

# Component 3:

## Relationships within a Family



### Negotiate Compassionate Connections

For the purpose of this research family is defined by the person receiving support, who they deem close to them and with whom they have a relationship.

This person-guided definition of ‘family’ was strengthened in the conversations we had during this research project. From the outset of the project, it became apparent that ideas of “family” was often negotiated through compassionate connections, rather than purely biological or proximity (living together, for example). This reflected our definition of family outlined in the scoping review.

In order to understand what works to improve relationships within a family – that is the ecology of close relationships that surround a person, with whatever genetic relationship or affinity it is comprised of, we asked about how the needs of each family member were acknowledged and addressed, and what people receiving support would want from a whole family approach.

During the research, workers and people they support described experiences of whole family support that they felt had been useful or successful. Workers described whole family approaches more

as reliant on workers being mindful of the important relationships that exist within a young person or adult’s family; rather than, for example, simply a family coming together for a group support session.

**Families felt supported when each family member received support on an individual basis, meaning each person received support for their own development which contributed to improvement of the family dynamic as a whole.**

One of the reasons for this is because each member of the family **could feel supported in their own right**, whilst being confident that their parent or child was also receiving support for their unique issues or concerns.

Young people expressed a feeling that engaging with support felt that they had a connection with someone out with their family that **‘has their back’**, someone who is ‘theirs’ to confide in without worrying or relying on their parent.

Those supporting them reported that they felt like 1-1 sessions worked well for families as they knew their thoughts were in a safe, protected environment with open space to reflect without judgement or retaliation from other family members.

However, practitioners noted that support for each member of the family within one organisation was rare, which meant that work felt disjointed. Workers described feelings of being 'confined' because their role was only to work with one particular member of the family, the child or the parent for example, or because the organisation was limited in its resource (for example, due to commissioning arrangements or conditions of grants). Workers felt they were limited in the extent to which they could facilitate open and honest communication between family members.



You work with young people, but at the end of the day, you know, what can you.... what kind of family environment are they going back to? That can get workers frustrated? Because you put in all this hard work but then you see them go home, and this is this kind of stuff that's going on for them. And there's normally nobody there doing that whole family work. And we've known that for a long time, that it needs to happen. And I think whole family work is about meeting the needs of individual, every individual within that family, and how do we do that?

**PRACTITIONER**



So, it's not just about, "I'm here to give you support" it's about how do we encourage you to work together as a family and not need me, ya know? Not need folk that are paid to be in your life?

**PRACTITIONER**



What helps that positive relationships between family members, and how can they be maintained? I think that everybody feels heard. And, you know, I say we're looking at families, you know, we're looking at systems theory or wherever, you know, we're looking at ecosystems that you know, have their own lives, you know, you never know what it's like to be in that family, they only can tell us and they've all got a different story to share. So, as long as everybody feels listened to and then understands what the impact their behaviour is having on another and maybe and take steps to change them, because they want to have hope and belief for that unit, then I think the all these parts are integral to being maintained.

**PRACTITIONER**

An example of 1-1 work being done with multiple family members was reflected on by a parent who had received support alongside their child.



you know, they were doing sports, they were doing activities and through that, he was talking to her. I have no idea [what was said] between the two of them, but I'm comfortable with that. Because I know that [child] had somebody that was able to work with them. I had somebody that was able to work with me, because what an adult needs is completely different from what a child needs, you know.

**PARENT**

An element that must be present throughout all relationships involved is **trust**. Trust that the rights and respect of the family are at the centre of the support, and trust that their thoughts and feelings are listened to and kept safe.

### Putting your own oxygen mask on first

During this research, we heard that one important element is providing support for whole families is giving each parent the opportunity to have time to themselves – for example, in regularly scheduled sessions or in the family home while their child is in support. This individual time to talk about issues or challenges for that parent is an individual and related to ideas that people need time to themselves to charge their own batteries, to check-in with their own wellbeing so that they are more able to care for others.



**Honestly, childcare [is important]. You know, just an hour now and again. Because when you get in a rut, you realise you haven't had an hour to yourself in a long time, that's the only thing in my life that is lacking. Even just an hour, to get tidied or something you know.**

**PARENT**

Being given time and space to focus on personal wellbeing, healing and the needs as an individual (rather than their role as 'parent') often leads to better relationship building, and maintenance being extended to those around them.



**[1-1 support] has completely transformed my whole life and I am the mother to my son that I was not able to be to my [older] daughter, the way that I have parented has such a huge contrast and a lot of that is forgiving myself for not being as competent a mum to my daughter as ideally I would have liked to have been, but I didn't know how to.**

**PARENT**

### So, what else works with this type of support?

People within a family have unique needs as individuals, and in their role as a member of a family, which exist simultaneously. This means that the support each person receives must be considerate of their unique-to-the-individual needs, alongside the needs of they have as a member of the family, and the needs of the family unit as a whole.

For whole family support to be effective, individual needs must be addressed as the first step, before any work that focusses on working with the family as a unit. While the support for each individual should at the least be cognisant of the needs of the whole family, the pathways of support for each family member may only converge after a period focussed on the needs of the individual. This means people have time to focus on their own unique issues, without having to focus on the problems or concerns of the family as a whole.



So many women when they're in crisis, they've got children with them and we don't talk about things when children are present in the room and they have nobody else to look after their children. Or sometimes they're just having a bad day, and having someone to look after the children for an hour so they can sit down for an hour and have a cup of tea makes so much difference.

**PRACTITIONER**

## Reflections

Opportunities for whole family sessions may become beneficial once each family has had enough time to feel safe, and enough support to begin to understand their individual situation or issues. When each family member is comfortable and secure enough to start speaking in sessions together, as a unit it, it may then be appropriate to bring the family together to begin work around issues that face the family as a whole.

The type of whole family support we found in the scoping review was not regularly reported in practice throughout the conversations we had, despite what we heard about whole family support in theory.

What appears to be more important to supporting people, is trusting and secure relationships with people they can feel safe with, whether that is a worker, family member or a peer who has similar experiences.

