

SOLUTION-FOCUSED QUESTIONS

SUMMARY

Solution-focused questions are a foundational skill and strategy of Safety Organized Practice that helps the social worker explore worries, what is working well and next steps with a family in a strength-based manner that is in itself an intervention.

WHY SOLUTION-FOCUSED QUESTIONS?

- Safety Organized Practice (SOP) views engagement as one of the primary functions of a social worker to help ensure child safety, permanency and well-being. Engagement is the art and skill of interacting with a family in ways that move them toward greater readiness for their own active participation in making change.
- Without engagement, families may complete required steps or services, but the chances are greatly reduced that they will genuinely internalize the need for change and make lasting, meaningful change. Skilled engagement, therefore, is critical to child safety.
- Effective engagement also helps individuals with a history of trauma step out of “fight/flight/freeze” mode so that they can access their best thinking.
- Masterful use of questions is one of the most effective engagement strategies, and an intervention in and of itself.

THE THREE QUESTIONS

- The Three Questions are a guiding framework for SOP that is rooted in solution-focused questioning and infused through many other SOP tools and strategies. The Three Questions are a deceptively simple framework for exploring strengths, concerns and necessary next steps with a child, a parent, a family, their network, reporting parties, collaterals and anyone else involved in a case.

THE THREE QUESTIONS

1. **What’s working well?**
2. **What are we worried about?**
3. **What needs to happen next?**

- The Three Questions are a component of many other strategies of SOP, including:
 - Guiding the discussion in Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings, Group Supervision, or Review, Evaluate, Direct (RED) Teams
 - Completing the Three Houses with children or youth: House of Good Things = working well, House of Worries = what we’re worried about, House of Hopes & Dreams = what happens next
 - Providing a framework for SOP-based intake/screening questions
 - Guiding other conversations or meetings with parents, youth, collaterals or agency staff

SOLUTION-FOCUSED QUESTIONS

- Solution-focused questions are an effective strategy to have conversations with people about what is already working well, or has worked well in the past, in order to successfully engage families, build their hope and belief that change is possible, and focus their energies on positive change.
- The solution-focused approach is based on a simple idea with profound ramifications: that what we pay attention to grows. This highlights the need to ask families and others about safety as rigorously as we ask about harm and danger, because identifying where there is already safety or has been safety in the past holds the solutions, at least in part, to future safety.
- Solution-focused questions also help us conduct a rigorous, balanced assessment by evoking discussion with network members, collaterals and other agency staff about acts of protection and family strengths, rather than focusing solely on what isn’t working, which leaves us with only half of the picture.
- Solution-focused interviewing is also an excellent strategy to use with youth to help them focus on their strengths, build confidence in their skills and guide them toward positive choices.
- Solution-focused questions can also be used with resource parents or service providers to guide conversations about a child’s or youth’s behavior, with the goal of stabilizing a placement or identifying additional supports that may be needed.

TYPES OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED QUESTIONS

- **Exception Questions** ask individuals to think about times that the problem was not happening so they can explore what, when, where and how they were able to achieve success. They help people remember that the problem has not always been present, or can help clarify that there was no time when the problem was not happening, which is also important information.

Example: “Was there a time that you (mom) were able to stay clean and sober? How were you able to achieve that? What was it like to parent your kids when you weren’t drinking?”

Example: “Was there a time in your relationship that you (dad) were not using violence or making mom stay away from her family and friends? What did your relationship look like during that time?”

Example: “Are there times that (your foster child) is not acting out? What does his behavior look like at those times? What is happening in the home, at school or in his life when he is at his best?”

- **Coping Questions** ask people to reflect on how they were able to make it through something difficult, painful or challenging without resorting to problem behavior. Coping questions help build people's sense of self-efficacy and resilience and also show us what strategies they used for success.

Example: "Wow, it's amazing that your sister died and you were still able to stay sober during that time. How were you able to manage that?"

Example: "It shows so much strength that you got yourself and the kids out of the house after your boyfriend started using again. How were you able to do that?"

- **Position (or Relationship) Questions** ask a person to think about a situation or problem from someone else's perspective, or by putting themselves in the other's shoes. This helps them understand the impact of their actions or behavior on another person and see it from their eyes. Position questions can help build empathy and understanding of how one's own actions affect another person.

Example: "If your son were here, what do you think he would say about how your drug use affects you as his dad?"

Example: "If your mom were here, what do you think she would say about the kind of relationship she wants for you and your children?"

Example: "If you put yourself in my shoes as the social worker, what would you be worried about?"

- **Preferred Future Questions** ask the person to think about what the best possible future would look like if they were able to change their issue or problem. They help build a vision for what things will look like when the problem is no longer happening, and assist in setting goals.

Example: "If the best possible future happened and your child welfare case was closed, what would your life look like? Where would you be living? What would you be doing? How would you be parenting your children?"

TYPES OF SFQs

Exception
Coping
Position
Preferred Future
Scaling

- **The Miracle Question** is a special type of preferred future question that can help people get clarity on how the problem impacts their daily life and what life would look like without the problem happening.

Example: "Imagine you woke up tomorrow and a miracle had happened over night, and all the trouble was gone. How would you know it was over? What would be different that would tell you the problem was no longer happening? What is the first thing you would be doing to start the day? What would the rest of your day look like? What would things look like for your children?"

- **Scaling Questions** are a powerful, flexible strategy that can be adapted to many situations to help gauge or clarify a person's (or all team members') perspective on an issue. The important thing about scaling questions is not necessarily the number that someone picks, but rather the chance to explore with them the *reasons* that they picked that number.

- Follow-up questions are the key; for example, asking someone what it would take to move them up one number, or why they picked that number and not a lower or higher one. Follow-up questions help us get to the underlying reasons for someone's perspective and explore next steps.

- Scaling questions can be used to scale many different areas, including but not limited to:

- Willingness
- Confidence
- Readiness
- Agreement

For example, how *willing* is someone to participate in a safety network, how *confident* are CFT participants that a plan will keep a child safe, how *ready* is a parent to make a change, how much do team members *agree* with the decision a team is making.

Example: "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is that you are not at all ready to stop using drugs, and 10 is that you are completely ready, where would you rate yourself today? How did you pick a 9? What would it take to move you from a 9 to a 10?" (Or: "Wow, you're very ready — what made you pick a 9 and not a 8? Have you ever been at a 9 before? What were the steps you took at that time?")

Example: "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is that you have no confidence that this plan will keep the child safe, and 10 is that you are completely confident the plan will keep the child safe, where would you rate? How did you pick a 4? What puts you at a 4 instead of a 3? (Or: "What would you need to see happen to be at a 5 instead of a 4? What would you need to see happen to be a 6?")

A NOTE ABOUT APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciative inquiry is a term that is sometimes used interchangeably with solution-focused approaches. Appreciative inquiry is based on the belief that what we pay most attention to has the best chance of growing. Fundamentally, appreciative inquiry is the concept that asking questions about what is working will be more effective in creating change than focusing our attention primarily on the problem.

Beyond work with families, appreciative inquiry is an approach to organizational change that mirrors solution-focused questions used with families by helping social workers pay attention to what they are doing well and what good things they are already doing that they can build on to grow their skills. It is an important parallel process for agencies implementing Safety Organized Practice.