



ONE MINUTE GUIDE: Systemic Practice

What is Systemic Practice?

Systemic Practice has been developed from Systemic Family Therapy ideas which have been around since the 1950's. A number of theories have been developed to support change within family systems. These theories can be applied to children's social work which is termed 'systemic practice'.

Systemic Practice is well researched and has been shown in the field of social work to achieve better outcomes for families, decrease children coming into care and increase positive family engagement.

The Key values of Systemic Practice

Systemic Practice is a way of working which focuses on people's relationships as a way of making sense of their experiences. It doesn't consider the 'problem' to be inside any one particular person, but that the 'problem' exists and is maintained in relationships between people. The theory that the families we work with are part of systems which can be made up of wider family networks, friends, neighbourhoods etc means that these systems can either sustain or resist change. This theory also means that if we change just one part of the system, this can have a ripple effect which can impact on the rest of the system.

Systemic Practice considers that we can support two main types of changes with families:

The first one is a 'first order change' which is a change at the level of behaviour. For instance, if we feel that a parent might need some support around anger management, we get them to agree to undertake an anger management course. This isn't a negative change but can mean that it's less meaningful and often isn't sustained - 'parent is doing this because we've asked them to'.

The next type of change is 'second order change'. This is change at the level of belief. It might be working with the same parent to try and help them make sense of the impact of their anger or how others might perceive them when they are angry. It might consider more deeply how and why they might get angry and how they feel they might better manage this. These type of questions might cause the parent to make more sense of their anger and how this might impact on others and in turn cause them to want to change. This change is thought to be more meaningful and sustaining than first order - 'parent is doing this because they want to change'.

Systemic Practice recognises that we as professionals working with families aren't neutral, just the fact that we are involved will impact on the family system. This means that Systemic Practice moves away from professional's being neutral 'experts' and emphasises the importance of professionals being curious and using that curiosity to make sense of the system. It recognises that just as all family systems are unique, we also as professionals bring our own sets of experiences, values and beliefs to our work. It's because of this that we need to use curiosity, as without it we might develop unhelpful or incorrect assumptions.

The Key Theories of Systemic Practice

There are a number of theories which have been developed under the umbrella of Systemic Practice. As the City of York Council is looking to embrace Systemic Practice as our practice model, there will be training available. Some of the key theories are:

Social Graces - considers yours and others set of beliefs and attitudes which might impact on our work.

Motivational Interviewing - considers that when we think about change we have factors which make us want to change and factors which make us want to stay the same, and offers ways to support the factors of change.

Interventive interviewing - this is a relational way of working in which asking certain types of questions can lead to second order change.

Hypothesising - an explanatory process to help professionals recognise and link the family relationships with their behaviour and beliefs. This seeks to uncover the 'logic' of the system.

Narrative therapy - considers problems located within the stories we tell as they shape our beliefs. Change is seen as a process of re-storying and re-authoring.

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