Introduction

Solution-focused practice with children
Solution-focused practice was originally developed in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s by a group of people including Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (Shennan, 2014). From the beginning, this approach has been used with children and young people as well as adults, and a variety of books have been written about its specific use with children (for example, Berg and Steiner, 2003; Milner and Bateman, 2011).

The approach of solution-focused brief therapy distinguishes itself from other more traditional forms of interventions because the change that is sought is located in an imagined future. The task of solving problems is approached by seeking to move towards what is wanted instead of trying to move away from an unwanted problem.

In offering this support, the practitioner makes the assumption that the child or young person is the expert on their own life. In asking useful questions, the process enables the person to begin moving towards the future they want and to learn from their own existing skills, strategies and ideas of what could be done differently. Although the principle is simple, the delivery of the approach is often felt to be far from easy: “Solution-focused interviewing is not an easy process; it is one in which therapists have to search as hard for the questions as their clients have to search for their answers.” (Ratner et al, 2012, p109)

This task of working with children and young people using a solution-focused approach can require innovative means to channel communication and pose the questions that are at the core of solution-focused brief therapy. It is the challenges experienced by NSPCC practitioners in using solution-focused practice with children and young people, and the creative solutions that they have devised that has led to the development of this toolkit.

NSPCC’s Face to Face service
The NSPCC’s Face to Face service has been delivered in 18 locations in the UK. The service is offered to children and young people in care and those on the edge of care who wish to receive support and can identify something that they wish to change in their life. Trained NSPCC practitioners work with the children and young people using a solution-focused approach, to identify how the child can make positive changes in their life to achieve their wishes. Practitioners delivering the Face to Face service received introductory training in using solution-focused practice.

The Face to Face service is being evaluated and links to published evaluation reports can be found in the resources section at the end of this toolkit.

A toolkit for working with children and young people
This toolkit was first developed by NSPCC practitioners to support themselves and their colleagues in conducting solution-focused work with children and young people aged five to 19.

The NSPCC has been using solution-focused practice with children and young people in our Face to Face service since September 2011. Through this work our practitioners have developed a wealth of knowledge in communicating different aspects of the solution-focused approach to children of varying ages, interests and needs. We have decided to develop and publish this toolkit so that others using solution-focused practice with children can benefit from the collective experience and creativity of our practitioners and the children they have worked with. The toolkit presents ideas for worksheets and activities that NSPCC practitioners have found to be helpful in working with children and young people. We do not intend this toolkit to be prescriptive or
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limiting in any way. Each child will have different needs and interests; therefore, you will want to tailor your practice and any ideas in this toolkit to make them relevant and useful to the individual. Inevitably, the best ideas will come directly from the young person – many of the case examples provided show how young people have brought their own ideas into this work. However, we do hope that the ideas set out in this toolkit will provide inspiration for activities that you may wish to use, adapt or devise for the children and young people that you work with.

NSPCC practitioners have often found it helpful to come to sessions of the Face to Face service prepared with worksheets and activities to help young people to get started on their solution-focused journey (some examples of these are shared in this toolkit). However, while worksheets can be helpful, you may find that they are unnecessary.

Who this toolkit is for
This toolkit has been developed to help people who have already received training in using a solution-focused approach with children and young people. It provides practical materials and resources that can be used specifically with children and young people.

You will find brief introductions at the start of each section of the toolkit to refresh your memory on different aspects of the solution-focused approach. However, for a fuller discussion we suggest that you consult other texts, such as Berg and Steiner, 2003; Milner and Bateman, 2011; Ratner et al, 2012; and Shennan, 2014 (full publication details are provided in the resources section).

Things to consider

• Every child and young person is different and will have different needs and interests.

• You may/will want to modify your approach depending on the age, ethnicity and developmental stage of the child, as well as taking into account their individual learning style, emotional literacy and any learning difficulties or disabilities. Is the child particularly creative or active, or do they prefer reading and writing? Berg and Steiner (2003, p13–14) emphasise the importance of ‘learning children’s ways’.

• The section in this toolkit called ‘problem-free talk’ includes activities that can be used to help the solution-focused practitioner get to know the child and what is important to them.

• Do not let the activities you choose be restricted by the child’s age. Some teenagers will enjoy drawing exercises or using a sand tray, while some younger children will be very confident about expressing their opinions verbally.

• The role of the child’s existing support network is important in facilitating and reinforcing the work taking place within your sessions with them. In this toolkit, we refer to the child’s support network as the ‘solution team’.

• Come to sessions prepared with a back-up option, as your planned approach may not always work.

• Tailor your approaches as you go, to keep them relevant to the individual and the work itself as it progresses.

• Bring the child’s earlier work to subsequent sessions so that you can refer back to it and chart progress.