



# Engaging children as partners in practice to support their mental health and wellbeing

12 December 2018 | Chris Dolman, Lisa Johnson and Dom Kleinig

## Comments

“ **Within the 5 step framework that has been discussed can you describe actual/ practical engagement strategies that the presenters use with children 5-12?**

*Jeanette | 18 January 2019*

“ Thanks for your question. The five shifts discussed during the webinar together advocate for a practice stance or position or perspective that is available to practitioners when working with children. In the context of this webinar and forum, rather than suggesting particular strategies we invite practitioners to firstly reflect on the extent to which their preferred practice approach or modality reflects these shifts, and then if it interests them, what small changes to practice might facilitate a movement in line with these shifts. For example, if we were to take the position that children know a lot about the problems they are facing and have something to say about them, what is it we could be curious about and ask them?

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“ **In thinking more about bringing creativity and interest into the working partnership with children- do you have favourite ways of engaging creatively in the first session that promotes the 5 shifts perspective?**

*Fiona | 18 January 2019*

“ Thanks for your question. A great place to start is paying attention to children's own creativity, imagination and interests, by getting to know them - what they enjoy, what they are good at, where and when and with whom they enjoy and are good at these things. It's about inviting them to speak about these things, or write or illustrate or construct or perform them. Invariably we become fascinated and even more curious about their skills and aspects of their life that is beyond the reach of the problem. In some practice contexts its possible to hear snippets of these from parents, friends or others prior to engaging the child, so practitioners can be quite intentional in asking the child about these aspects of their life.

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“ **Shift 5, I'm confused. Can you give some examples of ways children can be accountable for their mental health?**

*Linnea | 18 January 2019*

“ Thanks for your question. This shift is actually about inviting practitioners to consider ways they can ensure their practice is accountable, or answerable, to the children they work with. How can we check out with children how they are experiencing our work with them? Are we talking about what is important to them? How do we ask about whether they are feeling an important partner in the conversations? How can we make it possible for them to tell us whether our conversations are being useful, or their ideas about ways they could be more useful? etc. There seems a lot to consider if we are to take this ethic seriously.

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“ **As well as engaging the child to understand their views, experiences, and experiences; is it not also import to understand their expectations and to manage those?**

*Hadyn | 18 January 2019*

“ Thank you for your question. Firstly, yes, understanding children's expectations could be important. 'Their expectations' could include a whole range of things in relation to their life, their family, their future, our work with them. And these might be quite different to 'their hopes' for these areas of life too, so asking about 'hopes' and asking about 'expectations' can at times evoke quite different sentiments from children. As for managing expectations, there may well be an important place for that. What might also be important is to be curious about the child's view of the expectation - how long they've held it, how important it is, whether other people know about it or share it also, the ways it might help them at times, or times when it might be downright unhelpful etc. In doing so, we may just get to hear about a whole lot of ways the child is managing the expectation, perhaps with the help of others.

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“ **Lisa mentioned finding skills and knowledge other than the English language - do you have some practical examples?**

*Joanna | 18 January 2019*

“ Thanks for your question. During the webinar we were inviting participants to guard against the idea that knowledge can only be expressed in certain ways – e.g. in language, in English – or by certain categories of children – e.g. smart kids, neurotypical kids. Instead we are also interested in what other forms of knowledge are held by children that can be performed or embodied. If we remained curious about this, what skills and knowledge of children might we be more likely to notice? Also, in my experience there are times when it seems unhelpful, maybe culturally dissonant or overly burdensome, to rely on children themselves to verbally provide a direct account of their knowledge, wisdoms or good ideas. Some young people have been generous



in letting me know when this is happening! Whilst I haven't found a single strategy to navigate this, I often find that young people are comfortable with me looking further afield for stories of their skills or qualities, that I can carefully re-present to them for their consideration. Sometimes the child and their guardian are open to a significant person being interviewed about a pleasing story or two they may have about the child. I remember being directed by a young person's family to interview a receptionist who was always warm and genuinely happy to greet their daughter at school each morning, despite the persistent trouble that tested many relationships at school. Through careful interviewing I learnt that this young person's smile in the morning warmed the heart of the reception staff, and heard about a time when the young person proudly showed them a courageously pulled-out tooth with a twinkle in their eye. This story, when shared back in picture form with the child and their family, was met with great interest. Whilst it certainly did not erase the troubles this young person was facing it did 'breathe some fresh air' into our conversations and made it more possible for the child to add their perspectives. In this instance their perspectives were in picture form – which began the journey of creating a book (with many contributors) as a way to document this young persons' preferred skills, qualities and ways of putting these into action. If examples like this are useful, you may be interested in the 'A Child's Voice' article listed in the Resources section. In terms of working with infants, we know for example that where an infant looks and pays attention is important to what he/she finds interesting and engaging, and that levels of movement (rapid and jerky or smooth and controlled) point to how activated/excited the infant is. Making guesses about the meaning of what we observe that – as accurately as possible – reflects the infant's internal experience, supports a sensitive response to the infant's initiatives and for the infant creates the experience of being seen and understood. So it can be useful to broaden communication to the level of action the child initiates.

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“ **In post separation, some parents demand higher accountability to them than to the child. How can a practitioner address this?**

*Jeannette | 18 January 2019*

“ Thanks for your question, yes this can pose some dilemmas. If a parent is preoccupied with their own requirements and therefore what is important to the child becomes sidelined, some options for responding can be explored. It's interesting to consider what might be getting in the way of the parent taking more notice of the child's voice than their own. Maybe there is something important to the parent that they feel the practitioner is not hearing or understanding, that has them preoccupied with achieving this. Perhaps there are concerns the parent holds that they feel are not being acknowledged by the practitioner. What might it be like for the parent to be expected to really understand their child, when they feel professionals are not trying to really understand them? We can be reflecting on what is it that the parent is wanting us to understand, that they feel we're just not getting, and how we can we ask them about this. The practitioner can also remain curious about the parent's preferences for an action or outcome, why that is important to them, and what they are anticipating about its effects on them, their parenting, the child and their relationship with the child.



The practitioner can explore the basis for these guesses and invite the parent to be speculating on what the child might say about some of these matters. The intention here is to create space for less certainty and other possibilities and an interest in the child's experience. While parents may often hear the message that they are the ones who know their child best, how can practitioners also sponsor parent's interest and curiosity about their children and who they are becoming? What is it that they are newly discovering and appreciating about their child?

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“ **In terms of assisting a child/adolescent mental health organisation in engaging their young people more and more effectively - are there any useful existing frameworks for the organisation to adopt?**

*Brigid | 18 January 2019*

“ Thanks for your question. The five shifts we introduced in the webinar propose a practitioner and indeed organisational stance that can support effective engagement with children and young people. For example, if we take the view that children and young people are active in shaping their own lives, have gathered knowledge about problems and skills in responding to them, and are open to an invitation to contribute to other children and young people, then how might a service facilitate this becoming visible and possible? What kind of 'project' could young people be invited into? These projects don't have to be grand but incorporated into the work with children and young people.

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