

Guide: using strengths-based practice in child protection services

Gives advice on how to use strengths-based practice in child protection services

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Gives advice on how to use strengths-based practice in child protection services

Why is hearing the child's voice in child protection processes important?

- Legislation makes it clear that children should be involved in decision-making when they're subject to statutory processes.
- Where children are unseen, and their voices are unheard, there's more likelihood of unsafe practices.
- Involving children and young people allows practitioners to develop a better understanding of their needs as early as possible.
- When they're involved in their plans, children and young people are more likely to feel they're a part of the positive changes happening in their families.
- Children and young people who are included in decision-making report more positive experiences in child protection processes.

What do children and young people value in child protection services?

- The opportunity to build a trusting relationship with their worker.
- Getting clear, accessible and timely information about processes, meetings and plans.
- Being able to decide whether to attend meetings, and being supported to contribute if they do; or being involved in decision-making in other age-appropriate ways.

Watch social worker Ian use the 'drama triangle' to describe how children can view formal interventions from services:

[View transcript](#)

00:06

For those of you who have experience of working in childcare social work, you might recognise

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this in terms of if you're meeting people socially and they say "what do you do for

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a living?" and you say "oh I work in child protection", you get a certain look, where

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they go "oh that's a difficult job, how do you sleep at night, you must be carrying those

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worries at home with you, you must see some horrible sights" etc. If you tell them that

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you work in childcare they think you work in a creche and you get a different kind of

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image, and a different kind of perception of the work that you do. We all know that

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sometimes we work with very challenging situations, particularly those people that are known to MARAC,

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the domestic abuse and stuff like that, and there are challenges for Social Workers. For

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that reason because I live in Neath Port Talbot and my daughter went to school in Neath Port

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Talbot, we sort of made it a point that if she was to be asked about what I did for a

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living, she would say "My dad works for the council". She was also told that if I turned

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up at school, she was to blank me out. Now being a teenage daughter she was quite good

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at doing that in any case. There was this one occasion where she brought a new friend home

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to the house, me and my partner were out at work at the time, and the friend looks at

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the photo and sees a photo of myself and she goes "I know him, I know him. Now where do

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I know him from? What does he do for a job?" and my daughter on cue said "He works for

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the council", "Ah that's where I know him from, he's our bin man".

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Given the choice

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of being seen as the bin man or the child protection Social Worker when I visit a family

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for the first time, I'd rather be seen as the bin man. And the reason for that is this,

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a triangle. Not any old triangle, but the Kaufman Drama Triangle. This has been around

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for about 50 odd years now, and it talks about kind of the dynamics that most of us will

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be familiar with. In terms of team dynamics, sometimes you'll have somebody who'll go into

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the victim role and other members of the team will then go to rescue them. Or sometimes

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you might be in a situation where you're challenging somebody about their behavior and they go

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into the victim role, then suddenly you want to rescue them and pull them out of that situation.

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I think it's a useful model to actually think of when we actually start calling ourselves

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child protection workers, and whether that's actually a good thing to do. So if we use

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this model, I'm a child protection worker, so that must mean I am the child protector

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and the person I'm protecting is the child. So who's the child being a victim of? Already

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we've created a dynamic there where we're actually accusing the parents. Back to the

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triangle, I suppose if we were to ask the parents, they would have a different kind

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of view. They would see themselves as the protective parent, they might have their issues,

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they might have their difficulties, they'd have to recognise that,

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but 'I love my child, I want to care for my child'.

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So they're there to protect the child. And again if we think

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back to Tina's case this morning with the mum and the video that you saw

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"I was mortified when I was first contacted", "I'm going to lose my kids"

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So already we're working with fear.

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And I think Geraint the headmaster really put that quite succinctly this morning, about

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when we're having challenges and under pressure quite often we resort to strategies that may

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not be helpful, we might be less than honest about things. Like when you go to the doctor

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and they ask you how much do you drink? or how much do you smoke? or how much do you eat?

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you probably would give a different answer to what the truth is.

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Neath Port Talbot,

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from the director, heads of service, principal officers, managers always want us to know

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what the view of the child is. So if we were to go back to the triangle, and think about

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the child, I would argue that for many of the children the drama triangle would mean

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that they would see themselves as having to protect their parent. And quite often when

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we're working with families, we have to work through that kind of challenge because they're

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quite frightened about what could be happening. They may want the Social Worker to be supportive

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and help stop certain things that happen, but they don't want to be taken off their parents.

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They don't want their parents upset and distressed. They may love and have a very

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strong bond with their parents, but they may also want certain things to change. I qualified

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just as the Children's Act was coming in and one of the criticisms that was about at that

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time, was that while it was important that things needed to happen in a more timely manner,

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there was a real risk that we'd end up being process-driven, so it was more about the processes

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and more about the evidence, so that we lose sight of things. In 1993 there was a fascinating

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study that was done where they took Social Workers from all across Europe and they got

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them to visit each of the different countries. So the English Social Worker says "they didn't

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discuss evidence at all, I wondered what that says about their system. We spoke about it

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most of the time, I wonder what it says about our system". The French Social Worker says

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"All this talk of proof and evidence, the child is suffering, can't they see that".

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They also went on to make another important point, one of the principles of the Children's

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Act is the best interests of the child is paramount and they said "In France we say

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something similar but we say the best interests of the child is paramount in the context of

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the family". So you've been hearing a lot about the outcome focused approach all day

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and I think quite importantly, as we heard from Andrew Jarrett earlier, is it's not a

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process, it's not a tool that we just deploy, it's actually conceptual thinking, it's important

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that we think about our value systems, we think about our language, and we think about

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how we work with people. So if we go back to the drama triangle, I would suggest that

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the outcome focused model actually gets us to think of us as being the support to a family

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and the perpetrators are maybe the issues about how the parents maybe manage their frustrations.

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So that could be anger management, it could be the domestic abuse, it could be a whole

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range of other things. How do they get support around their substance misuse? How do they

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get support around their mental health? And also increasingly, because one of the things

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that also happens is we quite often have big issues within our societies that we try

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to deal with on a casework basis, and I think more and more we're seeing and the

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evidence is coming forward all the time about how much poverty is starting to impact on

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our families. 68,000 kids in Wales are likely to go to bed hungry during the school holidays

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because they can't get free school meals. Is that a child protection thing or is that

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a community development thing? Is that something about how we approach the work that we do?

08:01

So for me, outcome focus is a good tool. Signs of safety I think is actually a very good

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tool, but unless you actually have that conceptual thinking about how we work, we are really

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going to struggle in terms of bringing about change. So three points that I'd like to finish

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on, we need to learn that the vast majority of our parents want to do the best for their

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kids and we have to trust in that, and I think you've heard that time and time again across today.

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While, and again this is the whole enquiritis thing, it makes us think about

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things always from a severe child protection point of view, the Maria Colwells, the Peter

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Donaldsons etc. And there is this thing about the rule of optimism that its almost as soon as

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you start actually advocating that these parents have strengths, or maybe you're getting caught

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up too much in the parents' abilities and stuff like that. But for me that's something

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about professional cynicism that has come into child protection over the last 20 odd

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years, and that doesn't really help us. And finally I think it's important that we think

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about how we work to build engaging relationships. And that gets us past that issue of disguised

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compliance.

Why collaborate with parents and carers in child protection services?

- Better engagement with families helps practitioners to get a fuller picture of the child's well-being.
- Parents' morale can improve and be motivated to change when practitioners recognise a parent's strengths.
- Involving parents when developing child protection plans can lead to a higher chance of better outcomes.
- Engaging well and supporting parents – particularly younger parents – whose children are removed may mean they have a better chance of coping as a parent in the future, and prevent further children from being removed.
- Families' experiences and views are a valuable way of making systems and processes better. We can learn from existing practice about what works well to engage parents who may, at first, have been hostile.

What parents and carers value in child protection services

There's a relatively small body of research evidence about the views and experiences of parents and carers in child protection processes.

But when they were asked, they consistently said they wanted to be more involved when their children were subject to statutory child protection services.

Specifically, parents and carers say they value or would like:

- clear, jargon-free information about the processes, and time and support to take in the information at their own pace
- the opportunity to build a relationship with a social worker (ideally one person), who gets to know the family, spends time with their children and acts 'like a human'

- hands-on support, not just monitoring
- a balanced approach, where workers and their reports acknowledge parents' strengths and positive intentions, but are also frank and specific about concerns and risks
- conferences that don't involve too many people or too many surprises, and are as informal and inclusive as possible
- workers who ask parents for their ideas about solutions in their own families, and also ask for their feedback about how to make the wider system and processes better
- plans that set out clearly what's expected of them, focusing on outcomes and not just outputs, and are followed without 'moving the goalposts'
- workers who are non-judgemental, reliable and trustworthy
- workers who really listen and recognise how stressful and traumatic these processes can be for families.

Listen to a parent talk about how people working with her in an outcome-focused, strengths-based way supported her to make changes for herself and her children:

[View transcript](#)

00:00

I was mortified

00:02

I'm gonna lose my kids

00:05

People telling me, You're not good enough

00:08

You haven't got the family support behind you

00:10

and they are going to take your kids away

00:12

because you're on your own

00:16

So I was initially worried

00:19

I was reluctant to listen

00:22

Because I had those dark voices in my head

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I would lose my kids

00:26

My ex...he would destroy everything

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I struggled, I was in a really low income

00:33

My son's attendance was 63%

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It was terrible

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He was late all the time

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It wasn't he didn't like school because he loved school.

00:41

Because he was in that habit of

00:42

pick and choosing

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Because

00:46

there was a lack of encouragement to make him want to go

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there was a lot of fighting with him then

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Due to lack of order and discipline,

00:57

Everything was chaos in his life

1:00

At the time

1: 2

I'll be honest, I think I was a selfish person

01:04

It was all me, me, me

01:07

Not realizing that it was the children

01:10

All I wanted to do was escape

01:13

I wanted to escape the life I was in

01:16

I was watching my children suffer

01:19

My kids, they deserved better

01:23

They deserved more than me

01:26

I thought I couldn't give them what they want

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Love of family

01:32

So at the time, it was me, it was me

01:35

When Tina came over,

01:37

he asked me what you really want

01:39

what are the outcomes you want for yourself

01:42

It really made me realize,

01:44

I didn't want my kids to be in the position they were in

01:46

I didn't want to be in the position I was in

01:48

I was looking at my children

1:51

and I could see my childhood in them

01:53

They were isolated, unsure

1:57

They were not beaten,

2:00

They were mentally beaten,

2: 3

They could not speak out

02:05

I was that scared little scary girl

2: 9

where I could not speak as a child

02:11

That realization ...

02:14

I did not want my children to be mentally destroyed

02:17

They need a full week at school

02:20

But also that one-on-one with their parents

02:23

That's what school did for me

02:26

They opened that door

02:29

About that one-to-one service with my son, so I can understand it,

02:33

Seeing through a child's eyes

02:35

See it through his own eyes

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In the one to one sessions

02:40

They taught me how to talk to my son

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And get him to open up

02:47

Schools should be able to do that

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Coad Frank acknowledged that

02:53

children need to work with peers and parents

2:59 pm

Basically, what I think is

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If everyone who is at a Conference meeting

03:07

ready to listen to each other

03:10

... and listening to the parents

03:13

they can understand the distress for the parents

03:18

Because you all understood me

03:21

because you took the time to listen and look

03:26

Anyone can bark orders at you

03:29

You can be a robot all your life

03:32

But it does not fill that darkness and emptiness inside you,

03:36

Until someone asks you

03:39

What do you want for your future,

03:41

for the future of your children

03:44

You step out of that phase of being a robot

03:47

You become a person

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You are recognized as a human being not a robot

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When you are recognized as a person

04:01

Things are getting a little brighter

04:05

Because I'm not an invisible shadow

04:10

I'm not a door mat

04:13

I'm a person

04:14

I have a voice and an opinion

04:17

and someone is interested in my opinion

04:22

that brightens my day

04:24

It's everything ...

04:26

The way they eat is different,

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My son wouldn't eat any fruit or vegetables,

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He eats every vegetable that is put before him now

04:37

He used to have night terrors,

04:39

45 minutes screaming and crying

04:43

Fits in her sleep

04:46

Wetting himself,

04:49

He has not done so for over a year

4:54 pm

I forgot what it was like to have my son in complete fear,

4:58 pm

the thought of it scares me now

05:06

But it doesn't do that anymore

05:10

He is polite,

05:13

He is kind and caring to his sister

05:15

My daughter,

05:17

she's very peculiar, she has character, she has charisma,

05:24

They both are eager to learn

05:26

they are not afraid,

05:29

they are very confident children now

05:32

I could not have done it alone.

Listen to Keri talk about how she encouraged a culture change in children's services by collaborating with families and front-line staff:

[View transcript](#)

00:00

One of our biggest challenges was how we developed closer working relationships

00:06

with partner agencies. We'd been quite risk-averse, we had one of the highest

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looked after children populations in the country, we had one of the highest child

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protection registrations in the country, and we had the highest child in need

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population in the country. Partners had lost confidence in us and as a result

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the workforce had become very pressurised and overheated, and staff had

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started to leave the authority and when we came in we had 42 agency staff

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working for us, the turnover was huge. It was like spinning

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plates all at the same time. Whilst we were trying to create a

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happy, healthy and resilient workforce and build up experience, at the same time

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we were trying to build relationships with partners. We took the same approach,

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we spoke with partners, we made them aware of the situation, and we talked to

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them about what our plan was in order to recover from that position. We took a

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very hands-on approach, I spent time, along with other principal officers, in

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case conferences, we spent time with our conference-and-review service and

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we sat in on conferences. We sat in on conferences to particularly look at

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the experience of vulnerable families and children in that formal setting. My

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feelings at that time were that we were very process driven and that we had
lost

01:44

the voice of the child and the voice of the vulnerable mum and dad in that

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conference setting. The outcomes model of working has transformed the

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conference arena. I've been delighted by the way in which we have now
moved to a

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way of working where families remain at the heart of everything we do in a

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conference, and that older children are invited to the conference,

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they are prepared for conference and their voice is heard in conference. The language

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is family-friendly, every opportunity is given to talk to families about their

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own personal outcomes, they play a big part in the plan, the outcomes focused plan,

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and I have spent time then with families that have experienced conferences before

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outcomes and after outcomes. The difference is incredible, hearing some

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families say 'there were lots of big words', 'there was lots of jargon', 'people

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looked very official', 'I didn't think I could speak', 'I just wanted to get it over

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with', and 'then we have meetings after the

03:00

conference where they talk about me, they talk about my children as if I'm not

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there', families saying 'we just needed time to pass for our children to come off the

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register' but not really understanding what the local authority was worried

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about, what the priority risks were. Very little discussion around what the

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strengths were, what they were doing well as a family, and a recognition that all

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families including our own will get things wrong sometimes. I think that's

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something that we are particularly proud of. It's still a work in progress, partner

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agencies have started to see the difference it's making. We've moved away

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from statements being made, for example, 'I don't believe the child is suffering

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significant harm but I will recommend registration so that the family will get

04:01

support'. And empowering chairs, and helping chairs support partners in

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reminding them of what the criteria is for registration and helping

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them during the conference process to remain focused on what those

04:22

priority risks are.