The Structured Decision Making® System

Listening Differently to Engage Families
Workshop Participant Packet

September 2016
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Children’s Research Center is a nonprofit social research organization and a center of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

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**Exception Quotes**

Although life is rich in lived experience, we notice and give meaning to actually very little of our experience. When aspects of our experience are rendered meaningful we can take them into our own storylines and make them a part our lives. However, countless amounts of experiences of daily life mostly pass like a blip across the screen of our consciousness and into an historical vacuum. Many of those experiences are not congruent with the plots and themes of problem-saturated stories in our lives, and thus are not registered, noticed, or given meaning to. These experiences can be potentially significant, and in favorable circumstances they can become “unique outcomes” or “exceptions.” The identification of these aspects of lived experience can provide a point of entry for development of new storylines in people’s lives and allow people to take up new actions in their lives as a result.

Adapted from Michael White, Maps of Narrative Practice, 2007

It is easier and more profitable to construct solutions than to dissolve problems. It is also easier to repeat already successful behavior patterns than it is to try to stop or change existing problematic behavior. For example, the activities a worker may engage in to protect a child from abusive or neglectful parents are quite different than those activities designed to “build safety” for that same child. What the worker does becomes even more different when she or he looks for and finds instances when the parent is already successful in ensuring the safety of the child, even if only a little bit, and even if it occurs only occasionally. Getting the client to repeat successful methods of child rearing is far easier than trying to teach totally new and foreign skills.

Exceptions are those periods when the expected problem does not occur; for example, when a child who “fights all the time” or “lies all the time” has a period when she/he is cooperative or honest. When a great deal of attention is paid to the interactional patterns around those periods—that is, what the parent does and how the child starts to behave and what else is involved—such activities provide clues to what the client needs to do more of. Initially, exceptions to problems can seem unimportant or insignificant. However, when clients can find ways to repeat the behaviors that surround exceptions the problematic situations become less overwhelming and more manageable.

Adapted from Insoo Kim Berg, Family Based Services, 1994
What are exceptions?

Exceptions are times the problem could have happened but did not. These times can be studied to understand who did what, when, and how. By looking at these moments you are trying to understand, in a detailed way, what new patterns around or outside the problem were changed. Such interruptions in the known, familiar, and expected problem—however brief—can be repeated and lead to more significant changes.

Types of Exceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Future</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions/Behaviors</td>
<td>A time in the past when an individual was able to take an action step to solve or respond to a problem that the same individual is currently facing again.</td>
<td>A present moment when an individual is trying to solve a problem or do something other than what he/she did in the past.</td>
<td>Plans people have for themselves, their families, and the actions they will take in the future.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The past action may provide a foundation for new actions and solutions in the present and future.</td>
<td>These actions are often minimized initially; however, they can be significant attempts at new behavior.</td>
<td>These plans can anchor new actions that begin now; however, they will need to be described in detail so that the “path” from the present to the future is clear.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intentions/Beliefs</td>
<td>Deeply held values or beliefs that were the foundation for successful actions taken in the past.</td>
<td>Wishes, beliefs, and hopes that continue to be held onto in the present despite the difficulties of current problems.</td>
<td>Hopes, dreams, or intentions for oneself or others in the future.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Helping people to describe the values that supported their past exceptions can lead to greater commitment to doing them again.</td>
<td>Helping people to notice these can lead to recognizing small, current actions that may be being missed.</td>
<td>These often start very superficially, but with some effort can be enriched, detailed, and grown to support new action steps going forward.</td>
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What are you listening for? (Not a complete list!)

There is always a history of resistance to the problem ... there is always a history of protection. When having conversations with families, listen for examples of the following situations.

**Deliberate Action Steps**
Someone took a deliberate action step to do something different, unexpected, or other than what was contributing to the problem.

**Accidental or Contextual Success**
A situation seemingly improved “on its own” due to accidental circumstances or changing contexts. Be curious: What actually occurred to allow the change? What deliberate actions by the person with whom you are working might be obscured?

**“Failed” or Incomplete Attempts at Solutions**
Someone made an attempt to solve a problem, and the situation went awry; or, perhaps, the solution is not something you can fully endorse. However, it was that person’s best attempt to improve something at that time.

**Minimized or Missed Exceptions**
Someone was able to do something different, but the effort was unrecognized, dismissed, or minimized. Be curious and tenacious: How did this occur? What does this say about that person, his/her hopes, or ability to change? Insoo Kim Berg said, “Ask the questions three different times in three different ways before giving up on that line of inquiry.”

**Absolute Comments About Self or Others**
Someone uses words such as “always” or “never.” In a world where things are always changing, such words can mask subtle efforts at solutions.

**Wishes or Desires for Change**
Someone speaks about how he/she would like things to be different. These imply hopes for a future and often can provide a pathway forward.
The O Family Background

The O family has a 25-year history with CPS. The parents’ involvement began when they—Steven and Karen—were abusing cocaine and alcohol, and their three now-adult children were all under the age of 5. The children’s needs were not being met, and they were placed in foster care several times before experiencing a successful reunification.

With three younger children still living at home, Karen and Steven now have semi-annual triggers that lead to relapsing with alcohol and physical violence incidents twice a year. Triggers include the anniversary of Steven’s parents’ deaths (from his father drunk driving with his mother in the car) in September and championship sporting events such as the Stanley Cup or the Super Bowl. The younger children—Tia, Justin, and Joshua—have never been in placement, as the family was able to safety plan at the time of the prior four investigations.

Tia was a product of an extra-marital affair with a man who has very little contact with Tia despite the family’s efforts to allow her to remain connected. Her siblings tease Tia, saying that she is not really an O because she has a different father. She dropped out of school at age 16.

The family’s most recent CPS case closed two weeks prior to this new incident. Everyone is very frustrated.
The O Family, Day 30 of Investigation, Getting Ready for “Warm Handoff” to Ongoing

Harm/Danger

- CPS hotline received a call and responded on Super Bowl Sunday. Karen and Steve had been drinking alcohol, and a physical fight ensued while Tia (17), Joshua (10), and Justin (8) were home. Steven kicked Karen, Karen called the police, and Steven was arrested.
- Karen took Ambien after consuming alcohol and was incoherent when speaking to the police.
- The fight woke up the boys; they were scared when they witnessed their dad’s arrest and their mom’s inability to speak clearly.

Complicating Factors

- Brian, Steven’s brother, broke an agreement to not come to the house with alcohol or when he has been drinking. Karen and Steven allowed him to stay while the kids were home.
- CPS involvement.
- Karen is estranged from friends and family.
- Karen is on bipolar medication, but does not take it when drinking.
- The family is able to demonstrate lengthy periods of sobriety and stability; they think they are “all set” when they may need more support.
- CPS is worried by the number of empty beer cans (150+) seen in the home.
- Everybody is worried about Tia not finishing school.
- Karen left a voicemail message for her CPS worker, Julie, on Sunday night: “If you F-in open this, I’ll F-in kill myself.”
- Report stated that Steve kicked Karen on Super Bowl Sunday when the kids were home.
- Steven is worried about the emotional abuse that goes on between him and his wife.
- Past history of drinking hard alcohol.
- Shauna is worried about her brothers, Joshua and Justin.
• Shauna can be a barrier to Tia having successful relationships within the family when she rubs it in that Tia has a different father.

• Boys’ exposure to negative behaviors.

• All grew up in alcoholic families.

**Danger Statements**

• CPS is worried that Steve will continue drinking alcohol while caring for the children, could become distracted or unavailable, and the children could be physically harmed (out of the house unsupervised, taken advantage of on the street, or not have their important or basic needs met like being fed or helped with schoolwork).

• CPS is worried that Steve will continue drinking alcohol while he is caring for the children, could become angry and violent, may physically harm Karen in front of the children, and the children could be physically harmed (by putting themselves in the middle of the fight).

• CPS is worried that Steve will continue drinking alcohol while he is caring for the children, could become angry and violent, may physically hurt Karen in front of the children, and the children could be emotionally harmed (scared or confused by the fighting, without a father caring for them every day if Steve continues to be arrested).

• CPS and the family are worried that Karen and Tia may continue having heated arguments, could physically harm one another (kicking or hitting each other), and Tia could lose her independence (forced to live elsewhere and feel unsupported by her family).

**Safety**

• Karen has strong protective instincts for her children. Parents provide supervision by being home after school and ensuring the children check in every hour or two when they are out in the neighborhood.

• Shauna was available to her younger siblings when Karen and Steve were drinking last September around the anniversary date of Steven’s parents’ death and took them in the other room when Karen and Steven were yelling at each other.

• Both parents have a history of partying out of the home (or at home and have kids stay out of home) and prefer to stay home and not drive under the influence.

**Strengths**

• Family has daily routines (despite Karen’s mood swings from bipolar and “self-loathing”).

• Karen successfully completed substance abuse engagement project last month.
Karen and Steven have been married for 26 years.

Kids go to school, play sports, etc.

Family has a tight bond.

Karen and Steve were motivated to stay sober to get kids back in the past.

Karen and Steve have had success with substance abuse services multiple times in past.

Shauna feels her parents get along better when sober.

Family is friends with landlord and other supports. Karen drives landlord’s son to school.

Parents believe Justin needs tutoring because he needs more help in school.

Josh is getting signed up for an afterschool program this week.

When Karen is working, Shauna or Tia can be home with the boys after school to give them a snack and help them with their homework.

Aunt Francine is a probation officer and has good rapport with troubled youth.

Aunt Francine always tries to engage and support Tia.

At their second meeting, Steve and Karen shared the danger statements and safety goal with their network and asked for their help.

Aunt Francine offered her home as a place the boys can stay if worried; she would be a formal placement resource in worst-case scenario.

**Safety Goal**

Karen and Steve and their network of family, friends, and professionals will work to show everyone that:

- Justin and Joshua always will be cared for by safe and sober adults; and
- Tia always will be cared for by adults who understand her particular supervision needs and help set up clear plans, rules, and action steps that help to keep her safe.

To accomplish this, Karen and Steve will ask for help from the network to maintain their sobriety, create a relapse plan, improve their ability to parent their children collaboratively, resolve conflicts in a constructive manner, and create a plan for what to do if one or both of them become violent.

CPS will need to see this plan working continuously for six months so everyone feels confident the family will maintain their new behaviors and the children will remain safe once the case closes.
### SDM® Safety Plan

**Child Name, Family Name, Worker Name, Date of Plan, Date Plan Expires:** Tia, Joshua, and Justin O; Social Worker Julie; 2/6/11; no longer than 30 days

**Names and Phone Numbers of Each Safety Network Member:** Shauna O, 978-555-5555 cell (adult daughter, age 23)

**Household Safety Threats:** Caregiver’s current substance abuse seriously impairs his/her ability to supervise, protect, or care for the child.

Domestic violence exists in the home and poses an imminent danger of serious physical and/or emotional harm to the child.

**Harm/Danger Statement(s) (Note: There should be at least one danger statement for each above safety threat):**

- **Harm Statement:** CPS hotline received a call and responded on Super Bowl Sunday. Karen and Steve had been drinking alcohol, and a physical fight ensued while Tia (17), Joshua (10), and Justin (8) were home. Steven kicked Karen, Karen called the police, and Steven was arrested. Karen took Ambien after consuming alcohol and was incoherent when speaking to the police. The fight woke up the boys; they were scared when they witnessed their dad’s arrest and their mom’s inability to speak clearly.

- **Danger Statement:** CPS is worried that if Steve and Karen continue to drink to excess and get into verbal and physical fights with each other the children will be scared or potentially get injured if they try to break up the fight.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who? Shauna</th>
<th>Will do what? Stay the night to make sure Karen does not disturb the boys so they can get some sleep. She will call 911 if she is unable to deter Karen’s behavior.</th>
<th>When/how often? Tonight</th>
<th>How will this action mitigate the danger statement/safety threat? If the boys need something in the middle of the night or in the morning while getting ready for school and Karen is unable to assist due to being under the influence, Shauna will be able to meet their needs and they will avoid any exposure to violent behavior by their parents.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who? Shauna</td>
<td>Will do what? Not allow Steven in the home if he is released from jail.</td>
<td>When/how often? Tonight</td>
<td>How will this action mitigate the danger statement/safety threat? Steven will not be able to physically harm Karen in front of the boys again tonight.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**How will we know if the above actions are working to keep the child safe?**
In the morning, Shauna will receive both a call and a visit from the daytime social worker assigned to the investigation. She can report what happened overnight: whether Karen was able to sleep and if she was able to take care of the boys overnight by herself.

The social worker will speak with the boys at school to hear how the night went from their perspective.

**What will the family and safety network do to keep the child safe if the above plan does not work? What is “Plan B”?**

**Plan A:** Shauna will take the boys to her house if Karen’s behaviors become unmanageable and she disturbs the boys’ sleep.

**Plan B:** Shauna will call 911 so the police can intervene with Karen if she tries to stop Shauna from leaving with the boys or follows them to Shauna’s house. Shauna also will try to reach her older brothers, Ryan and Steve Jr., to assist if needed.

**Signatures, Date, and Plan of Next Review**

- Shauna O
- 2/6/11
- This plan will be reviewed first thing Monday morning, 2/7/11.
References


Additional Resources:

sfbta.org – Solution Focused Brief Therapy Association

dulwichcentre.com.au – Dulwich Center Gateway to narrative practice

nccdglobal.org – The National Council on Crime and Delinquency