

A collaborative response to supporting children experiencing challenges with contact

Yuyun Tan
Lesley Bracebridge



RELATIONSHIPS

Acknowledgement



We wish to acknowledge the Kurna people as the traditional owners of the land on which we are working today and pay respect to Elders past ... present and future.



Aims of presentation

To describe AnglicareWA practice model for working with children and their families who are engaged in the Children's Contact Service where children demonstrate discomfort or resistance to contact with a parent

To describe how therapeutic supports can assist the building of more positive parent/child relationships



What are Children's Contact Service's?

Children's Contact Services

- Provide parents/caregivers with the opportunity to spend time with their children in a safe environment
- Focus on the wellbeing, safety and best interests of children
- Support the development of stronger attachment relationships between parents and their children
- Assist parents/caregivers to have a greater understanding of the needs of their children
- Assist families in moving to self managed care arrangements (where possible)



How do the Children's Contact Services work?

- Priority for child-focused services
- Safety of children as paramount
- Preparation for CCS for children: introduction to program
- Preparation for CCS for parents: Intake, screening and assessment, introduction to program, expectations, contact arrangements
- Provide supervised visits and changeovers
- Regular reviews for both parents and children
- Court reports where requested or court ordered



Promoting children's security

- A focus on child's safety and child's voice in service delivery
- Consistency in processes and procedures in CCS
- Staff with skills, knowledge and expertise in working with children in CCS
- Ongoing review with children and families



The families' complex issues

Families who use the CCS may have experienced or continue to experience the following:

- Family and Domestic Violence
- Drug and Alcohol issues
- Mental Health issues
- Trauma experiences
- Poor or non-existent attachment relationships
- Grief & confusion; Loss of relationships following separation
- Insecurity and change
- Resistant-refusal dynamics



Children's exposure to adverse situations

Can result in:

- Less ability to articulate and manage emotions
- Inability to rely on or trust parents for physical, psychological or emotional safety
- Child feeling responsible for supporting parent
- Child being less able to cope with situations or understand own perceptions
- Poorer developmental outcomes (such as education, friendships, mental health), adjustment issues
- Ongoing trauma responses



Children's exposure to adverse situations

- Conflicted loyalties
- Exposure to different perceptions of reality
- Presented with extreme views of relationships
- Presented with accounts of events that do not fit with their own experiences of a parent
- Fears



These dynamics make it difficult for child to deal with complex emotions and to form on-going healthy attachment relationships



Attachment experiences of children in CCS

Secure: confidence in connections with loved ones and an ability to regulate distress of separation

Insecure Avoidant: Physiological distress, suppressed delay of emotions

Insecure (Ambivalent/Resistant): Extreme distress on separation with observed clingy, angry protests to loved ones on reunion and difficulties in soothing.



Children's experiences in CCS

Many children have positive experiences in the CCS such as:

- Having a level of control over the environment
- Having the opportunity for a relationship with a parent they long to see
- Time spent with a parent can be healing and assist recovery from traumatic experiences
- A timely opportunity to maintain an attachment that may otherwise be lost



How we view children

- We recognise children as credible beings who have agency, skills and emotional wisdom
- That with meaningful efforts to talk to children, we discover levels of maturity and insight in the views they reflect
- Their voice can direct us to advocate for the change they need in their family
- Transforming children from invisible objects into subjects with legitimate voices of their own (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011)



Importance of positive attachment relationships

Children grow best when they experience safe, consistent, responsive and sensitive caregivers



How attachment styles contribute to dynamics of relationship

→ **Felt Security**

Intergenerational patterns of attachment

Attachment Pre-separation

Attachment During separation

Attachment Post-separation

Attachment influences

Positive:

Quality time
Felt safety
Sensitive parenting

Negative:

FDV / Child abuse
Absent parenting (psychological/physical)/
Insensitive parenting

Negative separation experience can have an influence attachment security

Pre positive attachments less need for repair



Integrated and holistic services

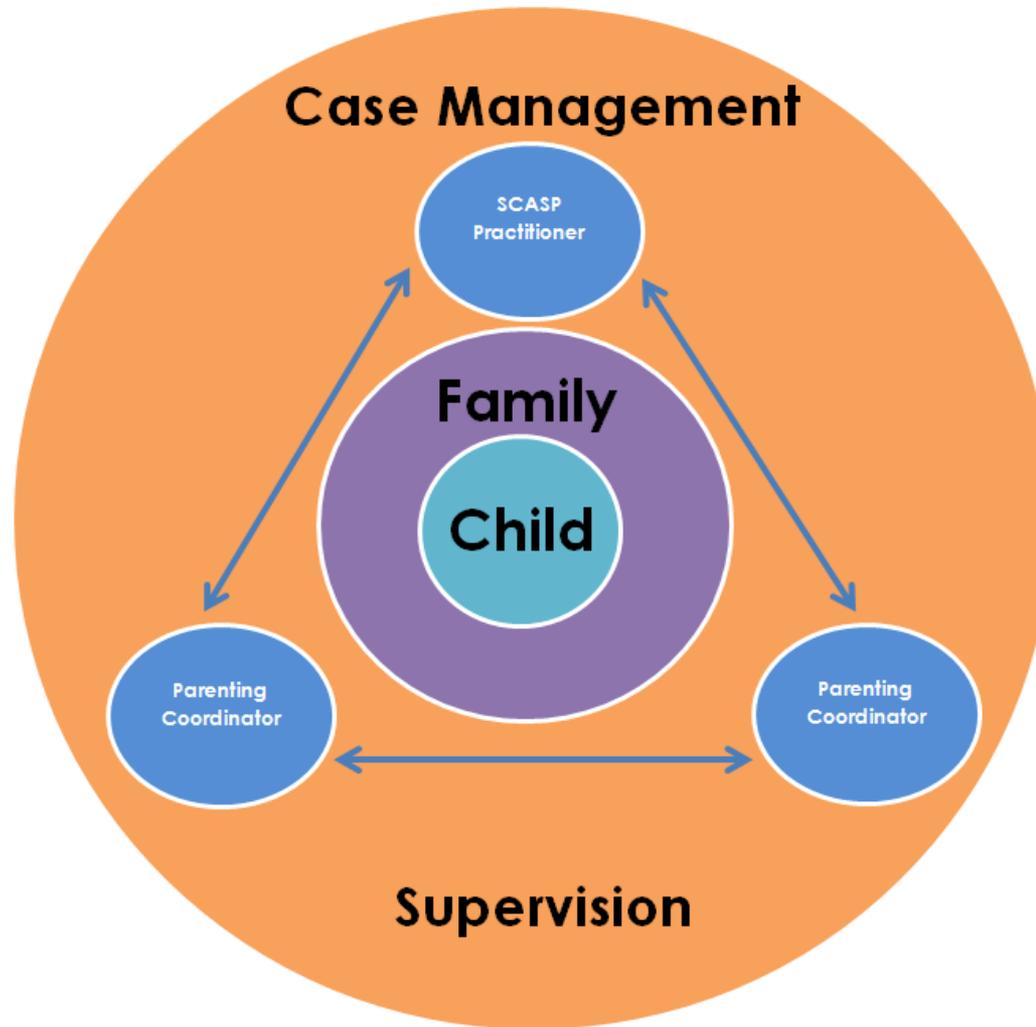
Systemic and holistic services including:

- Counselling for children and parents
- Groups for children and adults
- Family Therapy
- Psycho-education
- Case management

Importantly has RISK ASSESSMENT as an on-going feature of the work of all practitioners



Practice Model



RELATIONSHIPS



AnglicareWA
FOR TODAY FOR TOMORROW

Supporting positive attachment relationships

- Guide parents in being child focused and listening deeply to needs of children
- Provide opportunities for both parents and children to express feelings and thoughts.
- Role model positive interaction and communication for parents and children.
- Work with the tension between acknowledging child's voice (for example no contact) and the importance of a safe parental relationship
- Assist parents/children to understand change can occur and for parents to address issues with support services



Theoretical underpinnings

The support for the children and family is underpinned by the following:

- Attachment theory
- Trauma-informed practice
- Systems theory
- Person- centred practice
- Child- focussed and child-inclusive practice
- Child directive and non-directive play therapy
- Psycho-education



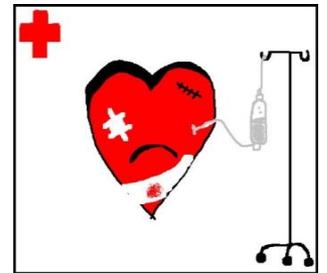
Eligibility for the therapeutic process

- Children who have ambivalence in their desire to spend time with a parent
- Children who resist contact with a parent and have a willingness to explore their feelings
- Parents who agree to “look” at their child’s and own needs, to attain a level of insight
- Parents are screened out where there are high child safety concerns, high risk factors or where parent does not demonstrate some ability to have introspection



The goals of the therapeutic process for the child

- Maintaining a focus on the needs of the child, at his/her pace
- Assisting the child in expressing his/her own complex and independent feelings
- Assisting the child to have healthy participation in decisions that affect them
- Enhancing the child's chance of maintaining or rebuilding attachment relationships with the parent



The goals of the therapeutic process for the child (Continued)

- Equip children with healthy coping skills; not avoidance
- Improve children's skills and self-esteem
- Increases capacity to cope with adversities
- Promote child safety

An important process for the child and separate and apart from whether a "reunification" with the parent takes place



The goals of the therapeutic process with parents

- To assist parents to focus on the needs of the child
- To build stronger attachment relationships with child
- To assist parents to identify, acknowledge and take responsibility for factors that have adversely impacted the child and his responses.
- To support parents to manage own emotions and behaviours
- To maintain objectivity, a balanced perspective and empathy
- To refer parents to other appropriate support



Working with children

- Child drives the session.
- Listen to child's story through therapeutic means (e.g. art & play, sand tray) at his/her place.
- Assist child in exploring and expressing needs , wishes and hopes
- Explore what relationships mean and identify possible ways for safe ways of interacting
- Provide sense of hope for change whilst listening and acknowledging fears
- Explore possible ways of connection with child/parent in spite of absence (Letter writing, exchange photos) & positive coping strategies



Working with the parents

- Listen to the parent's story through therapeutic engagement
- Assist parent to identify, accept responsibility for and work through behaviours that have "harmed" relationships
- Identify issues and explore different ways of interacting and engaging with children
- Assist parent to work at the child's pace and focus on the child's needs, wishes and hopes.
- Support parents to hear challenging information/feedback



Case study

Smith Family

4 children: 12yo female, 10yo male, 8yo female, 5 yo female

Lives with mother

No contact with father for 2 years

Family & domestic violence observed by children

Referred for CCS



Children's stories

"He needs to apologise for what he has done"

- 12yo - felt betrayed, angry at father for leaving the family and for hurting mum
- 10yo - felt scared and angry at his father for hurting mum
- 8yo - missed her father and felt worried that her father will hurt mum again.
- 5yo - felt that her father was a "bad" person



Children's issues

- All children strongly aligned to the mother
- Children were very loyal to each other
- Three of the children missed their father although ruptured
- Loss and grief issues for all children
- Children experienced lack of trust in father
- All children expressed the need for their father to apologise (for leaving the family, for hurting mum)



Intervention

- Work at child's pace, and in exploring relationships in the family and their wishes and hopes for their dad and mum
- Identify their hurts and named the grief
- Assist and explore each child's independent needs and emotions and his/her wish for reconnection
- Each child decided to describe his/her thoughts and feelings surrounding the hurt experienced to their dad
- Planned for a group reunification



Dad's story

- Referred to practitioner for support
- Was provided opportunity to share his story
- Assisted father to explore his abusive behaviour and the impact on the children and former partner
- Discussed his relationship with his children pre-separation and his role in their lives
- Assisted him to consider his parenting role post-separation and ways he can re-establish stronger relationships with his children
- Provided psycho education regarding child development needs and assisted him to focus on hurts impacting his children



Mum's story

- Referred to practitioner for support
- Was provided opportunity to share her story
- Acknowledged her focus on children
- Encouraged her to explore her fears/anxieties for the children
- Assisted her to focus on her children's needs in having a safe relationship with their father
- Referrals to domestic violence services



Apology letter from Dad

My apology to

My daughter, as you know, you are precious to me. I remember when you asked me to carry you on my back and asked me to take you to my friend's place so that you could play with your friends. So, I am very proud of you. The separation has been a very difficult period for you. I think about you and your future is always present in my mind. I am profoundly sorry for hurting you by fighting with your mum. I sincerely regret this and I promise you that this will never occur again. From now on I am committed to cooperating with your mum to work together for your best interest. To make sure your future is bright.

My daughter, as you know, you are precious to me. I remember when you asked me to carry you on my back and asked me to take you to my friend's place so you could play with your friends. I am very proud of you. The separation has been a very difficult period for you. I think about you and your future is always present in my mind. I am profoundly sorry for hurting you by fighting with your mum. I sincerely regret this and I promise you that this will never occur again. From now on I am committed to cooperated with your mum to work together for your best interest. To make sure your future is bright.



Response from child

yo dad I felt happy confident
and surprise I felt surprise
that you wanted me to have a
good life, love me and you want
me to do hard work and improve
my work. I felt confident that
you believe me what I do
and what I think. I felt happy
that you wrote thing about me
and that you also take me places
I love to go when I was a
kid

Also Im still mad at you
and I also love you Im
mad at you for choking mom
and I hope you don't do
it again xoxo

Yo dad I felt happy confident and surprise. I felt surprise that you wanted me to have a good life, love me and you want me to do hard work and improve my work. I felt confident that you believe me in what I do and what I think. I felt happy that you wrote things about me and that you also take me places I love to go when I was a kid. Also I am still mad at you and I also love you. I'm mad at you for choking mum and I hope you don't do it again.



Responses from other children

Dear Dad

Thank you for the letter that you have sent me. It's going to take a lot of time for me to forgive you. I remembered the way you treated my mum, that made me sad and depressed. I don't want to be treated that way. I know you won't treat me that way but I am afraid I'd be treated that way.

Two days after the incident (the day you and mum fought), I was in my room crying and keep remembering that you tried to strangle mum.

Dear Dad Thank you for the letter you have sent me. It's going to take a lot of time for me to forgive you. I remembered the way you treated my mum, that made me sad and depressed. I don't want to be treated that way. I know you won't treat me that way but I am afraid I'd be treated that way. Two days after the incident (the day you & mum fought), I was in my room crying and keep remembering that you tried to strangle mum



Responses from other children (continue)

I accept your apology and therefore I hope that you have changed. I hope to you see you change. Like the time when you were driving dangerously when we were at the back of the car. I want you to act like a good dad; responsible for us in loving us and spending time with us. You did spend time with us but that was when we were living with us.

I hope you can a ~~apologize~~ apologize to mum for what you have done because when I saw you hurting mum that made me sad.

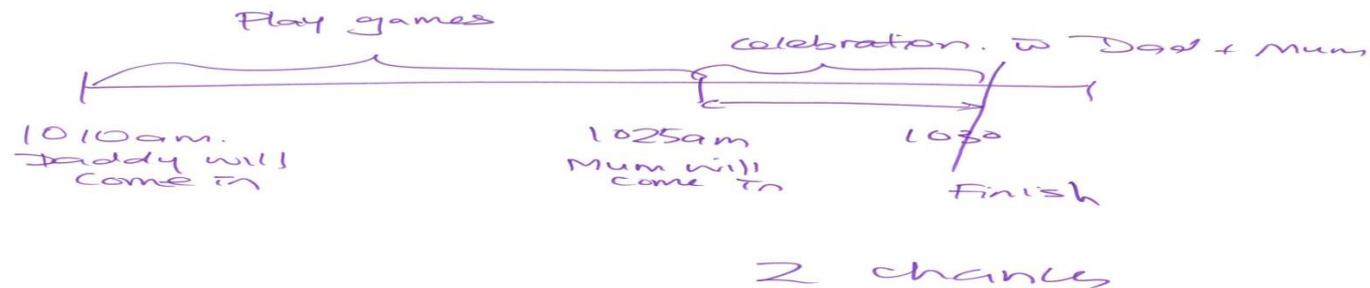


I accept your apology and therefore I hope you have changed. I hope to see you change. Like the time when you were driving dangerously when we were at the back of the car. I want you to act like a good dad, responsible for us in loving us and spending time with us. You did spend time with us but that was when we were living with us. I hope you can apologize to mum for what you have done because when I saw you hurting mum that made me sad



The reunification

- At the children's pace
- Children came up with rules and activities they would like to engage with their father
- Safety signals explored
- Both mum & dad to come into the session supported by their parenting coordinators
- Therapist act as time keeper



Father's feedback

It helped me very much in building good rapport with my children, improve my relationship with my children



Achievements & Outcomes

- Opportunity for child to express his feelings and needs
- Parents' preparedness allowed the voice of the children to be heard
- Role modelling for healthy relationships
- Increasing a parent's sensitivities towards the child and building a relationship
- Building of a stronger attachment relationship
- Building capacity for a safe relationship to occur



Challenges for children & parents

- May be resistance & fear from parents and children
- Relationship building takes time
- Pressure from parents for outcomes
- Pressure from courts, legal personnel for quicker outcomes



Conclusions

- Children thrive best in safe healthy environments where parents are responsive and sensitive to their needs.
- Importance of hearing child's voice and in refocussing parents.
- The rebuilding of more positive relationships
- That even if reunification does not happen, the child has an opportunity to explore their thoughts and feelings and has a voice.



The end or the beginning?...

