

## **One Minute Guides - A Restorative Approach to Child Protection Conferences in Portsmouth** July 2017

### **What is Restorative Practice?**

Very simply restorative practice is about doing things *with* others, rather than *to* them or *for* them. The principles underpinning a restorative approach are:

- A response to wrongdoing that causes harm to others
- It focuses on relationships
- In the process of dialogue, stories are told, motivations explained, and harm is explored
- A plan is developed both to address the harm and its causes, including underlying behaviour
- An opportunity for a face to face accountability that is characterised by high challenge with high support and seeks to heal, to restore and to move on

A restorative approach to child protection provides a mechanism to address harm in a way that brings together the people affected and affords them the opportunity to make it better and in particular to make the child/ren safe.

### **How can Restorative Practice be applied in Child Protection?**

A child protection enquiry is always undertaken when a child has experienced or is at risk of experiencing significant harm. A restorative approach can be undertaken with the family to understand this harm through some very simple, but powerful questions:

- What has happened?
- What has been the impact on the children? On you? On anyone else?
- How do you feel about this? How do you think the children feel about this? This is what they are saying they feel about this. How might anyone else feel about this?
- How do we make it better? How do we make the children safe?

When a child protection conference is recommended as a result of a child protection enquiry these questions, and in part some of their answers, can form the basis of the child protection meetings. If an initial conference is going to be facilitated the first task will be to identify, with the family, what harm needs to be addressed and who they want to attend at the conference to help them develop the plan of action to address it.

## A Restorative Child Protection Conference

A restorative child protection conference aims to bring together the people in the family affected by the harm that has been identified, together with the professionals who might assist them in making things better. It is important that the family are at the centre of the meeting, taking a leading role in the discussion and the planning.

The chair of the conference will need to facilitate the meeting carefully so as to manage the confrontation of harm, the emotional impact of this and the potential healing as a result of addressing it. The chair will aim to consider:

- *What are the issues/ harm that the conference needs to address?*
- *How the family feel about what people are saying?*
- *What has been the impact on the children?*
- *How they feel about this*
- *What would better look like? What can they do about this?*
- *What support the family need from the people round the table*

A restorative approach means avoiding blame and judgements whilst having high expectations of what can be achieved and people's contributions to making things better. This will mean understanding and appreciating the strengths in the system (in and around the family) whilst honestly and openly exploring the challenges - so as to support each other to deliver change:

- *This is what I can do to help...*

## What might a Restorative Protection Plan look like?

A restorative child protection plan will list the outcomes that the family want to achieve and the list of actions - who will do what, when - to achieve them. It is really important that the protection plan is written in the language used by the family so that they are clear about what needs to be better to repair the harm and that they own it.

A restorative child protection plan will only include actions that address the harm identified. If the actions listed are more about promoting a child's wellbeing, the plan agreed should be a child in need plan. A protection plan can be 'stepped down' to a child in need plan at a review child protection conference once the actions to address the harm have been completed and things are better for the family.

## The Role of the Core Group

The professionals identified by the family to support them making things better and make the child/ren safe will, together with the family, form the core group of people working on the child protection plan. This core group will meet every 6 weeks to talk about the plan - how it is working for the family and how well they are progressing with it and whether the child/ren is/are safer or safe. If you are part of the identified core group, it is important that you attend core group meetings and child protection conferences. If you are not able to attend the core group meeting or child protection conference, you **must** ensure another member of your agency attends to represent you. This is particularly important at child protection conferences, as without a representative from your agency, the meeting may not be able to go ahead.

The role of the professionals within the core group is to work with the family to achieve the outcomes laid out in the plan by completing the actions agreed at the child protection conference. The progress made by the family will be reported back to the review child protection conference. The professional in the core group will be expected to work to the principle of restorative practice in providing high support and high challenge to each other for the benefit of the child/ren and family.

The core group meeting will produce a report to update the child protection conference. Any agency that has not been part of a core group meeting will need to submit a report to the core group/Child Protection Conference.

## The review Child Protection Conference

The first review conference will be facilitated 3 months after the initial child protection conference and then every 6 months thereafter.

The purpose of the review conference is to consider the progress the family is making with their plan. Those attending the conference will need to consider whether there have been any further incidents of harm, or not, and how the family are progressing with their plan to make things better. The family will be at the centre of this meeting, supported by their core group of professionals, to talk about the things that are going well and any things they are finding difficult.

The chair of the conference will ask the family to consider whether they think the plan is still the right plan for them, whether they want to make any changes - and if so, what changes they might be. The professionals will be expected to support the family to explore these issues openly and honestly so that the plan can be revised or not, as necessary, and agreed for ongoing work.

When the core group are confident that the family have repaired the harm and made things better, the protection plan can be removed at the review conference or 'stepped down' to a child in need plan if the family need ongoing support to promote their wellbeing.

## What is my contribution as a professional attending a Restorative Child Protection Conference?

You will be invited to participate in a restorative child protection conference if the family have identified you as having a key role in their life. This might be supporting a parent or teaching a child.

You will be expected to attend having prepared for the conference and be clear about how you can provide high support and high challenge to the family and to other professionals in order to progress the plan.

At the conference you will be expected to support the family to explore:

- What has happened, and any harm that has been experienced or the risk of harm that is perceived
- The impact this has had or is having on the child/ren
- How the family feel about what has happened or is happening
- How the family want to make things better and keep their child/ren safe

The important element of the restorative conference is that discussion is facilitated in a non-judgemental and non-blaming way, and that professionals hang on to the aspiration that the family can, with the right support, make things better. This means that professionals have a responsibility to be mindful about their language and their behaviour so as to be able to work with the family to repair the harm identified.

## How will the family be prepared for a Restorative Child Protection Conference?

It is the role of the social worker to prepare the family for a restorative child protection conference. The first important step the social worker will take is exploring the outcome of the child protection enquiry with the family. This will mean exploring:

- What has happened to trigger the child protection enquiry
- The impact this has had or is having on the child
- How they feel about what has happened or is happening

And importantly

- How they think the harm can be repaired

The social worker can then explain why a restorative child protection conference will be helpful and agree who should attend to support them to make things better.