Effective relationships with families and communities are the foundation for quality child protection practice.
Introduction

It is a great privilege to introduce the Care and Protection Practice Standards because they honour the work of keeping children safe. They promote a clear foundation to support relationship building.

The Standards have been developed by our people for our people under the leadership of the Office of the Senior Practitioner. Their intention is to strengthen role clarity, confidence and professionalism of the child protection workforce in New South Wales.

The key expectations set out under each of the Standards use the evidence about what works in child protection. Centred around the experiences of children and families the Standards have strong messages about respectful and holistic practice.

The Standards have been designed to be easily understood in everyday practice. Please take the time to use the prompts to reflect on your own practice, or use them with colleagues to identify skills and strengths, as well as areas for development.

They are an excellent tool for use in meetings, group supervision and in discussions with community partners because they keep the focus squarely on children, families and quality practice.

Michael Coutts-Trotter
Secretary
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Care and Protection Practice Standards

Office of the Senior Practitioner

Key Expectations

1. Be curious - think about why something is happening and keep an open mind. Be creative and innovative - all cases are different
2. Role model ethical casework with children, young people, families, colleagues, service partners and community
3. Be an active, respectful and participating member of a team
4. Be responsive, accepting and adaptable to the changing needs of the child/young person and their family
5. Take responsibility to support and create a collaborative and relationship-based culture
6. Use the expertise and experience of others to guide your practice and development
7. Share professional knowledge, skills and resources with others
8. Be honest about mistakes and where necessary seek support to address them
9. Be courageous by continually bringing other people’s thoughts, plans and actions back to the needs and rights of the child.

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

• Led by example? Do I ‘walk the talk’ in the way that I treat children and families, my colleagues and others? Do I speak to and treat them with courtesy and respect?
• Thought about innovative ways to work with a child/young person and family to achieve a goal?
• Respectfully guided others back to the child/young person when their focus has drifted?
• Been open to being guided by others?
• Challenged or guided others’ practice?
• Shown curiosity and kept an open mind?
• Actively contributed to creating a positive and effective work culture?
• Role modelled self care strategies and supported others to look after themselves so our practice can be at its best?
• Been mindful about the language I use?
• Been courageous?

Seeking Feedback

How is my practice observed by others?
Standard 2
Relationship-based practice

“I need you to build a relationship with me, my family and other people so that together we can work out how to make my family safe. I need you to include us in decision making and creating change.”

Key Expectations

1. Engage in honest, respectful interactions and discussions with the child or young person and their family from the very first meeting.
2. Appreciate the potential for change that a professional relationship can influence. Use interpersonal skills to build meaningful relationships with the:
   - child/young person and their family
   - carer (if applicable)
   - network and community
   - other professionals
3. Identify the child’s relationships that are strong and positive and then look after them.
4. Commit to purposeful, regular contact e.g. home visits; with the child/young person and family.
5. Communicate in a clear, honest and respectful way about:
   - the purpose of our involvement
   - safety and risk concerns
   - what the bottom lines are and why
   - what needs to change and how that may occur
   - implications for any actions or lack of action
   - their rights and our responsibility to help them.
6. Role model and reinforce constructive and improved interactions, beliefs and behaviours.
7. Work hard to keep the family actively on board in the process of meaningful change.

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

- Used empathy, warmth and genuineness in my interactions with the child/young person and family?
- Remembered that people who are afraid may appear reluctant to engage?
- Visited the child/young person and family regularly?
- Empowered the child/young person and family to understand their strengths, skills and potential?
- Role modelled and reinforced nurturing behaviours, relationships and interactions?
- Tried to understand who the child/young person and family are, the function of their behaviour and why they may behave that way?
- Built partnerships with other professionals and community members?
- Considered that relationships and parenting patterns may have been developed in the context of trauma?
- Been able to engage respectfully with the family, while also having difficult conversations?

Seeking Feedback

How is my practice experienced by others? How do I seek feedback respectfully from children or young people, family, agency partners?
Key Expectations

1. Seek to understand the child/young person and their experiences outside of one event
2. Take a proactive role with the child and family to create the changes needed to achieve child safety and wellbeing
3. Use Structured Decision Making tools (or Secondary Risk of Harm Assessment) and professional judgement to establish immediate safety and future risk
4. Consider, in assessments and ongoing work, the family within their context e.g. culture, trauma history, disadvantages, familial history and composition
5. Observe the child in their home environment interacting with siblings and parents
6. Examine all information and think through all possibilities about what has occurred and why:
   • make sense of what you know
   • connect pieces of information
   • identify gaps and inconsistencies
   • link this with professional experience, knowledge and theory
7. Establish a clear goal with the child/young person and family; and a realistic case plan to reach that goal. Be clear and specific with the family about what they need to do and why that leads to improved child safety
8. Undertake regular quality case plan reviews to meet the changing needs of the child/young person; as per the Case Planning Framework.

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

- Used SDM tools to inform my assessment / re-assessment of the family?
- Made sure the family know why we are involved?
- Put myself in the shoes of the child, young person and family to support my understanding of their context?
- Genuinely listened to what the child/young person and the family are saying?
- Used curiosity to explore what is happening?
- Talked to all people I need to, to get a full understanding?
- Been clear and honest about what the safety and risk concerns are, the impact of these on the children, what needs to change and how that change may occur?
- Respectfully and effectively challenged parents when needed?
- Explored the ways I can educate and assist the family make changes?
- Established a clear case plan with the child, young person and family and regularly reviewed this?

Seeking Feedback

How does my practice influence outcomes?
Standard 4: Collaboration

“"I need you to work in partnership with my family and people around me, to support and challenge each other and have the same goals about my safety and wellbeing.”"
Key Expectations

1. Engage staff, colleagues and managers in professional conversations regularly to:
   • discuss the child/young person’s safety and wellbeing
   • analyse information gathered
   • sort out what is relevant to direct casework
   • Identify and guard against making predictable errors
   • support good decision making
2. Identify your own biases and assumptions about each case so that they do not get in the way of decision making
3. Continually reflect on your language and actions to ensure you are being non-judgemental, respectful and ethical
4. Participate meaningfully in supervision and case reviews
5. Identify all possible options and approaches; assess each one before making a decision
6. Plan how you will approach interactions, conversations and visits with each client. When doing so consider the context of that child/young person/family
7. Actively seek consultations and expert advice to draw on specialist knowledge and experience
8. Use curiosity to explore what is happening for the child and family so you do not jump to conclusions
9. Review and reflect on the rationale for casework direction and decision making regularly to ensure it is child focussed and in the best interests of the child/young person
10. Reflect on your practice in specific cases to enhance your practice more broadly.

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

• Been non-biased, fair and aware of the power I hold in my role?
• Considered the least intrusive options to support the child/young person’s safety and wellbeing?
• Regularly reflected on the way I work, the decisions I’ve made and the lessons I’ve learnt so I can do the best by children and families?
• Engaged in discussions with my colleagues and managers to think through the issues and context to support good decision making?
• Sought opportunities to make my practice transparent and invited critique to guard against common practice errors?
• Been courageous in challenging my own views and considering information from different perspectives?
• Used practise conversations and role plays to help plan how I will talk with my families and creative approaches in my practice?
• Taken the time to think about all possible options and solutions before deciding on one?
• Been responsive to new circumstances and adjusted case direction if needed?
• Engaged proactively in strategies to enhance the knowledge and skills I need to do my job well?

Seeking Feedback
How is my practice improved by feedback and reflection?
Culturally responsive practice with Aboriginal communities

“I need for you to acknowledge the trauma and impact of the Stolen Generations. Genuinely value my Aboriginal culture and connection to community.”

Key Expectations

1. Take the time to really understand the history of Aboriginal people and how it might impact for them in working with us
2. Work in a way that is culturally responsive and sensitive to the continued impact of the Stolen Generations, but acknowledges current risk
3. Apply consistently the Aboriginal Consultation Guide and the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles in the Act
4. Consult often and meaningfully
5. Understand and respect Aboriginal cultural values, protocols and ways of doing business
6. Respect family and kinship structures. Make sure that kin are included in important meetings and in making important decisions
7. Support the principle of self-determination by actively and genuinely engaging Aboriginal families, communities and organisations in decision making
8. Know about the local Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal communities. Collaborate with them in assessment and family work
9. Make sure regular and meaningful cultural planning and quality Life Story Work occurs (OOHC).

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

- Used the expertise of my Aboriginal colleagues whenever appropriate?
- Been responsive to the Aboriginal community’s experience of welfare and government agencies and their mistrust as a result of past practices?
- Kept my word and demonstrated that I am trustworthy to the family and community?
- Actively sought a thorough understanding of the child and young person’s extended family and kinship network?
- Developed my skills in working with Aboriginal families and communities?
- Developed an understanding of community protocols and communication such as Men’s and Women’s Business and Sorry Business?
- Explained clearly to the family that any people they ask to participate in consultations may find out sensitive information about them?
- Been mindful about the language I use (written, verbal and non-verbal)?
- Built strong networks with key people and groups in the Aboriginal community?
- Reflected on my own cultural values, biases and assumptions? Been honest about our concerns and why we are involved?

Seeking Feedback

How does my practice demonstrate an appreciation of Aboriginal culture and history? Have I asked?
Standard 7

Culturally responsive practice with diverse communities

“I need you to seek to learn from and be responsive to my culture and the language spoken by me and my family.”

Key Expectations

1. Work hard to understand the family’s culture and migration or refugee experiences and consider these factors in assessment and family work
2. Reflect on your own cultural values, question your assumptions and if necessary check these with the family
3. Include meaningful strategies in case plans to maintain the child and young persons connection to their identity, culture, religion and language
4. Use a qualified interpreter for complex communication (or in times of high stress). Use a Community Language Allowance Scheme (CLAS)-accredited worker for simple communication
5. Translate important correspondence to clients or use an interpreter for a translation
6. Seek the expertise of a multicultural caseworker or external workers (including African Sessional Workers) to provide cultural consultation and support
7. Explore parenting practices and alternate care arrangements in their country of origin, to identify strengths, supports available and culturally appropriate strategies
8. Explore appropriate support from extended family and community members
9. Develop a good working knowledge of local cultural communities and multicultural services
10. Carry out regular and meaningful cultural planning and quality life story work (OOHC).

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

- Gained a good understanding of the impact of the migration or refugee experiences of the child/young person and their family?
- Viewed the family as the expert in their culture and used curiosity to learn from them?
- Reflected on my own cultural values, biases and assumptions?
- Explored the context of parenting practices in their country of origin?
- Reflected on the issues and experiences from their cultural context? Have I thought about what it’s like to ‘walk in their shoes’?

- Sought out to develop culturally appropriate practice skills to engage and build a relationship with the family?
- Been creative and thorough in case planning to maintain the child’s connection to identity, culture, religion and language?
- Used interpreters, translations and other workers to ensure the family is given true respect and equal access to services and information?

Seeking Feedback

How will I know that my work is responsive? Who could tell me? How could I ask for this feedback?
Key Expectations

1. Engage in regular practice discussions with colleagues and managers to maintain a contemporary understanding of:
   - trauma, abuse and neglect
   - child development and attachment
   - domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse and mental illness
   - parenting and parenting capacity
   - engagement strategies and family work
   - preservation, restoration and permanency practices

2. Use evidence-based research and theory (alongside the characteristics of the child/young person/family) to inform assessments and your approaches to practice with the family

3. Motivate change by role modelling, reinforcing, educating, supporting and providing strategies and interventions

4. Engage in continuous learning and development activities, including supervision

5. Use the expertise of other professionals (internal and external)

6. Work with families in a way that complies with legislation, policy and procedures

7. Apply tools skilfully, using critical analysis and professional judgement

8. Draw on personal attributes (such as ability to empathise, relate to others) and values to compliment skills and knowledge

9. Seek opportunities to make practice transparent and invite critique to guard against common practice errors.

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

- Sought to improve my knowledge and skills continually?
- Identified any personal attributes that cause a barrier or enhance my work with families?
- Accessed evidence based materials to inform casework?
- Sought support to be more confident and competent in my practice, particularly about those aspects that worry me the most?
- Developed the ability to use effective relationships with the child/young person/family as a vehicle to create change?
- Practised challenging conversations (that may be challenging for me or for the family) before I have the conversation with children, young people and families?
- Developed a good understanding of the sector, including the local and broader service system?
- Provided professional advice and support to colleagues within and outside the unit?

Seeking Feedback

Who have I asked to find out if my practice is skilful, knowledgeable and ethical?
Standard 9  Sharing risk

“I need you to share decision making about my safety and wellbeing with my family, your colleagues, managers and interagency partners so that the right decision is made for me and there are clear bottom lines.”

Key Expectations

1. Reflect with your manager regularly to check that you are appropriately balancing the risks with strengths, safety and wellbeing
2. Communicate any concerns you have about circumstances that make you feel uneasy
3. Seek discussions actively with managers and colleagues (including casework specialists, psychologists, care legal support teams, interagency partners) to facilitate shared decision making
4. Identify and be clear, with the family and interagency partners, what their role and responsibilities are to reduce risk, improve safety and enhance the child’s wellbeing
5. Use the expertise of other professionals involved in decision making
6. Share information with the child, young person, family and interagency partners about why and how decisions are and were made
7. Actively contribute to the office and team culture by encouraging transparent practice and inviting or providing respectful advice, feedback and support from and to colleagues
8. Use the child/young person’s case planning meetings as an ongoing shared decision making forum.

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

- Balanced the strengths and risks during assessment, case planning and ongoing work so that the family have the opportunity to address entrenched issues, while not losing focus on child safety?
- Asked for support when a decision needs to be made so I don’t feel alone to make that decision?
- Been clear with the family about what they are responsible for to reduce risk; and felt confident that they understood what I was saying?
- Agreed what the responsibilities of all stakeholders are to reduce risk and promote the child or young person’s safety and wellbeing?
- Been encouraging and supportive of my colleagues when they need my assistance to think through an issue?
- Brought new professionals onboard if they have a responsibility to respond to any risk issues?
- Remembered that sharing risk is also relevant to children and young people in care? e.g. balancing risks about the child’s stability and wellbeing.

Seeking Feedback

How have I brought in others to check in on the thinking around decisions and actions?
Standard 10: Documentation in casework

“I need the records about my life and my family to be clear and respectful so that I understand why decisions were made and what happened. There needs to be a balance between documenting the important stuff and having the time to visit.”

Key Expectations

1. Use respectful, straightforward language that is sensitive to the child/young person and family. Take care when choosing words to describe a person and their behaviour and always be honest.
2. Record in an ethical, non-biased and fair manner.
3. Write succinctly and only include relevant information.
4. Use professional judgement to determine what needs to be recorded in the context of that case.
5. Read the family history so families don’t have to retell their story unnecessarily.
6. Clearly articulate the rationale for decisions and actions.
7. Write concise, analytical and child-focused assessment narratives.
8. Record information accurately. Clearly identify the source and the status e.g. fact, hearsay, opinion - professional or otherwise.
9. Ensure strengths and positive experiences are adequately captured.

Reflective Prompts - Have I...

- Written about children, young people and families in a way that I myself would like to be written about if I was in their shoes?
- Remembered that children, young people and families may read these records in the future, and reflected on how I would like them to feel?
- Been concrete in assessment narratives? Is it clear to an outsider how I reached a conclusion?
- Reviewed what I have written to check for any biases, jargon or judgemental language?
- Documented decisions and given a rationale for any decisions and changes in direction?
- Captured what the child/young person would think is important?
- Made an effort to read previous case notes so that the child, young person and family do not have to re-live traumatic experiences?
- Been fair in my written representation of a discussion or event?

Seeking Feedback

Have I asked the child/young person/family if they feel my documentation is respectful and fair?
Predictable errors in child protection practice

There are two broad types of “traps or pitfalls” that child protection practitioners will inevitably experience in the course of their work:

1. Errors or shortcuts in thinking, information gathering and reasoning, and
2. Emotional responses that influence the way we see what may be happening in families

Eileen Munro

Eileen Munro is a British Professor of Social Policy who practiced for many years as a children’s social worker. She has centred her research on improving the quality of frontline child protection practice.

Common errors in reasoning have been described by Professor Eileen Munro as:

• over-reliance on information known to the agency, overlooking significant information known by other agencies
• too great a focus on memorable and current information and too little focus on written and historical information
• judgements based on too little information
• failure to verify and cross-reference information
• making assumptions without checking for details and practitioners expressing themselves in vague terms, leaving messages open to interpretation
• an over focus on the first and last pieces of information received
• an uncritical attitude to new information which supports the existing view of the situation
• reluctance to revise decisions and judgements in the light of new information
• prioritising the views and experience of adults over that of the child or young person
• failure to determine and/or record the analysis and outcome of the assessment

Kari Killen

Kari Killen is a Norwegian Professor and social work practitioner who has spent her entire career working with families and influencing the thinking of the international child protection field.

Child protection work inevitably elicits strong emotions such as pain, fear and anger. Kari Killen has described predictable reactions child protection workers will have as a way of trying to manage such strong emotions. These are:

• over-identifying with the parent/s and their problems and experiences and unintentionally ignoring or reducing the burdens faced by children
• minimising the abuse and neglect or denying the children’s daily suffering, placing overly optimistic hope and belief in the parent’s capacity that is beyond what they are able to live up to

Both authors argue that these errors are a normal and predictable part of child protection work and that child protection organisations need to create a learning culture where critique and challenge are welcomed as a way of guarding against predictable errors. It is important that these errors are seen as an expected part of the work rather than individual weakness.

Further reading
