Mentoring children and young people: a solution-focused approach
This content is not available in natural text format.
The model is particularly useful because it offers a side-by-side, collaborative approach and as such is particularly appealing and engaging to young people who have often felt criticised and judged.

**Solution-focused underlying assumptions**

The SF approach started life as a therapeutic model, a way of talking with people that was associated with those making changes in their lives relatively quickly. And yet underpinning the conversational techniques lies a stance, a way of thinking about people, and this way of thinking can offer mentors a useful foundation upon which to build. SF starts with a set of assumptions which shapes how SF practitioners listen to people, how they pay attention and how they talk.

The five key assumptions can be summarised as follows:

- People are doing the best that they can do right now.
- Everyone brings skills, strengths, capacities, talents and abilities to their lives.
- The ‘solutions’ that people find for themselves are more likely to be useful to them than those that we ‘provide’ for people.
- There are ‘exceptions’ to the rule of every problem.
- Describing in detail a ‘preferred future’ is associated with a greater chance of that future happening.

Taken together, these five simple assumptions inevitably have a powerful impact on the nature of the engagement between mentor and mentee. The mentor is likely to be experienced as predominantly appreciative of the young person’s achievements, while of course also interested in how the young person can build on those achievements in the future. The mentor, assuming that young people bring useful qualities to their lives, will be listening out for those qualities and seeking to highlight them in conversations with the mentee. When challenges, difficulties and troubles occur in the mentee’s life, the SF approach invites the mentor to be interested in those times when the mentee manages the difficult situation better, copes better, those times when the ‘trouble’ is less dominant, and to be curious as to what the mentee is doing that is different at these times. And these moments may well provide some clues as to the best way forward for the mentee at similar times of difficulty in the future, a real source of self-generated and useful ‘advice’. And above all else, the mentee will experience the mentor as enquiring rather than telling, as curious and interested rather than knowing better, as respectful of the mentee’s own best ways forward, rather than imposing his or her own.

**Solution-focused conversational resources**

In our experience of training mentors in the SF approach, five conversational resources have seemed to be most obviously useful to the mentors.

- An opening question: ‘What has pleased you since we last met?’ or maybe ‘What have you done that has made you proud since we last met?’ Starting meetings this way, by celebrating achievement, sets the tone for the subsequent interaction. Mentees tend to relax in response to this enquiry, and as they relax, they also become more open and responsive. They even appear to think better, a conclusion that Martin Seligman’s positive psychology confidently supports.

- Lists. Asking children and young people to tell us five or maybe 10 or even 15 things that they have done well, extends their thinking beyond the first few easy answers. It is in having new thoughts that the potential for change resides, and using ‘lists’ becomes an enjoyable and often amusing way of stepping with the mentee into the realm of the previously unarticulated.

- Strategy and identity questions. When a mentee reports a success, an SF mentor will want to make as much as possible of that success. Asking a simple ‘strategy’ question such as, ‘How did you do that?’, not only invites the mentee into ownership of the outcome but also helps her to specify the ‘recipe’ for that success. This enhances the potential repeatability of that outcome. Following up the strategy question with an identity question, ‘What did it take to do that?’, for example, supports the young person in noticing and naming his/her capacities, forming the foundation for the construction of an ‘identity of possibility’. And since human beings tend to behave in line with their ideas of self, this changing view of self can open up new possibilities.

>
Using scale questions with mentees opens up in a straightforward way the space between ‘terrible’ and ‘great’. The young person who has just told her mentor that things are terrible may still not rate her week at 0, if 0 is established as standing for ‘the worst that things have ever been’. ‘So how come the last week has not been as bad as that?’, allows the mentee to focus on what has been a little better. In addition, scales open up a sense of movement and of hopefulness – after all, the scale connects even the very worst day to how the mentee might want things to be – their very own 10!

Watching out for progress. The SF mentor will frequently say goodbye to the mentee by recapping the successes that the mentee has identified during the course of their time together and will then conclude with asking the mentee to watch out for even tiny signs of progress. Since most of us tend to notice what we look for, what we notice tells us how our lives are going. And if what we are watching out for is what we are doing that is useful, a simple route to change is established.

Horizons Mentoring

Horizons is a mentoring project run by Evolve Housing + Support, and working with children aged 10 to 15 across London. Our core aim is to widen children’s horizons so that they can see a bigger picture of their future lives.

We chose to use the SF approach because it is positive, future focused and asset, rather than deficit, based. It invites children to imagine a positive, healthy future, to visualise and describe it, and to begin to work towards it.

We use ‘best hopes’ questions to find out what children want to achieve, the kind of person they want to be, and who they want to mix with. We help children to make lists of their qualities, increasing their sense of ownership over the qualities and making it easier for them to embrace and to live those qualities more often. We encourage children to review their week by making a list of small positive actions to help them notice more and develop a more positive frame of mind.

SF techniques seek to change children’s views of themselves, highlighting their strengths and abilities and what they do well, rather than their problematic behaviour. We professionals often focus on the deficits in children’s behaviour or attitudes, which seems to entrench this behaviour, risking causing children to feel worse about themselves. We believe strongly that children who have a positive view of themselves are able to achieve different, more positive, outcomes. This approach is often completely different for children. They may be used to being told off, being told how to fix their behaviour or being told to improve. As youth workers, educators and parents, we are pretty good at looking for things that need improving. So it’s quite refreshing for both practitioner and child to have SF sessions. It is radical and yet so simple. It creates a great atmosphere and promotes engagement and motivation because children leave sessions feeling uplifted.

Horizons mentors’ feedback on the SF approach

Mentors commented appreciatively on:
• ‘Questions and conversations that draw out the positive things your mentee has done’
• ‘(An approach) that brings out the best in people’
• ‘Learn(ing) how to react to a sad or grievous situation without becoming focused on, or buried in, the negatives’

Mentors also specifically commented on the application of the learning to their own lives.

Jennie Blake
Mentoring Projects Manager
Horizons Mentoring
www.evolvehousing.org.uk
Chance UK

Chance UK provides early intervention support for five to 11-year-old children with behavioural difficulties. Each child is matched with a carefully screened, trained and supervised adult mentor. The child and mentor meet once a week for a year. The Chance UK mentoring programme is underpinned by the principles and practices of the SF approach. All the charity’s mentors are required to be solution focused in their thinking, acting and speaking throughout their year of sessions. Their programme managers (supervisors) assist them in using the SF approach effectively through obligatory monthly supervision and support meetings.

Chance UK mentors create a safe, co-operative environment in every session, enabling children to experience problem-free time. This does not, of course, mean that no difficulties ever arise during mentoring sessions, but rather that the problems often allowed to define the children elsewhere are simply not allowed to do so. Instead, boys and girls who may often be judged ‘naughty’ or ‘disruptive’ at school or home can experience, perhaps for the first time, how it feels to be free of that judgment.

Mentors also encourage children to talk about activities they enjoy and are already able to acknowledge that they are skilful at, for example football or drama. They will also ask for specific details about any successes that their child mentions, for example winning a prize or acting in a school play, so that the child can recognise the full value of their achievement. This may be in contrast to what generally happens at home or at school, with the result that conversations which may seem commonplace can have a remarkably positive effect on a child who is not used to such recognition.

Chance UK mentor feedback on the SF approach

• ‘Once you’ve used it for some time, the SF approach feels very natural. It’s like it’s always in your mind, ready to use.’
• ‘My child (mentee) has set herself the goal of conquering her fear of crossing bridges, and I found that scaling was a great way of helping her to realise how confident she has grown in doing this. We were talking about a recent session and I asked her how willing she would be, on a scale of one to 10, to cross London Bridge before the mentoring started. She said three. I asked her where she was on the scale now and she said eight. When we talked about what had taken her from a three to an eight, she said ‘not giving up’.
• ‘S loves dressing up as a princess, so one session we drew a princess on a piece of card and on the back we wrote down all the things we imagine a princess would be like if we met one. When we looked back at all the words, we realised that S was all of those things too.’

Orli Gorensky
National Development Manager
CHANCE UK
www.chanceuk.com

References