

How to Help Families in Trouble Briefing Sheet

USING CONTRACTS IN FAMILY WORK

This briefing sheet is part of a series designed to work alongside the book *How to Help Families in Trouble – a short guide* (by Honor Rhodes, published by the Family and Parenting Institute 2007). The book is available from the Institute website: www.familyandparenting.org/publications

Contracts between family workers and the families they work with have long been recognised as a powerful way of creating an effective environment for change. The process of developing and working with a contract and the organisation of an agenda can help both parties to understand family processes and achieve vital goals. The concept started to be taken seriously in the late seventies when the voluntary sector, particularly agencies like Family Service Units and the Family Welfare Association, were looking to clarify the expectations in their own contracts with their funding authorities. They wanted to demonstrate what they were intending to do in their work with families and be able to demonstrate what had been achieved. They also believed that involving family members closely in setting work plans would both demonstrate respect for families and clarify roles and responsibilities.

The contracts referred to here are voluntary in nature and form part of a particular way of working. As 'contracts' today are known mainly in their statutory form, sometimes involving enforcement (for example Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, Parenting Contracts and Home-School Contracts), some people prefer to use the term 'written agreement' to describe this approach to working.

What do contracts look like?

The contract will stipulate both how the work is to be done and what the objectives will be. There is no fixed template but once a worker or workers sit down with the whole family to work out together what they wish to achieve and who will do what, there tend to be two or three parts. The first lays down the 'rules', like:

- When meetings will take place
- Who will be there
- How long it will be for
- Where it will happen
- The TV will be switched off
- We will decide what to do next before we stop
- And there will be idiosyncratic things like 'no one will shout'.

This kind of structuring is particularly helpful when working with families who present chaotically and may avoid tackling issues through disorganisation. But it also means that the workers must be organised, in control of their work and able to demonstrate that they can keep to rules in order to solve problems. If we believe that family units are important and at the heart of the troubles that children and adults experience together, there is no point in just 'popping in' on your way by to see who is there. The process of drawing up the agreement with the full involvement of all family members gives an opportunity to understand what is really happening in that family's relationships.

The next part of the agreement will be the problems identified that need to be tackled and given some kind of prioritisation. Again, it is important that everyone has their say, including the workers. To make it all transparent, it is advisable to write everything on large sheets of paper and get everyone to sign it at the end. It might be that the family keep the original and the workers copy it for themselves. The issues on the agenda are those identified by all the family and the workers as needing to be tackled. If for example there are external threats such as pending school exclusion, it would make little sense to ignore it and the worker would want to note this if the family didn't raise it. The possible objectives are endless and include both practical and emotional things like:

- Get John to come back to the family by 11 at night
- Work out why Jane hates school and help her go back
- Find things that are fun for the family to do together
- Get dad's money sorted while he is ill
- Getting Jane and Melanie to do what their mum says
- Do something about mum and dad fighting
- Have a birthday party for Melanie.

The third element, which might not be in the contract, is to prioritise the agenda and set the tasks people have to do to get started. It is important not to do too much at once or everyone will be overwhelmed.

The advantages of using contracts

Contracts, well used, help workers as well as families avoid getting into drift when months go by without effective contact and learning. It can also help families to avoid the feeling of always being 'done to' and not being participants in the solving of their problems. Research¹ has shown that this can lead to an altogether different mindset, more task-oriented and less casual. Families often appreciate the upfront conversations which lead to a negotiated contract and the respect shown for their knowledge of their family.

Another advantage is that it gives full recognition to the family and all its members and helps workers hone their skills in talking to and drawing out the wishes and opinions of all the children. This is not about children, it is with children and stays that way – this is real family intervention and provides much better opportunities to identify and work with the dynamics of that group of people.

Some of the issues that arise

For some workers, the fact that the rules may not be kept and the tasks may not be done poses a problem. When does the worker get heavy? Given the nature of some of the situations in which families try to survive it would be odd if everything went smoothly – indeed you might wonder why you were there. A useful adage that comes from systems theory is that 'things that don't work are not disasters, they are simply information'. Working with or without a contract, the process is about moving towards getting the family to function well enough and when something goes wrong or is not done, it is information which can help everyone sit back and reconsider. The answer might be a revision of the contract because the task was unrealistic or it might be looking to the family to tackle it a different way.

These considerations will arise right at the beginning. How do you negotiate what is listed in the objectives? Is 'dad will stop being drunk from tomorrow' realistic? If there is an issue about child protection, is it put down as improving relationships or with a reference to possible orders? These are judgement calls and negotiations and the play with words that produces a working document that everyone agrees to - even if they do not each agree with everything. It all needs a little bit of 'I want to be effective, not nice' with a bucketful of genuine respect. Then all you need is the creative solution to each task which puts lots of responsibility back with the family!

¹ The introduction of contracts in a Family Service Unit. G Smith and J Corden. Br J Social Wk (1981) 11, 289

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