They commonly explained their attendance as a choice, something they *wanted* to do, something they have power over; in that they choose to attend the service and to work with the third sector worker. In one instance, a person receiving support described the third sector worker as a 'professional friend', clearly articulating a relationship that was based on a form of equality, and which was deeply respectful and valued. For some attending support services, they only felt comfortable attending meetings with other services if their support worker was present – **because they trusted them, felt safe around them and valued their relationship.**



I know that she is the one person that wants to see me get through this and come out of it an awful lot stronger. And she believes that I am capable of putting one foot in front of the other while everybody else seems to question my sanity.

PARENT

This contrasted with how people described experiences of accessing support from statutory services. In this research study, support from statutory services was most frequently described by participants as something that was not felt to be optional, and which was often offered under very specific conditions that often related to deficit-based judgements (behaviour, attendance, compliance etc).

This perception – that services like social work are not something a person chooses, but something that is enforced – suggests that social work services are often experienced as authoritative for those engaging in support. From the conversations we had with families during this research, it seemed that as a result, relationships between social work services and an individual often involve a power imbalance, right from the outset of the relationship. This power imbalance appeared to make people more hesitant to building trusting relationships with social workers.

While the focus of this relationship was limited to third sector support services and the children and families they support, this finding important for influencing future research. Experiences of using relationship-based practice amongst social workers should be a key focus of future research.



I used to get people who came to my house, maybe... once a month, who'd immediately say "stop smoking the weed, stop doing this, you need to clean your house" but it's my house and I'm letting you in.

YOUNG PERSON

Some people engaging in support considered their 1-1 support workers as part of their family, the closeness and affinity a result of the compassion and care that formed their relationship.



Things like, you know, like court cases I've had to go to, I probably wouldn't have gone if [support worker] hadn't of come, you know. I probably wouldn't even... just like, to go to the doctors. I'm terrible. I wouldn't go. Just the support, and the pushing, I probably wouldn't have gotten through it without her.

PARENT

Formality Fails

So aside from free choice, what else helps remove feelings of authority or power imbalances? What makes relationships so important in providing support?

Both workers and those accessing support mentioned that casual clothing, having no visible ID tags and regular face to face conversations with the same person are what make a relationship feel familiar from the outset. Primarily, an informal appearance means that when in public, there is no suggestion that one has authority over the other, improving notions of equality. What's more, there is nothing to identify either person as a practitioner or 'worker' or someone using a service. The casual approach takes away a feeling of formality which can often be associated with social work and other statutory sector workers, such as health workers. It means one-to-ones feel more like a chat than a formal intervention.



It's better, this one to one stuff. Because you get to understand your worker better and they get to understand you better.

YOUNG PERSON

Some workers and people receiving support mentioned that people often become somewhat 'desensitised' when surrounded by constant professionalism; for example, regularly attending meetings or appointments in buildings and/or with staff who appear formal; who look and act as if they have more power than the person who needs support. **When difficult conversations happen in these settings, they do not appear to resonate as strongly with the person as those given within a context of trust and respect. Participants in this research expressed becoming desensitised to messages because concern and negativity are so frequently experienced, advice or messages presented become less meaningful due to the frequency with which they occur.**



High and low weeks, we talk about it.

WOMEN'S GROUP MEMBER



You can't do it for them, you do it with them

PRACTITIONER

In contrast, relationships with workers where an individual feels a level of equality and trust with their worker allows them to be more accepting of the difficult conversations that sometimes must happen. From the interviews in this research, it became clear that having an existing, positive relationship with a worker means that people accessing support are much more accepting of hearing difficult feedback, because the relationship they have means they trust the judgement of their worker and value their opinion. Consequently, they are less likely to be dismissive of the feedback and are more likely to reflect upon or take action to address the issue raised by the worker.



It's not all doom and gloom, you must pull out some of the positives with them – so that we're building safety, and trust and showing solidarity through times of crisis and through stresses.'

PRACTITIONER



It's important to have that line in between a family and a professional. But still have a relationship where they feel supported. It's mutual respect.... Or it's not going to work.

PRACTITIONER

In addition to the importance of informality and equality in relationships between workers and people accessing support, informal settings appeared to be especially important in gaining a deeper understanding of the needs of a person accessing support. People accessing support explained that non-structured appointments or groups make people feel more relaxed, more able to open up and talk. Workers felt that this approach allowed them to gain a deeper, more meaningful insight into the person they support.



Drop-ins mean you hear things you wouldn't usually hear in a formal setting.

PRACTITIONER

'Collaborative' was a term used to describe third sector workers, whereas some people noted that statutory sector work being done with them often felt out of their control and imposed.



Social work is intense. Intense rooms, they tell you what to do but not how to do it.

YOUNG PERSON



Social work never asks you what you want.

YOUNG PERSON

Being present is a gift

When discussing what makes relationships feel meaningful, people in the study often referred to almost intangible ways, using terms that suggested the ability to connect was an inherent skill some people have, something ‘you either have or you don’t’.

What was noted as clear indication of how people began to feel they could trust their worker, was that the worker was available; emotionally and physically. That they are consistent and present when the person needs them.



All these things that you worry about, all these things you keep really close to you, people often keep it guarded. If you open this box, and then that support doesn’t live up to what you feel like you needed.... If it goes back in its box, then it’s so hard to take it back out again. I guess I think it’s important that we don’t let that happen, we owe it to them to try to make sure that doesn’t happen.

PRACTITIONER



What’s really good is because you’re remembered, each individually. So, the doctor here, there’s this one doctor that remembers.... like he remembers every kid that he’s brought in. I think that’s amazing. Yeah. Like he knows everyone. There is like, I mean, if you have a really close like, even if you don’t have a good memory, if you can remember some stuff then its better working with them.

YOUNG PERSON



It’s the [1-1] sessions that have done the most benefit. Yeah, working out ways that I can maintain a balance... it’s been absolutely invaluable. Absolutely invaluable. Yeah. And she is such.... she is such a compassionate person. She’ll let me talk for as long as it’s beneficial, and we break things down, everything’s done in small bite size bits. Never overwhelming. You know if it does get too overwhelming then we step back. She has an incredibly good understanding of how I work.

PARENT

Continuity and consistency were explained as having regular contact with the same worker, which made people receiving support feel that they had someone to rely on, increasing feelings of trust in the worker. Consistency was a significant element in building trusting relationships, and so is essential to developing a practice that is relationship-based. Continuity was important because it negated the need to explain stories and experiences repeatedly.



And the continuity is so important because you need to, you need to build the trust. You know, if somebody leaves and then you have to go through that again, then you'd have to repeat everything you've already told someone else... If you do that every six months or so, you know, at the end, it's so demoralising that you start to say you know what, I can do this on my own. Women who have suffered that [domestic violence] we tend not to be able to talk and we tend to find it really, really, really hard to let people in. And when we do, then we need so much from them. Yeah, we really do. So, when that's then taken away we feel like we don't matter that much, you know, it was just a job [to the worker].

PARENT



With social [workers] because I've had bad ones and good ones, it's a bit hard to trust them because of the bad ones. Also, a lot of people go into work to work with people, but they don't really care for them. Whereas the people here do care, and they make sure your voice is heard. That's what helped with [third sector worker] because she does, she lets people hear me because especially being a young mum, a lot of the times they just push you down, like they don't listen to you properly.'

YOUNG PERSON

This also related to the length of support that was offered. People interviewed as part of this research clearly articulated the importance of sustained, open-ended support, noting that it takes time for people to feel safe enough to trust a worker, and that the intensive 'real' work to address issues relating to trauma or complex family dynamics cannot begin until a trusting relationship has been established. Third sector workers interviewed in this project almost universally felt that people accessing support had to understand there was no cut-off point to the support before they could fully trust the support offered. This suggests there is a practitioner-held view that time-limited support packages are less effective.



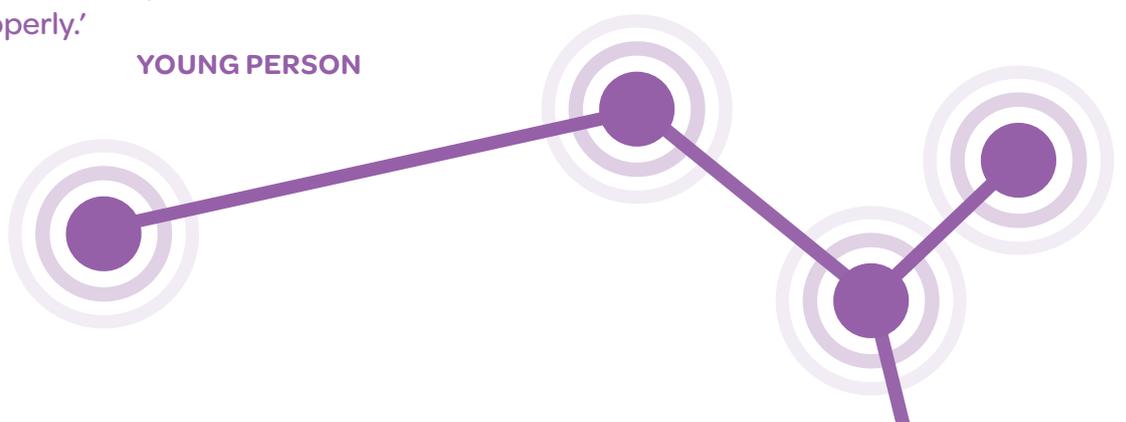
So, we don't have like a structure, like you come in for 12 weeks, and then that's it. So, I think that makes it work well.

PRACTITIONER



And I get why lots of services do the two-appointment discharge thing, because they are just inundated. But that's why we have these conversations with young people, how well they're engaged and how well we're doing. So, there's all this communication that happens around trying to get young people engaged in that.'

PRACTITIONER



Family Relationships with Workers in Statutory Services

Too many cooks: It's difficult to navigate the number of professionals

Young people and families can be overwhelmed with the number of workers in their lives, with young people and families often reporting feeling the pressure of navigating multiple appointments with numerous professionals who all have different expectations or demands for the person. Often, families and young people felt overwhelmed by the complex system they were expected to manage – particularly when multiple professionals, appear to have conflicting advice or expectations.



I think with social work, it's hard to fully trust them because like, it's just the name. But it's because they get a bad name... like not all the time. But if I had a big problem, I'll probably go to [third sector worker].

YOUNG PERSON



What's easiest for the agency is to throw lots of workers in but it might not be what's best for the family.

PRACTITIONER

The power imbalance that people in this research project described between a social worker and a young person or family suggests there is can be a reluctance to disclose information to social workers that may portray them negatively. This fear stems from being separated or penalised.



Yeah, I think for us, young people are more likely to open up and be a bit relaxed because they know that we are not social work.

PRACTITIONER

Discussions surrounding the way that inherited judgement from parents regarding views of social work are passed down to children and young people was apparent during these conversations.

Participants in the study explained that family members or young people who don't have a good relationship with those working with them means that important knowledge or information can slip through the cracks, because of a lack of trust in the professionals that surround them. As a result, important information can be hidden, and consequently, safety can be compromised. It shows how essential it is to have trusting relationships in all connections between a family and worker, to ensure that they are supported fully so that they feel safe to be honest and truthful with the workers in their lives.



You have to have an understanding of what's going on in that family. And again, to get that understanding you usually spend time with the mum, it's usually the mum.... She's got to be in a position that she trusts you.

PRACTITIONER

Aside from issues relating to power, one of the reasons that people accessing support do not fully trust social workers relates to the significant pressures social work departments face. It is widely accepted that social workers tend to have very high caseloads, and so often decisions about thresholds mean they intervene in families' or people's lives only at points of crisis, when immediate or more serious action is required. The fact that people working in social work roles only have the work capacity to show up at the crisis point, rather than being present and with time to build relationships, can create a feeling that social work involvement is most frequently experienced as a negative.

Reflections

Perceptions of third sector workers were often described differently from those of statutory sector workers, and links to the notions of power dynamics that were discussed throughout this research. Social workers inevitably have more power than those they support, given the legal powers they have and must use at times. This means that effective collaboration with colleagues working in the third sector is immensely important. Third sector workers often have a deeper, more meaningful relationships, which in turn means that their knowledge and understanding of the person could be of significant benefit to making the right decisions and providing the right support for a person.

During this research, we heard from third sector workers that there are untapped opportunities to share rich and insightful understandings of children and families they support. Workers noted that they felt more information could be shared by becoming more frequently involved in regular meetings, statutory sectors requesting advice on professional judgement, and being present to offer reflections to inform child protection proceedings. To do this more would allow a better understanding of the needs of a person, and the context of their lives.

Another key finding was that restrictions on support – for example in time-limited support programmes, frequency of appointments – were seen to be important factors when attending and engaging with support. People accessing support clearly stated that it takes time for them to feel safe, and to trust a service, which means short term support programmes are unlikely to facilitate adequate time for someone to feel safe, and to build trusting therapeutic relationships with third sector workers.



At that point even having a shower was an incredibly traumatic thing for me because of the flashbacks that I had. And [worker] didn't let me give up. We started with the practical things. [The child] needed a new mattress, and a new bed and [worker] was able to help me, so we were actually able to go shopping together and get new mattresses and transform his bedroom space where it was his space. Yeah. And, you know, at that point we had just moved away from my abusive ex-husband. And [child] didn't have his own space. And yeah, between that and [worker], I was able to get back up on my feet again.

PARENT



I think [charity] as a whole understand that you can't just pigeonhole somebody to a specific time slot. So that as that element of flexibility. She doesn't look her watch, there's none of that. I have her complete undivided attention. But they are heavily underfunded, heavily understaffed because they are heavily underfunded. And knowing that, you know, they make the time.... there's been times she's finished at the office and it's been after six o'clock before she's got home because she's come to swing by me because I've been having a complete meltdown and everything's just gone to absolute crap, and you know she's just never once mentioned anything about the fact of the lateness or the time... it's just if she can be there then she is. Nothing is ever too much trouble.'

PARENT