

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.

ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR

- Supervisors have two primary roles in supporting use of solution-focused approaches:
 - Teaching, coaching and setting the expectation for staff to use solution-focused questions in their work.
 - Modeling their own use of solution-focused approaches with staff to provide a parallel process that treats social workers as they are expected to treat families.
- Supervisors must take active steps to assess use of solution-focused questions by staff, which includes a plan for regularly accompanying social workers in the field, attending Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings whenever possible, and reviewing contact notes, court reports and other documentation for evidence of solution-focused strategies.

SUPPORTING USE OF THE THREE QUESTIONS

- The Three Questions of Safety Organized Practice (SOP) are rooted in solution-focused questioning and provide a foundation for many other SOP tools and strategies. Although very simple to use, expectations must be set for staff regarding use of the Three Questions.

THE THREE QUESTIONS

- What's working well?**
- What are we worried about?**
- What needs to happen next?**

- Supervisors are encouraged to use the Three Questions as a guiding framework for unit meetings, case staffing, Group Supervision and other agency meetings.

SUPPORTING SOLUTION-FOCUSED QUESTIONS

- The solution-focused approach is based on a simple idea with profound ramifications: that what we pay attention to grows. This is true for both families and social workers. Focusing on what is working well with parents, youth and staff leads to more effective change than focusing on deficits.
- To support use of solution-focused questions with staff, supervisors need to be well-versed in using these types of questions themselves, set expectations for using them with families, and model them in work with staff. This

does not mean we ignore problems or areas for growth, but that the best way to find solutions to these problems is by focusing on the existing strengths that can help provide the solutions to the problems.

- A supervisor or agency creating a climate of appreciative inquiry and solution-focused interactions is critical to having social workers who do the same with children, youth, parents, resource parents and others.

TYPES OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED QUESTIONS

- Following are types of solution-focused questions that supervisors can use directly with staff, as well as supporting staff to use with families. For more information, and examples to use with families, see: [SOP Quick Guide: Solution-Focused Questions](#).

- Exception Questions** ask people to think about times that a problem was not happening so they can explore how they were able to achieve success.

Example with staff: "Was there a time that you (social worker) were able to feel more on top of your work and everything you had to do? What was happening for you at that time?"

- Coping Questions** ask people to reflect on how they were able to make it through something difficult or challenging; they help build self-efficacy and resilience.

Example with staff: "I'm amazed you were able to handle the father's anger so calmly and engage him in such difficult circumstances, even though you were in the middle of an emergency placement change and filing two court reports. How did you manage that?"

- Position (Relationship) Questions** ask a person to think about a situation from someone else's perspective, or by putting themselves in the other's shoes.

Example with staff: "If the mom were here, what do you think she would say are the reasons she didn't get a restraining order?"

- 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.

Example with staff: "If the best possible outcome happened on this case, what would that look like?"

- Scaling Questions** can be used with families or staff to help gauge perspective on an issue. The important thing 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 help get to the underlying reasons for someone's perspective and explore next steps.

- Scaling questions can be used to self-evaluate many different areas, including but not limited to willingness, confidence, readiness and agreement.
Example with staff: “On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is that you have no confidence in your ability to facilitate a CFT meeting, and 10 is that you are completely confident in your ability, where would you rate? How did you pick a 5? What puts you at a 5 instead of a 4? (Or: “What would you need to see happen to be at a 6 instead of a 5? What would you need to see happen to be a 7?”)

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

- Appreciative inquiry is an approach to supervision and organizational change that builds on solution-focused questions and helps 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.
- Creating a culture of appreciative inquiry is an important parallel process for agencies implementing Safety Organized Practice.
 - *Appreciating* is the act of recognizing the best in people and the world around us, affirming past and present strengths, successes and potential.
 - *Inquiring* is the act of exploration and discovery, asking questions and being open to seeing new potential and possibilities.
- Appreciative inquiry also relies on the concept that the language we use and the questions we ask affect the system (or person) being observed. Thus, asking questions about what is working will be more effective in creating change than focusing our attention primarily on the problem.
- Appreciative inquiry involves valuing what we are like at our best, imagining how things could be, building on what we already do well and participating together in creating what could be.
 - In practice, it is the art and skill of supervisors asking questions that explore strengths, successes and possibilities for the best by initiating guided conversations with staff that explore what they are proud of in their work.
- The EARS model (*adapted from Philip Decter and Andrew Turnell*) is another way of thinking about using appreciative inquiry with staff. EARS stands for:
 - **Eliciting:** Drawing out from the worker a positive example of work to focus on
 - **Amplifying:** Helping the worker dig into the details (what, when, how) of the work
 - **Reflecting:** Helping the worker make meaning of what happened and reflect on their practice
 - **Summarizing:** Wrapping up and consolidating lessons to carry forward

| Type of Question | Example Questions |
|------------------|---|
| Eliciting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me about a piece of work you have done recently that you feel particularly good about? • Can you tell me about a family you worked with where you felt stuck and yet still made some progress? • Can you tell me about a situation at work that had the potential to become a “train wreck” but where you still managed to salvage a small component that you felt okay about? |
| Amplifying | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where did this happen? When did this happen? Who else was involved? • What did you try? What did you see happen? • How did you make this happen? What else did you do? What else? • How did you get the idea to do it that way? • What was the hardest part of doing this piece of work for you? So even though that part was hard, how did you keep it going? • What would the person you worked with say you did to contribute to achieving this outcome? • How did you know what you were doing was helping? • What differences did you see in the person you were working with that told you what you were doing was working? • What is the thing that you feel proudest about in this situation? • If we had a videotape of you doing that (the proudest thing), what would we see on the videotape? What are the practices that go into doing that? What steps went into those practices? |
| Reflecting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagine you are ready to close this family’s case. What would you be seeing in your last home visit with them? • What is one small thing you can do right now that would enable you to stay calm when the parent is giving you a really hard time? • How would you like to respond instead? What would it take in order to be able to do that? • If this example of your best work were to happen regularly, what would people be seeing you do? • What from this piece of work would you like to bring into other similar situations? • What suggestions from this experience would you offer to your coworkers? • When you think about this piece of work, what was the most important thing you learned? What would you like to do with that learning? • What does this experience say about what you value and what is important to you in your work? • What does this say about your hopes and dreams for yourself in doing this work? • What does this say about what you are committed to and what you stand for in this work? • What is one thing you think you would like to try doing differently next time? • How can you build even more on the success you had in this situation? |
| Summarizing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the lessons you are learning from this that you most want to remember? • What would you most like to share with others? • What have you learned or re-learned about yourself or your work from this conversation? • What kind of difference, if any, does it make to hear yourself say these things out loud today? |