Working toward the preferred future: instances, exceptions and scaling questions
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Introduction
A great deal of solution-focused work will be about working with the child or young person to identify behaviours and activities that are already helping them move towards their preferred future, and that can help them move closer still.

For example, a child may want to get on better with their foster carer. In one session, the child may identify that they get on better with their foster carer when they help out a bit more. Then between sessions they may practice times of doing this. At the next session they may report back on how this helped, who noticed and how this left them feeling, and can consider what else they are doing that is making a difference, and what other small differences might look like.

Instances, exceptions and scaling questions are important aspects of the process for solution-focused work.

Instances
An instance refers to an aspect of the preferred future that has already happened or is happening. Discussion of instances will help the child to stay close to the positive vision of their preferred future, and to consider how they are already moving towards their hopes. It is preferable to discuss the preferred future in relation to instances rather than exceptions, as exceptions are framed in relation to the problem, whereas instances are framed in relation to the solution.

If a young person’s best hope was to get on better with her mum, an example of an instance might be “This week I was able to stay downstairs and watch TV with my mum and we got on OK”.

This activity might work well alongside or following an exercise to identify the child’s solutions team, as the child may wish to include members of their solutions team in the scene they create.

Exceptions
It can be useful to discuss exceptions in situations where a child or young person is very stuck in talking about their problems and is struggling to describe their preferred future. It might also be useful in a follow-up session if the child is finding it hard to discuss ‘what is better’ and is talking about problems that have occurred since the last meeting. In these circumstances, it might be helpful for them to think about exceptions to these situations, when the problem was not a problem.

This process can help the child to recognise that the problem is not a problem all the time, and to think of ways that they can build on their existing strengths and coping skills.

Following on from the previous example, an example of an exception might be “This week I was able to stay downstairs and watch TV with my mum and we didn’t have an argument that day”.

Scaling questions
Scaling questions are a means of eliciting examples of instances and exceptions. During this stage you are looking for “news of difference” when parts of the preferred future are already happening. In doing this it is useful to introduce a scaling activity; making the top of the scale the child or young person’s preferred future and the bottom of the scale as remote from the preferred future as possible. When the child or young person chooses a value on the scale to represent where they feel they are now in relation to their preferred future, the number itself is not important to the worker, although of course it is to the child. The worker is not assessing the child here, and is not evaluating the meaning of the number. The number only becomes meaningful when the detail is shared by the child or young person of what the number means for them and what it says about what is already taking place.
Working toward the preferred future: instances, exceptions and scaling questions (continued)

The key function of the scaling is that the child or young person is supported to express the finer details of where they are now and what they are already doing in relation to their preferred future. This description will undoubtedly start to introduce instances and exceptions that can be explored further and built upon.

Scaling questions are used to break down the preferred future into small actions/steps, thus asking the child or young person to describe what one step on the scale looks like and what a step up the scale would look like.

It is important not to move up the scale too quickly, and to draw out a lot of detail about what the child is doing to be at the point they have reached on the scale (this is one of the hardest aspects of practising the approach). By focusing on what the child is already doing that is working, the child will be better able to do more of this, to find other strategies and try new ideas, and sometimes even to realise that they are already further up the scale than they thought.

For example, if the child or young person is currently at number three on the scale, you might ask them “What are you doing to be at number three rather than two or one?”

Things to consider

Listening for instances and exceptions
• When the child or young person is talking, listen out for moments when they give aspects of their preferred future that have already happened.
• Make sure to reflect these examples back to the child or young person.
• Also ask the young person to try and notice, between sessions, their own examples of moments when they did something or managed in a way that was helpful to them (see also the activities and tools in the ‘problem-free talk’ section).
• Where there are setbacks (for example, the child is at a lower number than last week), you may want to focus on what the child did to stop them falling even further down.
• It may be necessary to discuss the difference between things that are within the child’s control (for example, their own behaviour and actions) and things that are not.
Scaling exercises

- Some children and young people have communicated a sense of realistic expectation and suggested that they do not think that they will be able to reach the top of the scale. With all scaling it is important to ask what they would be happy with, what would that look like and so on.
- Some children may work well with numbers, others may want visual representations of scales that do not involve numbers (for example, the ‘climbing a mountain’ tool).
- Visual tools can be used to start a conversation.
- Coping skills, strengths, instances or exceptions can be drawn directly onto a paper worksheet.
- The same tool could be used each week, with a different figure added to represent the child on that day.

Tools to use with children and young people in working toward the preferred future

- Instances of my preferred future: explanation
- Instances of my preferred future: tool
- Climbing a mountain: explanation
- Climbing a mountain: tool
- Climbing the ladder: explanation
- Climbing the ladder: tool
- Taking off: explanation
- Taking off: tool
- Cartoon strip: explanation
- Cartoon strip: tool

Activities to use with children and young people in working toward the preferred future

- Scaling with physical objects: explanation
- Active scaling: explanation
Patrick was 16. When scaling, he was unable to identify with picking a number up to 10; he couldn’t get his head around it at all.

I suggested various other options including drawing a line in the sand tray and placing figures along that line or making a path to his preferred future out of paper and walking along to where he felt he was.

The option he chose to use, however, was to draw a line on a piece of paper, one end of which is his preferred future and each session using a different coloured marker he would mark the line according to how close he felt to his preferred future. This appeared to minimise any pressure as he didn’t have to name it, or give it a number and anything else like that; however, it was beneficial as it offered a visual representation of his changing perceptions.

One session that this scaling activity particularly helped was at a point when he had experienced a difficult week. He presented as nervous and annoyed that things weren’t as good as they had been the week before and was criticising himself. Following scaling, he was able to see the marks he’d made over the sessions and I invited him to share what he noticed.

First of all, he said “I’ve gone down”. So I said, “OK, so you’ve gone down today, but what else can you see from looking at that?” Eventually it seemed to just click with him that the mark, although lower than last session, remained considerably higher than it was at the start of the work. Then by asking how, despite having had a difficult week, he had managed to keep going, the conversation shifted. He was able to focus on positives, his nerves disappeared and during check out he reported feeling very positive about things.
We had a young Asian girl called Leila who was 10 years old. Her level of understanding was probably a bit younger than her age. She was referred to the service after an incident of domestic violence. The referrers were concerned because she was very nervous around other children. Sometimes she would act out if she was feeling threatened.

What she wanted from the work was to feel more confident around other children and she wanted to get on better with her sister. We did a crystal ball colouring sheet about what’s inside the crystal ball in her preferred future.

When we were looking at how she was working towards her preferred future we did a lot of identifying strengths. We got the strengths cards out and she would pick these pictures, colourful animals. I’d say “What strengths do you think you’ve got and can you tell me how you’ve used that strength?” It keeps it really positive. I also asked her if she could pick out some of her sister’s strengths, so that she could see that not everything was negative with her sister.

We also did a lot of scaling. She really enjoyed scaling. Sometimes we would do it by drawing stairs from 1 to 10 and asking her where she felt she was at the moment. Or sometimes we’d do it by running across the room – so this end of the room is really rubbish and this end is really brilliant, whereabouts do you feel that you are? She’d physically place herself where she felt she was. I’ve done this with quite a few young people and you can say, “So what number do you think that is?” – we did quite a lot of that. And I’m saying, “OK, so where do you want to be on the scale? If you were to move one up, what do you think that would be like? How might that be and what might change?”

When I first met her she was really shy and she wasn’t even looking at me. But I started to see improvements as we were doing the work. She started to make eye contact, she was laughing, and she was asking questions like “What are we doing this for?”

She started to say that she was feeling less anxious and she was getting on better with her sister, apart from the odd flare up. Her family were really pleased and the school reported that she was less likely to freak out if the other kids were getting noisy. So there were definitely improvements there. I think she really enjoyed the structure of the solution-focused approach; it was really helpful for her.
Some examples from NSPCC’s Face to Face service (continued)

Damien wasn’t really into doing worksheets or anything like that. He was sensitive to being singled out from other children or being told what to do, so what we did do at one point was make leaflets for other young people. When we were talking about what were the things that help to have a calm, relaxed atmosphere at home, we’d talk about how he stays calm: “How do you do that? How do you express your feelings without starting on someone, how do you relax with them?” Then I’d say “What do you think other young people should know about staying calm and expressing their feelings safely?” Then Damien turned this into an information leaflet for other young people. That worked really well, he liked that because it didn’t make him feel like he was different.

Also, some concerns around sexualised behaviour in Damien’s peer group cropped up during this piece of work, which needed to be addressed. So we worked through these issues in a similar way, by making an information leaflet about how young people could keep themselves safe.

With the eight-year-old girl who loved One Direction, we used the ladder image from this toolkit to determine where she was and how she could get to her preferred future (she wanted to be really well behaved so that everybody was pleased with her).

For the first few sessions, she was at the top of the ladder, so I was thinking “Where do you go from here if you’re already at the top?” So with the use of One Direction, we talked about what could be beyond the top of the ladder, and she said “Well there’d be someone from One Direction beyond there” and that’s where she wanted to go, where it was even better than the top of the ladder or number 10 on the scale. So we managed to develop a way of things being better than 10 so that she had something to aim for.

One little boy, he liked football so we drew a football pitch. Then he made the football characters and numbered them so we had ten players on there. I said, “You put them on the pitch”, so he felt that it was his scale. It wasn’t my scale, he owned it.

He wanted to get from 0 to 8 with his relationship with his brother. So we used the same sheet throughout so he could see when he’d got to an 8 for him.

When we ended the last session he asked me, “Can I have that?” and so I laminated it for him and sent it off to him in the post. I think he wanted to remember how he’d got from one end of the pitch to the other end of the pitch really.

We created a scale that looked like a garden with flowers and butterflies in it. She would move a counter to show where she was in the garden that day.
**Tool: Instances of my preferred future**

Ask the child to think of recent examples of when aspects of their preferred future were already happening, and to write these inside the stars.
Tool: Climbing a mountain

If reaching the top of this mountain means that you have achieved what you want from our work together, where are you on the mountain now?

You could give the child pens, stickers, counters or other markers to place on the drawing.
**Tool: Climbing the ladder**

*Where are you on this ladder?*
The top rung means you have got to where you want to be.

The bottom rung means you are far away from reaching what you want.

Zero out of 10 is below the first rung on the ladder.
Where are you on this scale?
Number 10 is the day when things go exactly as you wish them to.

Zero on the scale means that things are not as you wish them to be at all and maybe things are going worse than they are now.

If 10 couldn’t happen all the time, what number on the scale represents where you would be happy to be, where you would feel that this work had been useful?
Solution-focused practice: An NSPCC toolkit for working with children and young people

Activity: Scaling with physical objects

To bring the scale to life for a younger child, you could use physical objects that appeal to them, such as:

- Ten balloons
- Wooden blocks or lego (stacking or building stairs; you could use a toy or figure to represent the child)
- A row of toy cars
- A jar or bottle, marked with a scale; the child fills the bottle with water or sand up to the correct mark
- A row of 10 buttons (these could be ordered according to size or attractiveness)

To avoid confusion, it is best if you stick with a scale of 0-10 (e.g. choose 10 objects) although scaling does not have to involve numbers — it could be a range of faces from happy to sad, or 10 coloured blocks.
A more active child may prefer a scale that requires them to move around rather than talking or drawing. You could use:

- A staircase: the top step represents their best hopes. Where are they now?
- A room: this end of the room is their preferred future, the other end is as bad as things could be.
- Laminated pictures of pool balls – place them in a row and the child steps onto the right numbered picture.
- Outside: this tree is zero, the other tree is 10. Run to the place between the two trees that represents where you are now!
- Sports grounds: a basketball court or football pitch.
- Hopscotch or skipping.