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Multi-family Groups in Schools

A theoretical and practical manual



Neil Dawson, Brenda McHugh & Eia Asen

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John Lyon's Charity give grants to benefit children and young people up to the age of 25 who live in nine boroughs in northwest London. Since 1991, the Charity has distributed over £100 million to a range of organisations that seek to promote the life-chances of children and young people through education. The Charity understands that good emotional health and wellbeing are key factors in the successful development of children and young people and that schools can have a huge impact in this area.

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Foreword by Professor Peter Fonagy

In all Western societies, particularly since the Second World War, schools play a central role in socialising young people. Not only do we place considerable emphasis on educational attainment in schools, as their primary function, but we use schools as training grounds for shaping appropriate social and emotional behaviours in children. In many ways, schools have taken over many of the socialising functions that settings such as apprenticeships, and perhaps a little further back in history child labour and agricultural workplaces, once had. There can be no debate that access to free and universal high-quality education up to age 18 is one – if not the – hallmark of civilised society.

Yet there is no effect without side effect. By placing children into schools for at least 15,000 hours of their lives we have also opted to take them away from social environments where they are more likely to benefit from adult influence. We have created a situation in which the primary socialising influences for children are other children and young people. We have also changed other aspects of their life, reducing even further the proportion of time they spend with adults in and beyond their family. Workdays are getting longer again and patterns of family interaction have changed, with fewer family meals and less joint social entertainment. Ready access to sophisticated digital resources also reduces the time families spend together: young people spend time with each other digitally, even while in the family home.

These and other societal changes make it imperative that we use the school environment optimally to enhance children's social wellbeing. It is well known that schools present unique risks for children's mental health: educational pressures; the stress of exams and other public exposure; and, for some children, just regulating their behaviour sufficiently to permit group learning to take place. Bullying and victimisation, and the potential for a Goldingesque

digital environment, also have the potential to cause lasting damage to young minds. But schools are also places where we forge resilience, make lifelong friendships and encounter teachers that become role models. And where we learn all the stuff that we can take a lifetime to forget!

So, are our schools optimal, or could we do better? Where we have obtained a bare pass in the school of social engineering is in forging good enough links between the socialising influences of the family and those of the school. Both are key elements of young lives, yet they too often work against rather than in support of each other.

Parents wait at the school gate. Teachers hope for collaboration from parents, and they experience deep and justified frustration when this is not forthcoming. And, of course, parents commonly experience lack of understanding from schools, particularly when their children have significant emotional or behavioural problems.

More than half a century ago we discovered that separating children from their parents during hospital admissions not only caused deep distress

at a particularly stressful time in a child's life but also had irreversible consequences for their health and normal development. Not least of these challenges were increased mortality and increased time to full recovery. Society has since changed, and we would be horrified if a parent could not accompany a child who needed inpatient treatment.

Meanwhile, the professional boundaries between schools and families continue to be firmly drawn; in some ways the attitudes are reminiscent of those physicians and nurses who formerly insisted on separating at the hospital gate children from their families. Obviously the two contexts are not analogous. Schools provide the care function that enables parents to remain in gainful employment in a post-industrial society. It is also hard to imagine effective teaching taking place if parents were constantly turning up whenever they felt like seeing their child. Nevertheless, we may wonder whether the border between home and school is not too sharply drawn – particularly as such a binary split creates perfect opportunities for mutual blame.

Schools should be a place of learning not just for children but for parents too. We now know that the most effective psychosocial intervention for children is training their parents in parenting. Schools should make a better job of offering themselves as a place where parents can learn how to bring up children. We will all miss out if we do not take advantage of the universality that our education system provides and ensure schools can be part of the solution to provide the education that all parents need. This is not just about parenting at home – it also involves learning more about what schools need. But more importantly, bringing the parents into schools as learners will also help children connect more closely the two worlds of home and education.

In brief, the multi-family approach of bringing families into the school breaks down an unnatural barrier in children's lives. Especially for those children whose lives are dominated by division, a common language and a seamless natural continuity is created where previously the hallmark was fragmentation.

But the multi-family approach also provides something else that may help to fill a gap with which 21st century Western culture struggles. Most of us now recognise that the digital age, effective as it is in creating virtual communities, falls short of generating the interpersonal experience that may be at the core of effective human social function. Through the millennia of natural selection, we evolved to live and thrive in small communities. In these communities, we would know everyone, and those around us would share our burdens – including, most importantly, the responsibilities that caring for children entail. Ethnographic studies have produced compelling evidence that shows sensitivity to a young person is key to their healthy development in all societies; in our society, we translate this to be sensitive and secure attachment.

Yet in other societies sensitivity is not considered a characteristic of just the parent-child relationship, but rather of the community and the wider social context that supports the development of the child. Our social organisation, based almost exclusively on nuclear families, restricts opportunities for creating community-wide networks that can provide this essential form of social support.

The multi-family school-based initiative that this book so wonderfully and evocatively details creates an antidote to the social and emotional challenges an individualistic, attainment-focused culture has created for our children. It draws on the healing strength of what is in all our nature: the ability to build bridges, create a common language and establish trust between parts of our culture that, for the best of reasons, we have allowed to drift too far from what matters most.

There is much more that is remarkable about bringing families together in a shared effort to help their children, the school and each other to optimise the opportunities available to every young person. The attention to detail in this book is exceptional. Big ideas rarely solve the problems of daily living; this book has many great suggestions, but its wisdom shines through not so much in what it suggests but in how it does so. It is

a book that is born of patience – the patience we all need if we are to change behaviour. It teaches us that small steps are needed to climb the biggest mountain. The book is proof that simple ideas, when presented with clarity, have the potential to change lives.

I would not wish to exaggerate the benefit that an approach such as the one recommended here can bring. But nor would I wish to be guilty of understating it. Making the best use of the school as a platform for social change, and providing the tools that teachers, parents and carers need, is a massive step. The way we will solve the crisis represented by the increasing prevalence of mental health problems in children and young people is not by training yet more mental health professionals; it will be by training ourselves to incorporate mental health knowledge and skills into what we do already.

The value of this book is in encouraging parents and teachers to continue doing what they know how to but making changes in ways that benefit the children and young people for whose emotional development they take responsibility. In this space, in empowering all of us to offer support and help to our children and those of others, this book fulfils an all-important goal, and does so brilliantly, evocatively and in a profoundly inspiring way.

Professor Peter Fonagy
Chief Executive, Anna Freud Centre



Introduction to multi-family groups

It is estimated that there are over a million children and young people in the UK who are suffering with mental ill health. Of these, only a quarter receive treatment from child mental health services across the country. Those that are receiving help frequently present significant difficulties in many areas of their lives, including in the family and at school. But, for the vast majority who are not able to access appropriate support from mental health professionals, the picture is particularly bleak. These children and young people commonly struggle with complex personal issues, often associated with problematic family situations.

The nature of children's difficulties can mean that they are not able to function well at or in relation to school. Without expert guidance or intervention, teachers are faced with having to manage or cope with children and young people whose mental health and behavioural challenges are beyond their experience, knowledge or appropriate expertise.

There is little effective integration between the staff from statutory child and adolescent mental health services and school-based professionals. Teachers who have daily contact with these vulnerable and troubled children can become increasingly frustrated by their inability to find reliable help for the young people in their care. In these circumstances it is not unusual for the child to move or be moved increasingly into the margins of the school and to receive less and less teaching and learning experiences with their peers.

As their problems intensify, a child can become more isolated at school and may be excluded on numerous occasions because of their behavioural challenges. Many absent themselves from school altogether or are permanently excluded. Having mental health and emotional problems seriously affects a child or young person's chances of academic success and future opportunities. Children with an emotional or behavioural disorder fall behind in their intellectual development and fail to develop the emotional and social resilience that underpins academic and life success.

Within the youth justice system there is a very high percentage of young people in custody who present with unresolved mental health or psychological difficulties that have been known about for many years and during their time at school.

To improve things for their pupils, many school head teachers and governing bodies have taken to recruiting and paying for their own counsellors or mentors to work directly with the children on site. Although this can help to some extent, there is rarely good coordination or integration of practice across schools or with the NHS child mental health or social care services. Counsellors can become isolated in school. They are faced with trying to help children who have complex difficulties and troubled family circumstances, but without access to the professional support, guidance and supervision necessary to have even a chance of being effective.

School staff are equipped to teach children individually and in groups but receive no training or advice about how to think about or intervene in the context of a child's parental or family relationships. As many children and young people with mental health issues also have difficulties associated with family relationship problems, this leaves a gap. Teachers and school counsellors will attempt to help the children as best they can, at the same time being all too aware that they are not engaging with many of those child's key areas of difficulty, specifically that are connected to family relationships. It is in these circumstances that the idea of bringing children,

young people, family members, school and mental health or psychologically trained professionals together at school in multi-family groups was conceived.

Why multi-family groups?

There is an urgent need for an effective intervention in schools that successfully engages vulnerable young people and their families. The intention has been to integrate the highest level of skills and knowledge from the school and mental health and psychology professions to create an approach, delivered in schools, that promotes change while also being accessible and non-stigmatising for children, young people and their families.

In response to this need, the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed this manual, which describes the theory and practice of a multi-family group intervention in schools. (This type of intervention is also known as 'family class'; the terms are used interchangeably across the different countries in which the practice has become established.) The multi-family group approach is designed to help teachers, psychologists, social workers, therapists and other professionals whose job is to work with children and young people presenting with behavioural, emotional, psychological or mental health difficulties in school.

The approach described was devised by two of the authors, Brenda McHugh and Neil Dawson, who are consultant systemic family therapists with a background of teaching in primary, secondary and alternative provision schools. Their experience of setting up and running the first multi-family class and multi-family groups in schools forms the basis of the practice described here (see Dawson & McHugh 1994, 2000, 2005, 2012). Together with Eia Asen, consultant psychiatrist and family therapist, they devised and further developed the Marlborough Model (Asen, Dawson & McHugh 2001).

The most recent iteration of the multi-family group approach in education is the co-founding, by McHugh and Dawson, of the Pears Family School London in 2014. This is the first systemic and multi-family oriented, alternative provision school set up specifically to help children and young people with the most severely challenging emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties. It combines high-quality teaching with a fully integrated family and multi-family group therapeutic programme. The school was inspected by Ofsted in July 2017 and judged to be 'Outstanding'.



The use of multi-family groups in schools is intended to help children and young people in schools who are having difficulties with learning because their emotional and/or behavioural challenges distract them from the core teaching and learning functions required to be a successful pupil or student. It is an approach based in education that uses any difficulties a child might be having with teaching and learning as the central reason for seeking parental and family involvement in looking for better solutions in school.

The multi-family groups approach does not require children or their families to become patients or clients. It does not require diagnosis and avoids medicalising situations whenever possible. Parents join the groups in school primarily because they want to help their children change so that they can be happier, achieve better or attend school more consistently. A consequence of participating in a group is invariably that relationships and behaviour improve at home as well, even though this is not usually the key focus to begin with.

The stance throughout the whole process is one of collaboration such that parents are encouraged to feel that they are not the problem and that, we, the whole multi-family group, are intent on searching for new ideas and solutions.

The approach is designed so that mutual respect and trust can grow across parent-teacher relationships in support of good outcomes for children.

Multi-family specialist professionals, teachers, children, young people and parents meet, for a few hours each week, to pool resources. This allows new connections to be made between school and home in order to help the child presenting with difficulties make significant changes in both settings.

Providing help via multi-family groups, also known as multi-family therapy, is a well-established systemic intervention which is being used for a whole range of presentations and conditions and is accumulating a considerable evidence base. (Asen & Scholz 2010, Morris et al 2014).

The main aim of this school-focused approach is to reduce problematic behaviours and improve the emotional wellbeing of children and young people, both in the family and at school.

Core concepts



Throughout this guide we refer to a number of key concepts – ideas and approaches that are central to running multi-family groups in schools.

De-stigmatisation: removing the negative labels and associations that individuals may feel come with being identified as a child or family that needs additional mental health or behavioural support.

De-isolation: bringing families together to encourage positivity and belief in change, to benefit from giving and receiving advice from others and to provide a supportive sense of oneness that comes from 'being in the same boat'.

Living proof: seeing one's own experiences and feelings reflected in those of other people, making it easier to visualise and realise change. Showing that change is possible through sharing the positive experiences of others.

Learning: learning new behaviours and skills that can be transferred to home and school life – and learning how to learn.

Reflective functioning: improving an individual's capacity to perceive and interpret human behaviour, often considered as the ability to see oneself from the outside and others from the inside.

Change: focusing on the possibility of change and how to make change happen. Bringing families together provides a supportive and energising space in which new behaviours and feelings can be tested and reflected on, creating a path to change.

It helps families to discover or rediscover skills and strengths so that their children can perform better emotionally, academically and socially.

Multi-family intervention means working with, and alongside, other families who have similar experiences. This reduces stigma, furthers social collaboration and equips parents and teachers with new resources to tackle problems commonly associated with academic and/or social exclusion.

The approach

Typically, six to eight children or young people and their families are selected to take part in a multi-family group (which may be also called a family class or family workshop, depending on what best suits different school contexts). They are joined by a teacher or other member of the school staff and a psychologist, psychotherapist, social worker or mental health-oriented professional.

Throughout the manual we refer to the professionals leading the group as: 'family group specialist', when describing a mental health or psychology linked professional; and 'school partner' when describing the member of staff nominated by the school.

In situations where there is no possibility of recruiting a family group specialist two school partners may jointly run a group. In such circumstances, it is helpful to seek advice or supervision from a suitably qualified and experienced family group specialist.

The multi-family group can be run either as a closed group, with everyone starting and finishing at the same time or on a semi-open basis, with children and families joining and leaving as enough change has been achieved and as a space becomes available.

A family group commonly lasts for a school term in the first instance, with an average of 10 two-to three-hour sessions at weekly intervals, delivered during normal school hours in a room in the school. The children, young people and at least one of their adult family members, meet all together with the professional group leaders.

Behavioural and emotional wellbeing targets are set for each child or young person prior to the group starting. These targets can range from crucial changes in behaviour and emotional wellbeing to improved educational achievements. Initially targets are focused on the child or young person but as the group progresses, children may also set targets for their parents, thereby creating meaningful connections between school and home.

Lasting beneficial change, as assessed during regular reviews between the child, young person, their family member and school staff, may lead to them leaving the group at the end of a term though another period in the group can be agreed to, if needed.

Families who have had good experiences in the group are encouraged to remain available after leaving as their ability to describe the group and how it has been effective for them helps new families joining the group to feel that attending will also be likely to be beneficial for them: 'If it has helped others before then it might well help me and my child.'

Working wonders with group support

In the company of peers, children and parents commonly try harder and are more reluctant to admit defeat by constraints and problems. Furthermore, parents often realise that they are not the only ones struggling against seemingly insurmountable problems. Being 'in the same boat' with other parents experiencing similar difficulties can be extremely important in encouraging families to feel like they want to give the group a go. Having more minds involved also leads to a wider range of available problem-solving options.

Who benefits?

The multi-family groups are designed to be helpful for **children and young people** in schools presenting with difficulties identified by school staff, such as:

- Persistent disruptive behaviour
- Verbal and physical aggression
- Hyperactivity
- Poor impulse control
- Poor concentration and fluctuating attention
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Self-harm and suicidal ideation
- Communication difficulties
- Learning blocks
- Erratic school attendance
- School refusal

Many children asked to attend a family group have difficult interactions with other children in their peer group. These are commonly shown through problematic behaviours in the classroom and/or the playground, resulting in the child becoming increasingly angry, distressed, frustrated or sad. If this becomes a repeating process, it can lead to the child becoming isolated and struggling to



maintain friendships. School staff find themselves in difficult positions with such children, often feeling the need to supervise the child at all times to keep them and others safe.

This can typically result in the children having adults assigned to them (e.g. teaching assistants), often for both lessons and the less structured break or playtimes. However, the act of providing such intense monitoring and support can further isolate the child from their peers, making them appear, and often feel, even more different. This can take away the opportunity to develop the relational skills necessary for independence and autonomy.

Family groups are designed to help overcome such dependency relationships. Many of the children come from families struggling with domestic violence, parental mental health difficulties and/or substance misuse, disrupted family relationships, traumatic migration experiences and social marginalisation.

Parents who feel isolated and as if they are the only ones who have a child as difficult as theirs benefit from attending groups. They quickly learn that they are not alone, and the mutually supportive atmosphere of the group helps overcome any parental feelings of inadequacy or sense of personal failure.

After a few weeks, once a group has become established, it starts to become cohesive and parents and carers identify with each other, share ideas and experiences and become generally more optimistic about the possibility of things changing for them and their children. Parents will come to see each other as inspirational 'living proof' that change is possible and will follow each other's advice and suggestions about what might work, often more readily than they will from so-called professional experts.

The **school community and teachers** also benefit because the children's behaviour, attendance and achievement improve through participation in the group. Relationships between parents and teachers also improve significantly as a result of the collaborative nature of the programme. Other children in the class, who don't attend the group, appreciate the impact of their peers' behaviour changing and enjoy the whole class mood tending to become calmer and more learning focused as a consequence.

About this manual

This is a practical and theoretical manual for individuals who may want to use the multi-family groups approach in schools.

Who is this manual for?

We have written this manual as a companion for you as you go on your journey to becoming and developing as a family group specialist, school partner or group participant. While this manual will be relevant to a range of groups involved or with an interest in children's education and mental health and wellbeing – including parents – it is primarily intended for individuals who want to use the multi-family groups approach in schools.

Multi-family groups in schools should be facilitated by two specialists – school partners and family group specialists. The school partner may be a teacher, teaching assistant, special needs coordinator or SENCo inclusion manager, or another school professional with the aptitude for this function.

Similarly, individuals from a range of disciplines may effectively perform the role of family group specialist; you might be a family therapist, a clinical or educational psychologist, a social worker, mental health nurse, teacher or other individual with similar skills, knowledge, experience and support. You should, however, have had some systemic training and have participated in a specialist multi-family group training course.

Why this manual?

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families offers a comprehensive online training programme designed to equip professionals with skills and knowledge they need to set up and run effective multi-family groups at school. The training programme and this manual are based on years of experience and expertise in multi-family groups in schools. You do not need to have participated in the online training for this manual to be useful, but for those who have or who are participating, this manual will be a useful complement, offering further

theoretical background to the multi-family groups approach and practical detail on setting up and running the groups themselves.

You can find out more about the online training on our website www.annafreud.org/training.

How to use this manual

Having introduced multi-family groups in schools, this manual goes through in detail the organisational framework for delivery in more detail. These sections are colour coded (please refer to the diagram and the overview table on pages 11–14).

This is followed by a number of practical and theoretical considerations for group leaders – including steps on how to set up multi-family groups in schools, the format of the meetings, dealing with special issues such as confidentiality or language barriers, and how to foster group cohesion.

The theoretical approaches that inform the multi-family groups in schools approach can be found on page 83, and a list of references and further reading on page 118.

At the end of each section is a summary page that outlines the key concepts in what you've just read and a brief checklist to refer to as you run a group.

Terminology

Throughout this manual and in the context of the multi-family group participants, 'parent' is used to refer to the adult member of their family who has been nominated to act in loco parentis during the group. This may be a parent, step-parent, foster carer, relative or other as appropriate and by agreement.

Applying the delivery framework

TPART is an important organising framework for the delivery of multi-family groups. It creates the structure by which skills, including mentalizing skills, can be developed and relationships and communication improved.

An important organising framework for the delivery of multi-family groups is the Targets Planning Action Reflection & Transfer (TPART) framework, which offers a structure through which participants can develop skills, including mentalizing skills, and improve communication and relationships.

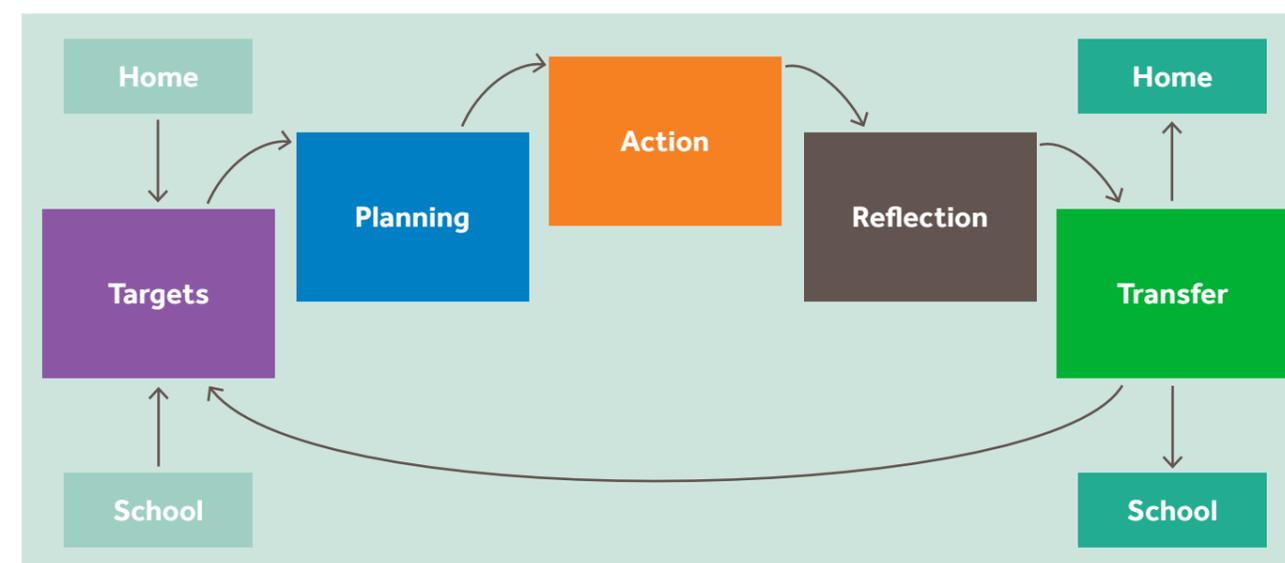
It is a five-part structure, with each of the parts representing a phase in the multi-family group process. During the weekly family group meetings, parents and children work through these five phases together, in a workshop-style setting.

Throughout the process, the aim is to create opportunities for parents, children, young people and professionals to exchange experiences, ideas, skills, and knowledge to help find new solutions for difficult situations.

Creating these interpersonal activities and contexts is designed to encourage increased quantities and more sensitive use of reflective processes between all members of the group. And, as the families participate together in the group, mutually supportive mini-communities start to form.

It is a circular process that, via the child and the targets they set, flows through the sessions, from one session to the next, and between home and school.

1. Target setting
2. A planning component
3. An action section
4. A reflection phase
5. Transfer to home and school



Phase	Summary	Guiding principles	Outline
Targets	Agreeing specific behavioural and emotional goals that will guide progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be goal based - Monitor progress - Create collaboratively - Be taken home daily 	<p>At the beginning of the engagement phase, the teacher, the parent(s) and the child or young person collaboratively create behavioural and emotional wellbeing targets for the child. They are designed to be clear so that everyone knows whether they have been successfully achieved or not.</p> <p>The targets are primarily focused on problematic behaviours and emotions that are being observed or experienced in school. The discussion about which targets to focus on is based around the question: 'What would need to be different for the child to be happier and/or more successful at school and/or at home?'</p> <p>The teacher is encouraged to describe behaviours and/or emotions that spoil the child's chances of being settled in class, able to learn and achieve their academic potential.</p> <p>The child or young person and their parents are encouraged to discuss these observations with the teacher so that they can agree three or four key targets.</p>
Planning	Naming an aim for a session and identifying the skills needed for the subsequent activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish common purpose - Be tightly focused 	<p>The aim of planning is to ensure that the mini-community of families feels that it has some common purpose and that everybody has identified something that they will benefit from by the end of the group.</p> <p>Whether it's a skill for the child or a skill for the parent and child, planning should be tightly focused so that nobody feels they are wasting their time and so that everybody can be encouraged to think about how they might help each other.</p> <p>We suggest that this planning section has a very clear focus on identifying a direction for what each child and family is going to do for the rest of the group rather than getting overburdened with looking for solutions or deep explorations of problems.</p> <p>If you allow too much problem talk, the group will lose focus and energy and it will be more difficult to inspire people to move onto the action and reflection stages.</p>

Phase	Summary	Guiding principles	Outline
Action	Designing an activity to experiment with new ideas and practise emerging skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Try out new ideas - Be playful - Demonstrate relationships in action 	<p>Once everybody has a direction, the action phase gives people the opportunity to try out new ideas or experience doing something different in circumstances where they would usually get stuck or have difficulty.</p> <p>The action component is an opportunity to see relationship patterns in action. If people experience themselves doing something differently, or maybe going beyond the stage where they normally give up or feel defeated, this will influence how they think about themselves.</p> <p>Later, when these new experiences are discussed in the reflection phase, it may help them think differently about themselves and what they are capable of. This gives increased confidence in what children and adults are willing to try to do individually or with each other.</p> <p>A lot of the discussion arising from the action phase centres on the skills that need to be developed to solve problems, adjust ways of communicating, feel more confident or overcome old habits.</p>
Reflection	Reflecting on what has been experienced and learned from undertaking the activity and via the targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Think together - Notice difference - Develop skills 	<p>The reflection and transfer phases are where all group members discuss and evaluate changes observed or experienced during the group.</p> <p>The thinking is focused on how lessons learned during the planning and action phases can be transferred and deployed in other areas of the school and/or at home.</p>
Transfer	Thinking about how to transfer new ideas, skills, behaviours and experiences to other contexts, especially to the family home and general school setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Home - School 	<p>Everyone in the multi-family group is asked to offer ideas designed to help each other think about and plan for how and where they might deploy new skills and behaviours later that day or during the week.</p> <p>This is where the the scores from the targets set at the last meeting are reviewed and evaluated.</p>

Targets

Setting family-friendly targets

How to

At a glance: using targets

Practical example

Roles and responsibilities

Summary

Targets

Targets are agreed at an initial meeting between the child, their parent(s), the teacher, the family group specialist and the school partner. They underpin the whole multi-family group process and provide a benchmark from which to monitor changes in the child's behaviour, feelings or relationships.

Setting family-friendly targets

The targets are set up so that they can be scored from week to week, according to observed changes in the child's behaviour, feelings or relationships (see Figure: 'Target scoring system' on page 19).

The target scores give immediate feedback on whether the teacher is noticing change in the classroom or across the whole school environment. They give parents accurate reporting about whether and to what degree their child is showing change, and they allow the child to have any changes they are attempting to make, or transfer, quickly recognised and recorded by their teachers.

Targets for reception-age children are significantly different from those for secondary-age adolescents. However, targets for both age groups aim to ensure that the child's behaviour and feelings in school are noted, recorded and scored by teachers as soon after the event as possible. The day's target card is taken home by the child at the end of the day for the parent(s)/ carer(s) or significant adult family member(s) to see and reflect on.

As the target cards go home, they provide a rich and fresh basis for communication from the teachers to the family about the child's performance in school every day. Parents have regularly said that they particularly appreciate the target setting and daily feedback between them and the teachers. They like the immediacy the targets provide and the clear picture they offer on how their children are doing in school.

Children, although sometimes reluctant at the outset, usually become very enthusiastic about the scores they are achieving and take great pleasure in feeding back their successes as others recognise their improved performance in key areas.

Targets need to be child and school friendly. The school partner and family group specialist should help the teacher, child and parent define the specific targets and to select the actual wording so that it is in a language and style that the child clearly understands in terms of both meaning and purpose.

The focus should be on gaining the child and family's enthusiasm and buy-in to the process rather than concentrating on producing targets that are couched in too much professional or therapeutic phraseology.

Targets should be in a form such that they can be unobtrusively measured and marked to allow the child and teacher(s) to have conversations at regular intervals throughout the school day. Individual arrangements are necessary for different phases of school.

For an example of a target score card please see page 21.



How to

Approach 1: Setting targets at an initial meeting in school

The school partner usually arranges a meeting to be attended by one or more parents or family members, the child, a member of school staff who knows the child best and the family group specialist. This is usually the first formal occasion to describe how the multi-family group works, what the potential benefits are and what is expected of everyone. It also offers an opportunity to gather information about the child's problematic behaviours, their learning struggles and their feelings, which can be transformed into a target record sheet.

In setting specific targets, we find it helpful to organise them under three categories:

- **Relationship to self** – to capture feelings, worries and emotions affecting the child's wellbeing at school
- **Relationship to others** – to gather specific information about the child or young person's difficulties with peers and/or teachers
- **Relationship to teaching and learning** – to help clarify the focus on what goes wrong in relation to the child or young person's learning skills, strategies or performance



Key questions to the member of staff who knows the child include:

Can you describe from your perspective which things go well for X in the class or around the school?

Can you describe things that don't go so well for X in class or around the school?

Can you say what X would need to do differently if they are going to feel happier/be more settled/achieve better/attend more consistently, etc.?

The school partner or family group specialist needs to help their colleague be clear about what is going wrong and about what they would need to see, hear or experience with the child for to feel confident that they can perform or behave more appropriately in the classroom or around the school.

The school partner or family group specialist should then check in with the parent to see if they recognise the difficulties that the teacher is describing. If not, there will need to be further discussion to explore the different experiences of the child, with their parent and with staff in school.

Do you recognise the behaviours that X's teacher is describing. Do you see or experience anything similar at home, with you, with X's siblings or friends?

The school partner or the family group specialist then asks the child whether they recognise the behaviours and worries that the teacher is describing, and promotes a conversation seeking a degree of agreement about the territory that is getting the child into difficulties.

Your teacher has just described how they see your behaviour in class or around the school. Do you understand what they are saying? Do you see it the same way or differently?

If there is agreement and some recognition of common ground, the next stage is to mutually create three or four key targets or goals that the child will be assessed against during the first six weeks of attendance in the group.

It is important that the targets are defined in language that is clear and understandable and phrased in such a way that the child can see how they might be able to achieve them. It is very good practice if the child, their teacher and the parents can actively contribute to both the language and meaning of the targets.

The school partner then fills the child's targets in on the target sheet (see page 21).



Approach 2: Child sets own targets via video interviews

An alternative way of more fully involving a child or young person in creating their own set of targets is to support them in filming interviews with two or three members of the school staff and one of their peers or friends.

The child is asked to choose individuals who they feel they can trust to give an honest opinion of how well or poorly they behave or perform in class or around the school.

The child prepares their own questions, which are usually something like:

How well do you think I behave in class/in the playground/in the lunch hall?

What do I do well?

What do you think I could do better?

What difference do you think it would make if I could do better in school?

The interviewees are asked to answer honestly so that the child can get a rounded picture of how they are perceived by different people they trust.

The child then shows the film at a meeting with the school partner, family group specialist, key teacher and their parent(s) in order to create a specific set of targets.

Interviews with the child's friends and peers can be very revealing and helpful both for the child carrying out the interview and for their interviewee helper.

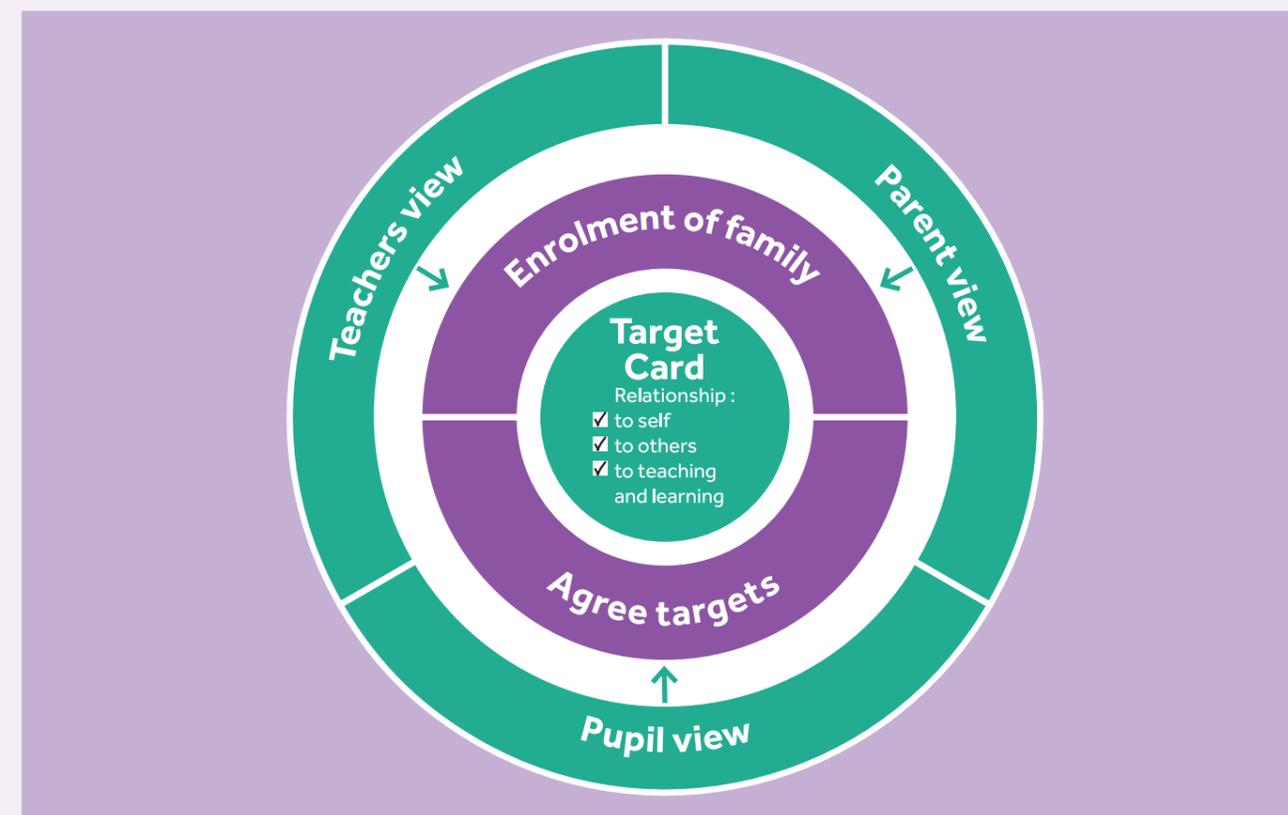
With each method the targets are reviewed every six weeks – the first method with the child, key professionals and family members; the second via a new film being made with the original staff and peer interviewees and then discussed.

Once the targets have been agreed and the record sheets produced, the cycle of the child attempting new behaviours, feelings and social competences, the teacher discussing, the parents evaluating and the group assisting can commence.



At a glance: using targets

Goal set-up



Scoring system

- 1 The child has made little or no progress towards achieving the target.
- 2 The child's approach to meeting the target is poor or inconsistent.
- 3 The child showed good effort on the behaviour associated with the target but could do some things to improve.
- 4 The child has fully met the target to the parent or teacher's satisfaction.



Practical example

John, aged 8 years (Year 3)

John is an able and articulate child in the classroom. However, he has great difficulty in concentrating for long, often shouts out in class discussions, is poor at following teacher instructions, finds it difficult to work independently without interrupting other children and cannot take turns easily. He is underachieving in the core curriculum subjects but does not appear to have any particular learning difficulties that might contribute to an explanation.

John also finds the playground difficult. He becomes easily drawn into verbal and physical conflict with other children.

Agreed behaviours and skills that could be focused on:

- Poor concentration
- Shouting out
- Difficulty with independent working
- Struggling with turn taking
- Following instructions
- Impatience
- Problematic social interactions, characterised by fighting, arguing

The following targets were collaboratively agreed at a meeting between the school partner, family group specialist, John, his parent and his teacher:

- John speaks to an adult if he is feeling upset or has a problem with his friends
- John works in a group or as part of a team when he is asked to
- John follows instructions at the start of lessons
- John shares one thing every day that he is proud of

The example target card (page 21) is designed to allow the class teacher or other member of staff to mark the targets on a daily basis for the morning and afternoon teaching sessions on the scale from 1 to 4.

The frequency of scoring may vary from school to school and from teacher to teacher. When negotiating this schedule with teachers it is advisable for the school partner and family group specialist to be sensitive to the burden it may place on them.

Some teachers, particularly in primary schools, can be very keen to mark the sheets up to four times a day to allow a more accurate view of the child's performance across the school day to become clear. Others, who may have felt bruised by the child's behaviour or possibly feeling pressed by demands of their teaching role, might need more persuasion to fill the sheets in at all.

During the target-setting meeting, John was asked for suggestions about what might help him achieve his targets.

He said that he would like his teacher to help him to move from what he called 'trouble' in the classroom and that he would like more help from his mum when his younger brother gets angry and hits him.

As trust develops in the workings of the family group it frequently becomes possible for children and parents to discuss setting up a target setting process for the parents. This is invariably a sign that the family is progressing into more systemic and mentalizing styles of relating.

Example of a primary family group target card

Target	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
John spoke to an adult if he felt upset	2	4	2	3	4
John worked in a group when asked to	1	3	4	4	4
John showed that he can follow instructions at the start of his lessons	3	4	3	2	3
John found one thing every day he was proud of	Write here				

Please score targets from 1 to 4, where 4 means targets were met at all times and 1 means targets were not met at all.



Roles and responsibilities

Role of child or young person

- To give the teacher the target card as and when agreed with staff (age dependent)
- To take home and show the parent daily
- To bring them back to school daily

Role of parent

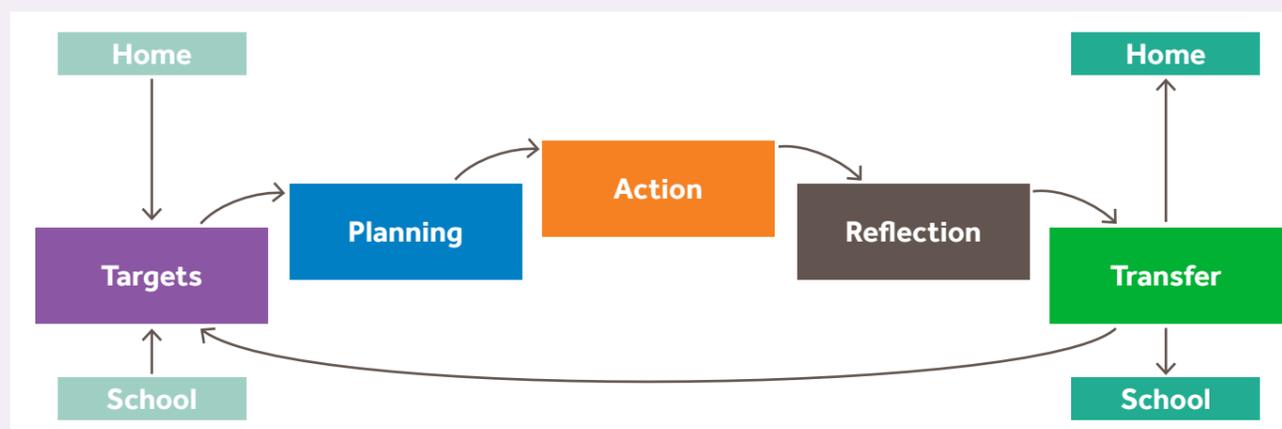
- To look at and discuss the target card daily
- To help the child to become organised in getting the targets marked
- To work with the teacher and other significant adults in the family who are involved
- To mark home targets regularly

Role of teacher and/or school staff

- To mark the targets and discuss with the child daily
- To help the child develop a system for ensuring that the teacher is given the targets (i.e. not to do it for them but to help them develop the capacity for taking this responsibility)
- To work with the school partner to develop the system and to help it run smoothly

Role of the multi-family group

- The **targets** feed into and weave through the workshop-style experience of the group, giving direction, pointing out where attention needs to be paid, and marking progress, for each child and family.
- The focus in the **planning** phase is to check in and choose a specific target for the day's family group.
- In the **action** phase, families can try new ideas and begin to see and think about behaviours.
- In **reflection**, families can think about new ideas and plan to **transfer** to home and school.
- The child, being hopefully inspired by what they've experienced in the group, can try out new ideas and new thinking at home and at school. Parents also go home with new ideas, new thinking, and new options for how to behave with their child.
- The process resumes at the next family group meeting, the targets are brought back in and the cycle starts again.



Systemic emotional and behavioural targets provide a good vehicle for highlighting changes and for exploring the states of mind that may be associated with these. If a child has, for example, managed to not hit someone in the playground for the first time, then speculation can be invited as to how this target has been achieved. The fact that the targets are being regularly and openly discussed in a multi-family group setting means that there are other parents and children present who can stimulate and contribute to this exploration.

The targets and how they have been marked by teachers are read out in the group by each child and feedback is invited from all the other parents and children. Such feedback can be positive and may be accompanied by applause and congratulations on the changes achieved.

When the scores are low and the targets have generally not been successfully achieved, the group is encouraged to be curious about what they have failed to understand about the difficulties the child is attempting to overcome. The group members, both adults and children, are encouraged to redouble their efforts to suggest ideas or solutions that the child might try during the next week.

This can also be followed up by speculations as to what may have been in the teacher's mind to provide these specific marks, and conversely, what may have gone on in the child's mind over the past week to meet, or not meet, the set targets. It is often easier for families to do this, not with their own child, but across families with someone else's child, possibly because they are emotionally less involved.

Individuals become interested in each other's child's targets from week to week and will frequently make specific arrangements with each other to monitor progress. It is common for a parent to ask someone else's child to text, message or video call them at the end of the school day to let them know how they have got on with their targets. This benefits not only the child or young person, but also the other parent who feels that they have something to offer that is of value.

It can be helpful if the target cards are stuck in an A4 exercise book and kept in a plastic folder or document wallet. One side of the page may be the target card, with the opposite page free for written comments by teacher and parent.

It is worth keeping a record of the filled-in target cards by photocopying them regularly. This enables staff to transfer them into tables and graphs, summarising changes over time. It is also useful to keep a copy in case the target cards or book is lost, as can happen.

Target cards can also form an important part of any evaluation of a child's progress over time and assist the documentation of the effectiveness of the family group.

With increasing IT possibilities for communication with parents, it is perfectly sensible to update paper-based methods to suit particular circumstances and available resources. The essence of reporting back on targets should still be for communications between the child, teacher and parents to be clear and shared as close as possible to daily events.



The process of group members talking and thinking about or working out what a child might want or need, guessing their thoughts and other mental states should be the focus of the group.

In this way, a methodology that is behavioural in essence becomes a vehicle for enhancing mentalizing capacity all round.

Speculations and guessing by all concerned as to how and why children – or indeed parents – have been rated in particular ways stimulates mentalizing enhancing discussions.

The following are questions that may assist in this process:

How do you think the teacher should have rated you last week in relation to all the targets?

How do you think the teacher felt about you getting only 2s? And what do you think the teacher thinks you were thinking? Who in the group believes that John was proud?

Who believes he doesn't care?

How do you explain that John rated his targets much more positively than the teacher/his mother?

How come your mum's and your own ratings are so different?

What would have to change for the ratings to get better or be more in tune with each other?

While the family group specialist may initiate this way of asking questions, the ambition is that families and their individual members will pick this up over time and develop enhanced reflective functioning themselves.

This process may be assisted by asking mentalization enhancing questions, such as the above, on a sheet of paper and giving this to one of the parents or children.

They are then encouraged, perhaps first in small groups, to practise questioning each other and themselves with the help of the crib sheet.

At a later stage the crib sheet may be removed so that parents and children can learn how to become more accomplished interviewers.

Small groups can be formed, tasked with generating new questions that aim to understand one's own thoughts and feelings and those of others.



Summary

Key ideas

- Targets underpin the multi-family group process
- Target setting must be collaborative, with the child, their parent, the school partner and family groups specialist all participating
- There are two options for setting targets: a meeting in school; or using video interviews
- Target cards are taken to school and brought home, with school-based targets scored by teachers and home-based targets scored by parents
- Target cards provide a rich and fresh channel for communication between school and home about a child's progress

Core concepts

- Participation and collaboration
- School and family friendly
- Feedback, discussion and communication

Your notes



Checklist

- Are the targets set school and family friendly and not couched in potentially inaccessible therapeutic terms?
- Did each child and each parent participate actively in setting targets?
- Do the targets reflect:
 - The child's relationship to self?
 - The child's relationship to others?
 - The child's relationship to teaching and school?
- Are teachers, school staff and parents willing and able to score the target cards?
- Have you kept and are you regularly keeping copies of the targets and the scored target cards?

Planning

Providing purpose in the group

Confidentiality and safeguarding

How to

Summary

Providing purpose in the group

At the beginning of the group it is important to have a time and place in which parents and children can look at what has gone well and what has gone not so well in the previous week. This should inform an ambition or direction for each child and parent for the ensuing action phase of the group.

Ambitions or directions are discussed quickly, agreed, named and listed on a flipchart or smartboard so that the whole group understands what each child and family is trying to achieve. These ambitions will likely reflect the child's targets as agreed at the intervention outset but do not need to be phrased in exactly the same language.

The naming of an ambition or direction at each family group session is intended to keep the notion of goal-setting fresh and alive so that current struggles and problems being faced by the child and their family are not overlooked in sticking too slavishly or bureaucratically to the wording of the target cards.

Planning should be quite tightly managed, with the aim of getting clear what is going to be focused on by everyone during the group.

All the children, young people and families are encouraged to come up with one or two suggestions about what's important for them to think about at the moment.

These might be linked to their main targets established earlier or may be something specific that's related to what's happening in school or with their family right now.

This phase of the group needs to be quite snappy: the family group specialist and school partner should not look for things to be resolved or seek solutions.



The aim should be to create workshop conditions that bring energy and direction into the room, activating the children and parents and avoiding the possibility of anyone looking to the professionals to come up with all the answers.



Confidentiality and safeguarding

It's important that everybody feels as secure as possible at the start of any multi-family group. The family group specialist and school partner should remind people about the issues of confidentiality and safeguarding.

The family group specialist and school partner should lead the discussion about what is meant by an agreement to keep things confidential so that children and parents can feel able to talk about their thoughts and behaviours without fearing that their private information is going to be talked about carelessly outside the group in the school or beyond.

It is crucial that all participants understand about child protection and the safeguarding situations in which both professionals and family members alike have a duty of care to break confidentiality and report any risk of harm to the relevant responsible statutory agency.

Once it has been established that people have made a promise to be respectful about each other's rights to privacy it is possible to go onto the next stage of planning. This introduction to the group should be undertaken at the opening of the first group and repeated whenever any new family joins the group.

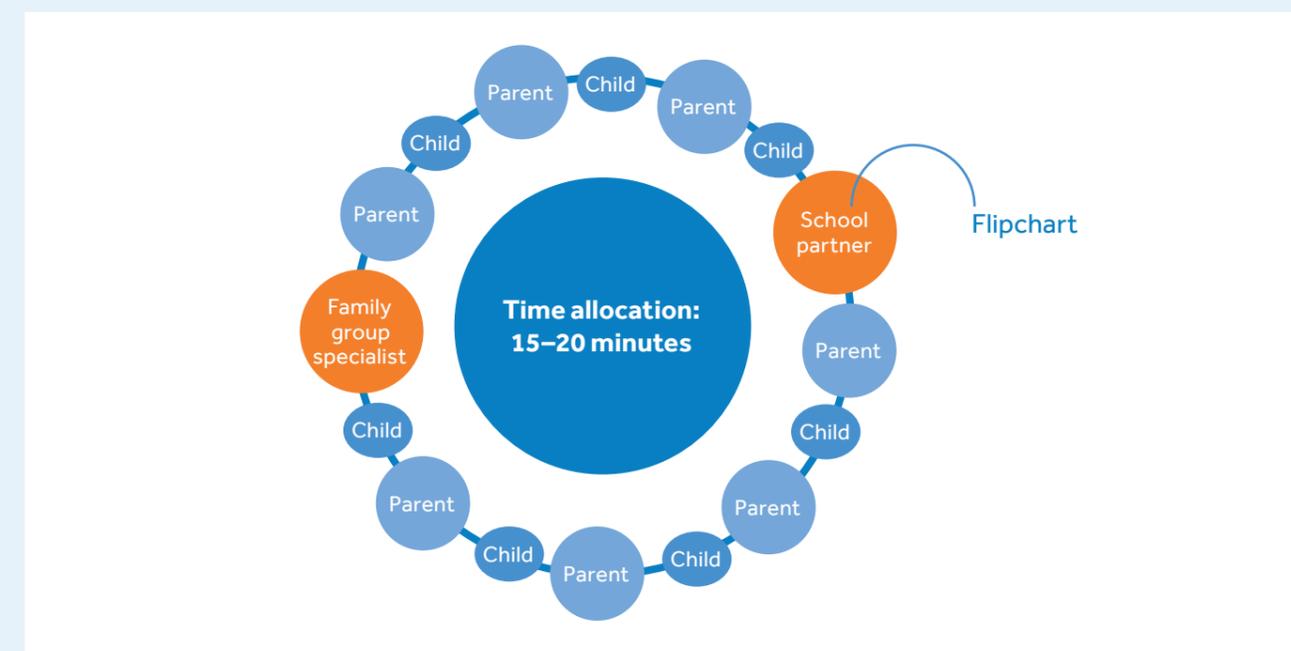
It is crucial that all participants understand the issues around confidentiality and safeguarding

It is most important to agree and possibly record ground rules at the start of group, such as:

- **Confidentiality:** family group specialist and school partner's commitment that information stays within the group; confidentiality is broken online in 'at-risk' situations or by prior expressed agreement.
- **Permissible behaviour:** discussion in the group to agree on what should and shouldn't be acceptable behaviour for both children and adults.
- **Attendance and punctuality:** need to set up communication systems so that people can let the group know if they are late or unable to come to show that everybody is being kept in mind. This can be done using text message, telephone, postcards or other means.
- **Respecting difference:** the group should encourage learning for all and create an inclusive environment that is respectful for everyone, regardless of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation or class.

The following sections describe two basic ways to run a planning phase, both of which aim to generate energy and direction.

How to Approach 1: Circle format



Preparation

- The space is ready and comfortable
- Chairs are arranged in a circle
- Timer and a flipchart or whiteboard and pens are ready

Who leads?

If the school partner leads

This sets the tone of working to a school-focused agenda. The school partner's presence in this activity makes it clear to everybody that this is valued work for the whole school and classroom.

It helps to highlight the principal reason for attending the group is to help the children manage better at school. This can be useful in circumstances where families may be feeling sensitive about the nature of the group and concerned that it feels too much like therapy.

If the family group specialist leads

This supports the idea that the group is going to focus on relationship issues and patterns of thinking and behaviours that may be getting in the way of behaviour change.

This can be useful in situations when things in the group are feeling too school- or teacher-blaming, too homeostatic or overly problem saturated.

Getting started

- Welcome and invite the families to sit together in the group
- Restate and clarify the confidentiality statement as necessary

Check in and 'what's hot'

Staying seated in the circle, check in with each child and family about the information they're bringing either using targets or just by their own experiences of how things have been for each of them during the previous week.

Focus and direction

Invite each child and family to identify an issue to work on now. What is the most pressing challenge that, if they could get some help from the group today, would make a difference to their lives? Make sure that you have given everybody in the group an opportunity to both identify what goes wrong and what area or skill they would like to work on immediately.

Encourage group members to remind each other of the skills that they could help them to practise or use to achieve their aim during the action phase.

Taking notes

Using a flipchart or smartboard, summarise against each person's name their ambition or aim. The writing can be done by the family group specialist, school partner, parent, child or young person, as appropriate and agreed. It is usual in the early stages of a group that the family group specialist or school partner take a lead but it is very important to look for opportunities for others to take on this function as trust and confidence develops among and between group members. It is very powerful when group members start to take increasing amounts of responsibility for group functions and processes.

Switchover

Switching over parents and children is a very useful technique that can be used to promote new experiences and related perspective changes, particularly for certain activities or group phases.

When managing the children of other families, many parents discover hidden or possibly forgotten competences that they can use later with their own children. Using switchover arrangements can be particularly useful during the planning phase, for example, when parents and their own children may lack ideas or optimism.



Activity

- Negotiate who will work with who during the action phase
- Encourage the group members to discuss and agree what behaviours, patterns or new skills they are going to look out for in each other during the action phase
- Write partnerships' names against their given tasks on the flipchart

Switching parents and children creates opportunities for fresh experiences and new learning.

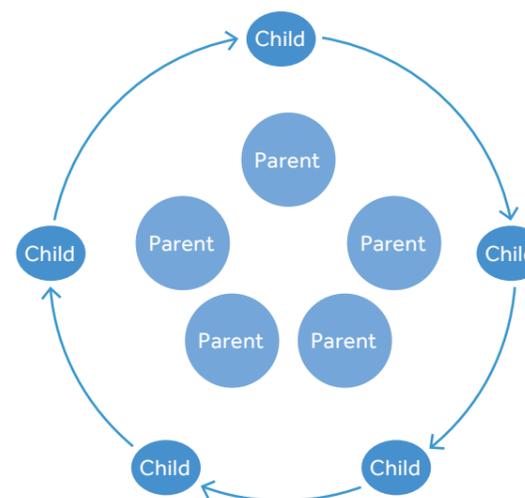
Summarise

Read out what is on the flipchart so that each child and family is reminded of their own ambition but also so that the whole group of families is given an opportunity to absorb what they are trying to achieve, not just for their own child, but for each other. As noted, who reads out is a choice depending on the maturity or specific state of the group. Devolving the task to others is invariably helpful.

Timing

The planning session should be aimed to take no more than 15–20 minutes. The family group specialist and school partner should work together to make it focused, purposeful and not saturated with problem language or negative stories. The family group specialist and school partner need to engender a good degree of optimism that moving into practising skills or thinking about new ideas will give everyone something positive and useful to try out at home or in class by the end of the session.

Approach 2: Speedy planning



Each child can discuss a target, a question, problem or idea with their own parent

A signal is given after a short time (one or two minutes only) and each child moves one place to the left and has another quick interview on same issue with a different parent

Repeat the process until the child is seated back with their own parent

Child and parent discuss any new ideas

Preparation

- The space is ready and comfortable
- Chairs are arranged in two concentric circles
- Timer and a flipchart or whiteboard and pens are ready

The speedy planning activity is a quick and excellent way to help people recognise that they have something to offer each other.

The children are given multiple reflections in semi-private from each parent. This offers the parents a different experience of themselves as a potential helper for their and other people's children. It works well as a readily accessible activity in support of the development of group cohesion.

It is also a helpful alternative to the more usual circle format described previously, especially when the group may appear tired and out of ideas.



Common themes that benefit from this format:

- Listening to adults' instructions including following through with actions, doing what is asked of you the first time, going to bed on time, not answering back and doing chores
- Working well with others, including sharing well, avoiding arguing, taking turns, not name-calling and being kind to someone
- Dealing with difficult situations, including accepting losing, ignoring other people who are winding you up, asking for help when you are about to lose your temper and telling someone when you are feeling sad or unhappy
- Being productive, including working well with others and independently, putting your hand up instead of shouting out, concentrating, getting started straight away, staying in the room, managing computer time (and being safe online) and trying something new
- Being cooperative and considerate of others, including working with other adults, not just a family member, improving eye contact and keeping your hands and feet to yourself

**Deciding which format to use**

There are no hard and fast rules on this. However, the use of the parent and child switchover technique is often experienced as very powerful. The interactions between a new parent and child combination will immediately be different from the usual pattern between a parent and their own child, and therefore offers opportunity for change

For instance, a child who has a tantrum, perhaps, because he is losing a game or not doing as he is asked, is likely to experience a different reaction from another parent. This may be different enough to produce a new reaction in the child and is also likely to allow the child's actual parent to view their child's reaction from a different perspective, thus offering a possibility for hope and change.

It also encourages the parents in the group to connect with and support each other through shared experience. Both parents and children may well have a more successful and positive experience with someone else's child/parent rather than with their own family members. This can help to generate confidence and a realisation that they have strengths and abilities previously unrecognised, lost or forgotten about.



Summary

Key ideas

- The planning phase is important for setting the ambition of and a shared vision for the multi-family group
- Working teams for the planning phase may be the whole multi-family group, smaller mixed groups, single family parent-and-child groups or switched parent-and-child groups
- Switching parents and children over can enhance curiosity and the possibility of experiencing difference
- During the first group, establish confidentiality and safeguarding rules, and other ground rules for creating a safe, constructive and productive setting for change.

Core concepts

- Direction, ambition and shared vision (p. 58)
- Warmth, mutual trust and respect (p. 94)
- 'Switchover' technique (p. 30)

Checklist

- Does each child know what they will attempt to learn or practise in the group today?
- Is every parent clear on what they are looking for with each child in the group?
- Have you established who will work with who?
- Have you considered a switchover, with children working with other parents?
- Have you got groups of families working together purposefully?

Your notes

Action

Doing things together

How to

Summary

Doing things together

The aim of setting up activities and games is to provide a combined education and therapeutic context in the 'here and now' for the children, young people and their families, under the guidance of the group leaders. Through action or doing things together, combined with reflection, families will be encouraged to observe and comment on behaviours, interactions and patterns and to practise new ones.

The presence of other parents and children offers new and different perspectives on the current issues for each family. The actual activity is the vehicle for enabling change experiences, and as such, its content is secondary to the processes (interactions, experimentation with new skills, developing different perspectives) that occur during it.

Playful exercises and activities can be used to break the ice, as well as enabling families to explore and address specific issues and themes. Creating classroom-style teaching and learning activities brings immediate relevance to the group purpose and allows opportunities to practise new ideas and ways of behaving in realistic scenarios. Furthermore, joint exercises help to build group cohesion and a team spirit, with the group members developing a healthy and mutually supportive interest in each other's challenges and successes.

Playful exercises and activities can be used to break the ice and help families explore specific issues



How to

We will say more about the different roles and positions that the school partner and family group specialist can adopt during the action phase later in the section on 'Group leaders: roles and functions' (page 64). For now, we will focus on how the activities are set up and directed by either group leader.

The activity phase should follow immediately on from the planning phase.

Running an activity

One of the group leaders describes what the activity is going to be and how it should run. This is frequently misheard or misunderstood by one or more family members.

If you feel you have been clear in your directions look to members of the group to re-explain what is going to happen. This helps to gain buy-in to the activity and counteracts the tendency for too much help-recruiting behaviours to become embedded in the group process.

The group leaders check quickly that each child and family member is clear about what they will try to achieve during the forthcoming activity. Refer to the planning notes on the flipchart or whiteboard.

The group leaders check that everyone is clear about who is partnering who and what help or support the child might need from others. Everyone should know what they are going to be looking out for during the activity.

Look for opportunities to devolve the job of describing ambitions, partnerships and tasks to group members, rather than retaining the central leader position, if this is not needed.



The leaders start the activity and manage its progress, differentiating their roles between context management and process management functions. This means one person manages how the activity will run and the other focuses on the relational events that arise between group members during their participation in the activity.

It doesn't matter which role the school partner or family group specialist takes on. This is a question of planning and discussing who feels more confident in which position.

Who does what will vary from group to group and as the partnership develops over time, the school partner and family group specialist will start to feel comfortable switching positions within a group or even within a phase of a group. It only matters that the two leaders should be aware of these two distinct positions and not duplicate one or other of the roles at any one time.

It is common for the family group specialist to be more confident in the relational pattern observer role and for the school partner to be more experienced and secure in the management of the activity position.

The two leaders should discuss this in their own post-group reflection times and consider extending each other's repertoire so that each can develop competence and confidence in either role.

Summary

Key ideas

- The action phase of the multi-family group is the vehicle for enabling change
- The content of the action phase is less important than the process
- Activities should enable participants to: interact with each other; experiment with new behaviours and skills; and develop different perspectives
- Playful activities can help to break the ice
- Learning-style activities provide a realistic practice setting and focus on the group purpose
- Joint exercises help to build group cohesion

Core concepts

- Doing things together
- Experimentation
- Fostering attachments (p. 89)
- Learning to learn (p. 89)

Your notes

Checklist

- Was everyone clear about what they were trying to achieve during the activities?
- Did members practise new skills or behaviours?
- Were group members mutually supportive?
- Did you spot opportunities to handover or share responsibility for leading activities?
- Were you clear about the role you were playing? Did the family group specialist and the school partner have a review meeting afterwards?

Reflection

Providing space to enable change

Four phases of reflection

Summary

Providing space to enable change

Reflection provides the space for observations to be named and discussed in the group setting. Without reflection, the focus tends to be only on the behaviours observed, which can overlook the thoughts and feelings informing an action.

Improving an individual's reflective mentalizing capacity is the key to a positive change in attachment patterns across the generations (Bateman & Fonagy 2015).

There are four distinct phases of reflection during a multi-family group:

1. Reflection in action
2. Reflection post action
3. Reflection on targets
4. Reflection on transfer



Four phases of reflection

Reflection in action

Reflection can take place during an activity – when parents and children are asked to pause for a couple of minutes and offer ad hoc observations and thoughts. Feedback and ideas can be quickly written down on a flipchart or on the smartboard.

Thoughts about what has happened in the activity up to now can be elicited with speedy acknowledgement and reinforcement of new behaviour patterns. For the remainder of the time, discuss how group members might experiment with new ways to do the activity differently – and maybe more successfully .

The more questions and suggestions come from group members, the better, and the role of the family group specialist or school partner is to ask questions which stimulate this kind of curiosity about others.

This process encourages the emergence of multiple perspectives and develops the capacity for observation and reflection across all the members of the multi-family group.

Reflection in action should be brief so as not to interrupt the flow of the activity too much, but sufficient to stimulate the expansion of active observation and to encourage the disruption of habitual unhelpful patterns of behaviour.

To facilitate reflection in action:

1. Stop the action.
2. Invite group members to say why they think family group specialist or school partner chose to interrupt the action at this point:

Has anyone noticed what is going well now?

or

What is not going so well at the moment?

3. Invite group members to take different perspectives to think about why something has got stuck or why something has gone well.
4. Highlight and praise something new that has been observed. Encourage new ideas and solutions that could be tried for things that have not been going so well.

Things to consider when stopping the action:

- Sometimes either the family group specialist or school partner can find it uncomfortable to stop the action while it is in full flow because one or other of them may feel the pressure of wanting the activity to be completed to plan and to go well.
- Activities in multi-family groups are done for different reasons than those undertaken in school as part of the usual teaching and learning curriculum.
- The learning or therapeutic drive comes from reflection on the patterns and processes experienced and observations noted through participation in the activity.
- Completion of the task to time and without any thought and discussion about what is happening would be unlikely to stimulate change. The family group specialist and school partner need to be thinking together about how not to focus on whether the activity is going well or wrong, but on things that should be noticed or noted as material for reflective discussion.
- Timing can be an issue. Too much reflection that goes on too long or is called for too often, can stifle any energy being created through the activity. The group leaders need to read their group to judge when to reflect in action and what dose is likely to be sufficient.
- It may be that the person who is not actually running the activity who is in a better position to prompt the reflection. They are likely to be more available to see what's going on, to notice patterns. So, in discussing things before the group and afterwards, decide who is going to take the lead on the reflection in action component.



Reflection post action

After the activity, group members should review and reflect on what has just happened. The family group specialist and school partner should be looking for feedback and ideas from the group in order that the previously identified themes and skills can be revisited and observations deconstructed and talked about.

Using video

Recording the activity and watching it back straight-away as part of the review process is a highly effective way of encouraging live reflection and should be an integral part of the multi-family group structure.

It offers a way of viewing interactions from a different perspective and is a constructive way of spotting habits and patterns of behaviour that can easily go unnoticed.

Parents and children as well as the group leaders can take charge of the camera to record the activity.



Seeing what captures their imagination and their attention can be very interesting and effective in encouraging active collaboration in this aspect of the reflection process.

Suggested questions

The family group specialist and school partner should ask everybody for their reactions and their ideas from what they saw.

- Did anybody achieve their targets?
- What can we see that someone did differently?
- What exceptional qualities has somebody shown in doing this?

- What could someone have done differently?
- Who was able to show that they were able to see something from someone else's perspective – when they'd never been seen to do this before?
- Who had said 'sorry' for the first time?
- Who had taken part in something they had never imagined they could do?
- Who had shown that they were enjoying themselves?
- What happened when someone managed to stop themselves from hitting out after they had been pushed?
- Did anyone notice how a particular child and parent were engrossed in the task together? Did anyone notice how they managed this without one of them storming off?

It is very powerful when any member of the group is noticed on film to have done something significantly different. When that moment is freeze-framed on screen and discussed across the whole group there are chances for the group leaders to orchestrate multiple reinforcing praise comments and reflections about the observed change.

These are often key building blocks for individual and family change. As a child sees and hears their parent being multiply praised by others they have to accommodate this in their thinking in some fashion. Similarly, if a parent has an experience of their child being massively rewarded by the group about a witnessed behaviour or attitudinal shift, it invariably markedly influences their own view of their child.

As well as the family group specialist and school partner holding responsibility for managing the video review it can also be helpful to encourage all members of the multi-family group to decide when to pause the playback, for example when they have noticed something of interest. This offers another opportunity for the locus of responsibility for

reflection to be with family members rather than keeping it as solely the professionals' domain.

There can often be a secondary use for the film if it captures something that shows the child doing something positive and different. It is sometimes incredibly useful to get agreement to show it to the child's teacher or other staff members so that they can see what is possible when that child is working to their best.

During the multi-family group, children, young people and their families are allocated time to report and discuss progress since the last time they met in the group. It is a chance to bring in

ideas, feelings, emotions and beliefs about what has gone well and what's not gone not so well.

Film can also be used to take something home to a key member of the family to show them what's going on in family group and how their child, grandchild, younger sibling, nephew or niece, is progressing. This is particularly useful if they are not able to attend the group themselves.



Reflection on targets

All children, young people and their families are allocated time to report on progress or lack of it since the last time they met in the group, and then given their own time for discussion. It's a chance to bring in ideas, feelings, emotions or beliefs about how people think about what's gone well and what's not gone so well.

The reflection on targets phase offers a place where an individual child and family will present their dilemmas, their successes, their thoughts or struggles and the rest of the group will think about the situation and be encouraged to come up with thoughts, ideas and suggestions about how to overcome difficulties and reward change.

Equipment and set up

- Circle of chairs for all the children, young people and adults attending the group
- Flipchart and pens or smart board for writing the 'menu of ideas and advice'
- Stopwatch, watch or sand timer. A sand timer is ideal because everyone can see it easily and it therefore provides a concrete visual aid
- A secure location that can be protected from interruption

Preparation

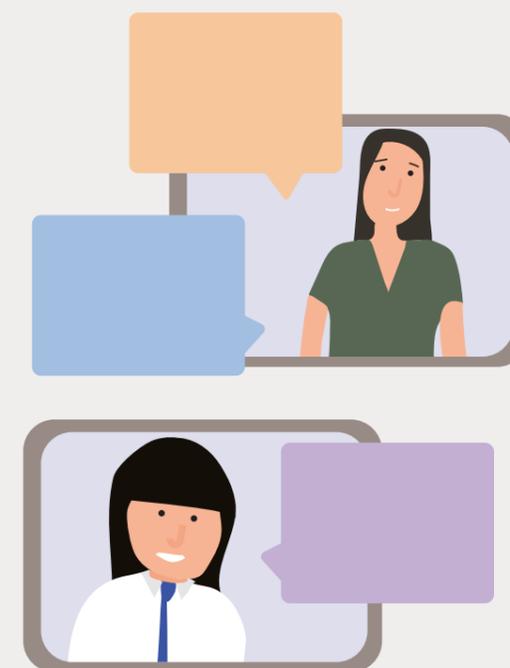
Children and young people can rehearse their targets with their own parents or in a switchover arrangement with someone else's parent. This can be helpful in bringing focus to the reflection discussion.

Timekeeping

Someone should keep time to ensure that no one family monopolises and that all members of the group have a fair chance to have their successes or concerns heard. The family group specialist, school partner, children, young people or other family members can keep time.

Menu of ideas

The aim is for the group of families to develop a menu of ideas that sets out possible ways of overcoming the problems that an individual child and their family is presenting. The families who are acting as consultants can also challenge the 'consultantee' child and family if they witness or hear about stuck repeating patterns. They will also notice small positive adjustments in behaviour or pattern that may be the start of a change process.



How to lead reflection on targets

Step 1 Group leaders convene the group

Remind everyone of the purposes of the group and the ground rules (as necessary).

Step 2 Child reads out their targets

Invite the child and their family to speak for a fixed time (often two minutes is good) about their target feedback and any other important information linked to their purpose for being in the group. The targets may be those from the previous day or since the last group meeting. Encourage participation with curious questioning and support the recognition of change and lead applause across the group when the child and family reports successes and positive outcomes.

Helpful hints:

- If the group is scheduled only once a week, it can be helpful to suggest that the child and parent review the week's targets before the meeting to agree on a selection to share with the group.
- Suggest that the child shares a few targets that have gone well and some that have gone not so well. This avoids each child reading out seemingly endless scores for every lesson of the week.

- Applause is often given in the group for children, young people or adults who have either got something positive to report, have noticed something new about themselves or have done something differently. This seems to enhance the feeling of wellbeing in the participants – not just for those that are receiving the applause but also for those who have offered ideas and solutions that are then put into practice and considered successful.
- When things are reported as having not changed, you will need to approach it as something that the whole group needs to think about, rather than it being a failure on the family's part or your part as group leader. 'OK, we've tried something previously, things haven't gone so well, so what can we all think together about it?' Your ambition is to bring together the group's energy to overcome individual demoralisation, offer hope and resolve challenges.

- Ensure you move on from the family discussing their problems to steps 3 and 4, in which the group will brainstorm ideas and solutions for them to try.

Step 3 Summarise what the family has discussed

Summarise what the family has discussed and check out anything that needs further clarification before opening out to the rest of the families.

Helpful hints:

- Don't only focus on the positive. If a child and family can be encouraged to say what help they would like from the group it is up to the consulting group to offer a menu of ideas for them to try before the group meets again.

Step 4 Open up the discussion to the group

Invite the other families to offer constructive suggestions and ideas about the dilemmas that are facing this child and family. Block destructive challenges or any negativity in the group and support and encourage the process of consulting children and families in the creation of a menu of ideas, solutions and inspiration from their own experiences.

Step 5 Write up the menu of options

Family group specialist or school partner summarises and the other writes up the list of options and ideas and possible strategies as a menu for the family to take home so that they can try something off the list between group sessions.

Helpful hints:

- Families will want to stay engaged in the conversation, but you can say 'No, you sit back and listen: it's up to other people to give you ideas about what you might try to do differently in the future.'
- Initially, when you open the discussion to the group, you will probably do so with an open question, asking who has experience of or ideas for how a child or family could manage this particular issue. But once you know your group well, you may be able to act as a matchmaker, pulling together people who you know have similar issues and have an enhanced knowledge of that particular area and can be sensitive enough to ask pertinent and helpful questions.

- Where you know of another child who has been struggling with but recently conquered a particular difficulty in school it can be very helpful to encourage them to share their ideas about how they overcame their problem. In this way you are not only increasing the repertoire of the other child, who may still be experiencing similar problems, you are also giving the first child the opportunity to hear ideas from a peer, to whom they are more likely to pay attention.
- Remember that information raised in the group in this phase of the meeting is often valuable to more than one family. So, troubleshooting one person's issue with a bedtime issue, for example, could actually be helping two or three other families who, although maybe being quiet, could still be listening and taking in ideas.

Step 6 Child and family choose something to try

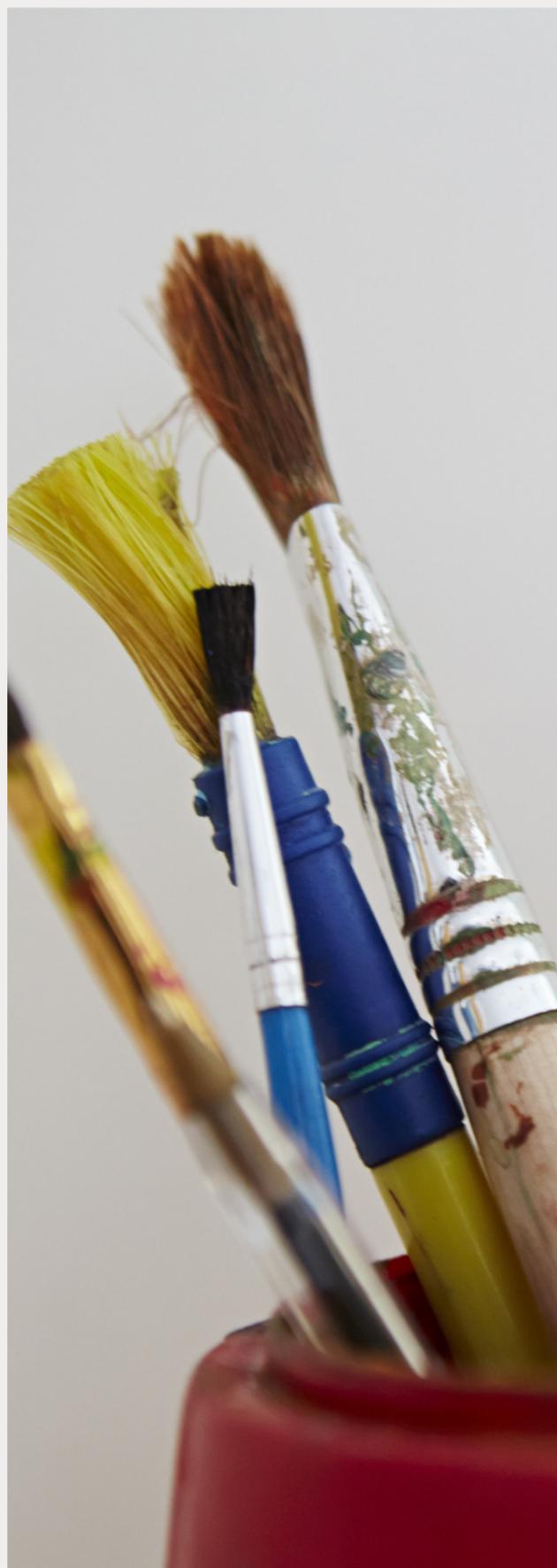
Encourage each child and their family to choose something from the menu to try out. They will be asked to report back at the next group if any of the ideas or experiences suggested by the group has helped them tackle some of the targets they've agreed to take on.

Helpful hints:

- Items from the flipcharts can be copied quickly so that each child and family knows what they are going to try in the intervening period between groups. Keeping the flipchart sheets acts as an aide memoire for the group from week to week. Do not only rely on conversation: many families need concrete reminders of what they are intending to do.

General tips:

- Use a timer to make sure you don't get over-fixated on one child or family.
- Remember: in the reflection time you are trying to create the conditions where different families can both challenge and support each other in the quest for change. Using a time limit encourages families to focus on how to use their time as well as respecting each other's agenda and need for help from the group.
- Work in partnership with the family group specialist/school partner, with one of you asking the questions, summarising requests and eliciting responses, and the other writing them down on the flipchart so they are available for the rest of the group to look at as you're going along. The family group specialist/school partner who is writing could check in with the particular family: 'Have I got this right?' 'Is this what I should put on the flipchart?' 'What should I write?' This helps ensure it's not actually your ideas as a professional but the families' ideas that the whole group are going to think about.
- Over time, this reflection time becomes the context that drives participants to expect change in themselves and others. The language of the workshop, the language of reflection is: 'What can we do to bring about some change?' 'How is this going to be different the next time we meet?'

**Reflection on transfer**

No reflection phase of a multi-family group is complete without a discussion about how any changes in behaviour, beliefs or ambitions are going to be implemented elsewhere. How are ideas generated in the group going to be tried out with others in the rest of the school or at home?

The family group specialist and school partner should encourage the children, young people and their families to think about how to transfer change that's been generated within the group into relevant settings at home or school.

So, you've learnt this about yourself today or you've tried out this new behaviour or discovered something new, where can you try this out?

At home:

Who would you do it with?
Who would notice?
How will you tell if they've noticed?
What would you like anyone to say or do or not say or not do if you say or do something different?

The same applies in the other parts of the school.
If it is in a primary school:

How would your teacher or children in the class notice?
Would you need to ask to sit somewhere different?
Is there anyone in the class who could help you?' Is there anyone you would need to avoid?'
If you want to do something different in the playground, who would it be good for you to play with?
How would you ask them?
What would you do if they say no?

If in a secondary school:

Which subject lesson would you try it out in?
Which period would work best for you?
What would your tutor notice?
Would a particular subject teacher notice?

Experimentation should underpin this discussion. The attitude of, 'Let's try something and see what comes from it,' is the language and the experience that you want families to have. You do not want them to feel that if they try something and it fails then that's the end of it and they can't come back to family group again. It is a constant workshop of exploration: 'These are some ideas for you to go away and try. Choose something to try or if you have another idea that's not on the list, try that instead. Then come back and tell us what worked for you, because none of us know what it's like to be in your shoes.'

Once this style of supportive questioning and future thinking has become established in the group via the group leaders' example, it is good for the children and families to be supported to take more of the lead. In this way you will be helping to embed increasingly complex reflective functioning and mentalizing skills across the group. You will be helping family members to consider potential for transfer of change by thinking about how they would fit with other contexts, taking into account other people and their perspectives, considering the likely impact of change on others and all within a framework of individuals taking increasing responsibility for their own relational processes.

Summary

Key ideas

- Reflection produces the space to discuss thoughts and feelings
- Improving reflective mentalizing capacity is key to positive change
- There are four key points for reflection during multi-family groups: in action; post action; on targets; and on reflection
- Timing is important to make sure each family gets to reflect, discuss and hear ideas, but also to help them to focus
- The issues and ideas raised are often valuable to more than one family
- Celebrate change and reinforce successes, but don't focus only on the positive
- Over time, the reflection phase becomes the catalyst for group members to expect change in themselves and in others

Core concepts

- Mentalizing (pp. 86–88)
- Experimentation
- Matchmaking (p.96)
- De-isolation (p. 58)
- Families helping families (p. 95)

Checklist

- Did you look for moments of reflection in action?
- Did you keep the pace of the action going during these?
- Were you able to manage time so that every family could reflect and get new ideas from the group?
- Have you summarised the issues and questions for each family?
- Did you invite ideas and block interruptions that got in the way of fresh thinking?
- Did you create an environment in which families could support and challenge each other?
- Did you reflect on both higher and lower target scores?
- Does each child and parent have a plan to put into practice newly discovered ideas and skills?

Further reading

- Fonagy et al. 1991
- Bateman & Fonagy 2016

Your notes

Transfer

Putting into practice

Transfer in school

Transfer at home

Summary

Putting it into practice

The primary responsibility for transfer of lessons learnt in the multi-family group to other areas of their lives obviously rests with the children, young people and their family members. However, there are several mechanisms that can be put in place to support the process of embedding change in school and at home.

The ambition of the school partner and family group specialist should be to help find and support as many conduits for information sharing beyond the group so that the maximum number of family members, teachers and children can have positive impact on rewarding individuals as they attempt to change.

Transfer in school

Target setting

The target system requires the involvement of several teachers and other school staff. In a primary school there will be at least the class teacher and possibly a teaching assistant who will be marking the target sheets with the child a certain number of times each day. In a secondary school there will be several different teachers and the form tutor to mark them.

In each setting this means that there should be a high number of mini-opportunities for reflection per day between the child or young person and several different adults. These adults will likely have varying degrees of interest in the child's emotional wellbeing and will have different amounts of information about the workings and ambitions of the family group.

The school partner can be very influential in affecting these processes as they can explain to colleagues what is happening and what the child or young person is attempting to achieve via the targets. The school partner should be the hub for the preparation, dissemination and collation of the target system with colleagues so that no member of staff should feel over-burdened by the demands of the task. All that should be required is for the member of staff to provide feedback on the child's behaviour and wellbeing while under their direction and care in as simple a way as possible.

Internal staff meetings or training events

Once the group has been running for a short time the school partner should seek an opportunity to present some of the outcomes of the group at a staff meeting or school training session. This enables the two group leaders to show film (with the agreement of the family members featured) to demonstrate how the group operates and to explain in more detail what it is trying to achieve. This process helps to prevent the family group from becoming isolated in the overall school context.

It can be incredibly helpful if one or more parents can also be persuaded to attend the meeting to explain the circumstances of what they and their children have been participating in the group and what their children have been working to achieve. Teachers, who may have previously been sceptical about the point or purpose of the group, are frequently better-informed and more supportive after such meetings.

Peers or buddies

It is helpful to try to influence the classroom setting to assist children who want to try out new ways of behaving. Peer expectations or pressure within a class or tutor group can work against anything being allowed to change.

Recruiting willing peers or buddies to help a child from the group as they try to be different in class can be very successful.

Teaching family group skills to class

When a child or young person has acquired a new skill via an activity carried out in the multi-family group it can be helpful for the school partner to agree with the class teacher for the child to lead an event in class where they demonstrate the activity and their skills to their peers. They don't necessarily have to be particularly expert in the skill but they should have basic knowledge about how the activity runs and what it is designed to achieve. The ambition is to counteract any assumption that the child is deficient and to show that the family group is a place where children can learn new and useful skills. Helping the child to explain and lead a role reversal activity about an aspect of classroom management or home life works well for this purpose.



Transfer at home

Target setting

The school partner has a significant role in supporting the process of the child or young person taking their targets to and from school to home. We will say more about the different areas of responsibility for the school partner and family group specialist later but for now it is enough to highlight that for change to have a chance of being transferred to relationships at home, the targets need to be seen by key family members on a daily basis if possible.

By the nature of the clientele who the family group is designed to serve, this will frequently go wrong. However, the school partner can help to give the process its best chance by managing things as effectively as possible from the school perspective.

Phone calls and text messages

Keeping the communication active and frequent in between group sessions helps to reinforce the importance that the school places on the ambitions of the group. The school partner and family group specialist can share out the task of calling or texting family members to update on progress.

Ad hoc conversations

Wherever possible the school partner should be available for quick conversations with parents or other family members if they come to school to pick up or drop off their child. This is more likely to be the case for primary school groups. Five-minute conversations at the beginning or end of the day in the playground can be invaluable.

Using film

On occasions, families have made short films of their participation in the group to share with absent family members who are unable to attend in person. This has worked well for families where, for example, a parent is in prison or may be too unwell to attend.



Summary

Key ideas

- The development of new skills in areas of life outside the multifamily group needs support
- The responsibility for transferring lessons lies primarily with the child but there are mechanisms to help
- The use of target cards offers mini opportunities for reflection and change at home and at school
- Peer pressures can discourage a child or young person as they try to behave differently
- It is useful to keep in touch outside the group to reinforce the importance of progress
- Opportunities for a child to share with others at school and at home what they've learnt are valuable

Core concepts

- Demonstrating change
- Communicating beyond the group

Checklist

- Did you look for opportunities for the child to share or present what they've learnt to others (teachers, peers, family members)?
- Did families and school staff use the target cards to reflect on behaviour and find opportunities for change?
- Is the child supported by peers to change their behaviour?
- Does the group keep in touch between multifamily group sessions?
- Does the school partner make themselves available to parents for ad hoc chats?

Your notes

Developing group cohesion

Making the group attractive

Creating a shared vision

De-stigmatise and de-isolating

Overcoming language differences

Encouraging new family members to join

Looking out for the 'aha' moment

Ensuring cohesion between sessions

Suggesting a parent group

Summary

Making the group attractive

Sharing experiences and hearing about other people's struggles and successes contributes to the formation of group cohesion.

It is important that the group represents something special and reliable for the parents and children alike. Parents often worry about being defined as members of the 'naughty children's group' but as they experience the 'same boat' support and start to experience success, this becomes less of an issue. However, it is important to pay attention to how the group is advertised in order to counteract negative labelling.

Celebrating small episodes of success and inviting parents and children to talk about any experiences of having 'turned things around' will foster optimism in the group.

Suggestions

- Advertise the group as a school offer to support pupil or student progress and inclusion.
- Invite parents who have benefited from the group to be available for consultation at parent-teacher consultation evenings.
- With the group's permission, advertise the family group using photographs taken in the group.
- Stories of success can be published in the school newsletter or on the school website.
- Celebrate success at school assemblies.
- Create a safe context for sharing by reminding people of the ground rules of respect and by challenging anyone who does not adhere to the rules.
- A visit and expression of support and interest from a senior member of staff can speed up the process of acceptance.



Creating a shared vision

Parents, children and their teachers need hope that things can change, a belief in changeability which helps the group to overcome predictions of, 'He'll never change' or 'Children with mental health issues are not teachable.'

When children, young people and parents are encouraged to give feedback in the group of small changes that they have noted in each other, the group will develop a curious stance and will seek out evidence of new behaviours and an interest in how change has come about which will have an impact on all participants.

It is hard to resist the optimism in a workshop approach that comes from discovering skills that have rarely been seen in the children before. Families who are holding onto beliefs such as 'It's the social worker's fault', which block change, find it hard to resist the positive experience that comes when families help families to help themselves.

De-stigmatising and de-isolating

Parents and children who live in isolation from others who can provide examples of how to solve problems, need the group to provide a context where they are able to observe ideas in action without feeling under the spotlight.

By seeing that others share similar problems, parents and children can start to feel less hopeless and more energised to think creatively. They often talk about the relief of finding others in the same boat and that by being in school how they can share common issues.

Suggestions

- Invite colleagues to see how new patterns can emerge in the multi-family context and that children and parents, often labelled as difficult or as failures, can demonstrate new skills and thinking.
- It is important to plan together how and when the new patterns can be supported in the relevant contexts of home and school.
- Invite parents and children who have success stories as living proof that change is possible and an inspiration for others.
- Help parents and children talk about changes in frequency and intensity of a problem and encourage others to track the small steps used to make changes in action and thinking.

Encourage feedback in the group of small changes they note in patterns of habitual behaviour and thinking

However, the interpersonal experience of giving as well as taking advice is as important for growth in confidence and skills in communication and problem solving as the advice and facts themselves.

Overcoming language differences

Many multi-family groups have parents attending who need the services of an interpreter. This brings its own complexities but can be managed in the school setting.

For example, many parents will have a language other than English as their first language and the children often have a greater command of English than their parents. During reflection sessions the interpreter will need to simultaneously interpret any discussion and reflection.

Although mostly there will only be one person talking at a time, the pace may be difficult to manage. Usually other families are patient and understanding about the extra time a family with an interpreter will need. On occasions a parent appears slower in understanding than the child, it is the role of the family group specialist or school partner to include the parent.

When there is another parent or family who also speaks the language, using them as much as possible rather than the professional interpreter can be preferable to promote significant cross-family working, which will encourage connections with other families and help maintain the parent-child relationship. However, care needs to be taken in negotiating this in light of each family's sensitivities about privacy and personal boundaries. Just because people speak the same language does not necessarily mean that they have a shared or common purpose.



Encouraging new family members to join

At the beginning of the group use exercises that will break the ice and begin to build a team approach to problem solving.

It is important to feel secure at the start of the group and when a new member joins, the issue of confidentiality should be raised again and clarified. It is vital that if children and parents are to open up to new ideas and talk about beliefs and behaviours, they should hear that their issues and private business will be respected and not gossiped about either in the school or in the local community.

Invite parents and children who have success stories to share them as personal evidence that change is possible with the hope that they will act as inspiration for new members of the group.

Some people take time to gain the confidence to try new ways of relating but, by using the switchover technique and coaching teams approach, opportunities will arise for parents and children to try new behaviours in a safe setting before going on to apply strategies and ideas outside the group.



Looking out for the 'aha' moment

When individuals report their experiences of change or new insights, we call these 'aha' moments.

'Aha' moments are those occasions when someone, either a child or parent, appears to suddenly 'see the light' and start to change something significant about themselves or their relationships.

Oh, I get it now. If we are going to expect our children to change then maybe I should do something different myself as well.

As well as being crucial for the individuals themselves, these moments can be extremely powerful and significant for other parents and children, as well as for teachers who might also witness them.

These moments of discovery are useful for building the group as they can define it as a safe environment for self-evaluation that can potentially lead to change.

The action and reflection programme will help families see over time that not only can they cope better but they can take a proactive approach to future life challenges.

Blaming the school will become less evident as parents and children rely on each other and gain more confidence in generating their own solutions.

Ensuring cohesion between sessions

Cohesion for families

Families will appreciate positive communication between sessions, not just through the target system. The experience of being, 'kept in mind' with messages of appreciation and support will be an important and possibly different experience for many families who find it difficult to trust professionals. Reminding families of progress, strengths and ambition between sessions is incredibly useful.

Postcards, text or online messages home with memories of success in the previous group keep hope for change alive in families not familiar with receiving positive messages from school.

Group and school cohesion

The school staff email system is an excellent pathway for giving information about each pupil or student's attempts to change and the family themes that parents have been discussing.

By using this constant feedback loop, teachers who may have had little experience of therapeutic practice, can become intrigued by concepts of predictability, stability, parenting styles, notion of parental presence and parental effectiveness.

Parent group

During the experience of helping other children and their own children experience success, many personal issues may come up for parents that are not appropriate to be discussed when the children are present. It is very useful to offer a context for adult conversation, whether that's individual with the group leaders or a joint time for parents to think together and support each other.

Parents value the opportunity to talk together about some of the challenges and opportunities involved with being parents.

Conversations often lead to discussions about some of their own early childhood experiences and how these have contributed to their ideas, beliefs or skill base for being a good parent for their own children.

The de-isolation of parents is an incredibly important focus for this model. When individuals are isolated, they are less able to be influenced or positively excited by new ways of solving some of the challenges and difficulties that face them as parents.

They are more likely to feel low or depressed if they come to believe that they haven't the skills, the energy or the influence to be able to be effective with their children.

When parents are constantly receiving messages from teachers that their child is in trouble or failing, this can easily reinforce their own negative experience and image of themselves as people and as parents.

For parents to be able to take care of and be able to emotionally or psychologically feed their children they also need replenishment and need to be rewarded, kept in mind and taken care of.

So, in the family group they are given the opportunity to begin to take care of each other. When parents have made a connection to the group, they will go on to text each other as well as communicate and support each other outside of the group. Quite often this happens and goes on beyond the life of the group.



Summary

Key ideas

- Parents, children and teachers need a shared vision that believes change is possible
- Parents and children will learn new skills by observing others in the group
- Celebrating success within the group helps foster optimism
- Sharing successes beyond the family support in the school and attracts other families
- Spotting the 'aha' moment helps define the group as a safe space for reflection and change
- Communication between multi-family group sessions is important to maintain positivity and trust
- A separate parent group can help de-isolate individuals and further bond the multi-family group

Core concepts

- De-isolation ('same boat') (p. 58)
- De-stigmatisation (p. 58)
- Communicating beyond the group
- Families helping families (p. 95)

Checklist

- Did you use opportunities to link people using common themes?
- Did you use or create opportunities for families to work together and for parents to help each other's children?
- Did you help parents and children to talk about changes in the frequency and intensity of a problem?
- Did you encourage the group to notice small changes in patterns of habitual behaviour and thinking?
- Did you keep teachers and other staff members informed about progress in the group?
- Did you continue to communicate with, support and encourage group members between sessions?
- Is there a safe space in which parents can talk and think together without their children?

Your notes

Understanding family group roles and functions

The family group specialist

The school partner

The parent partner

Summary

The family group specialist

For simplicity, we refer to the professional with expertise in setting up and running family groups in schools as a family group specialist. We deliberately do not specify one discipline or professional group who can perform the role of a family group specialist.

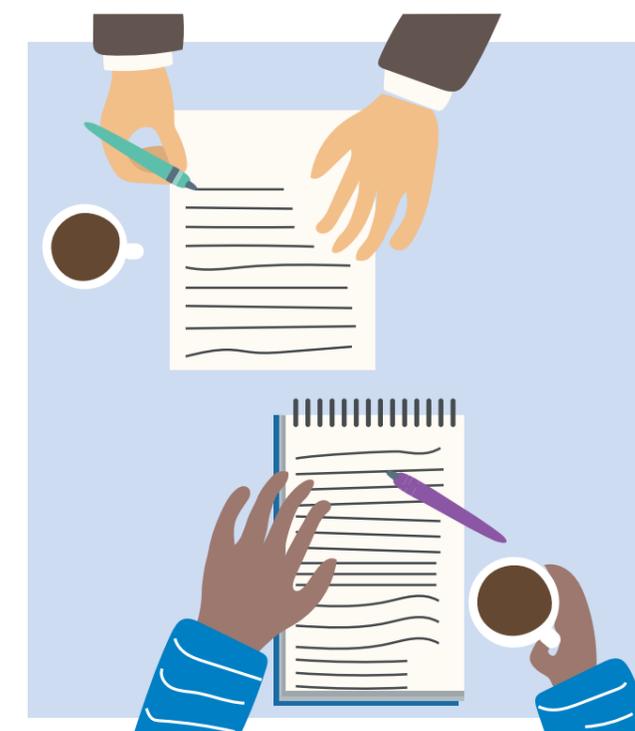
To date, we have known individuals from various disciplines who have successfully fulfilled the role of family group specialist. These include:

- Family therapists
- Clinical psychologists
- Social workers
- Educational psychologists
- Child and adolescent psychotherapists
- Teachers
- Psychiatrists
- Mental health nurses

We are sure that this list is not exhaustive and are keen only to emphasise the skills, knowledge, experience and support needed to set up and run a multi-family group in school.

- The family group specialist should have had some systemic training and additionally have participated in a specialist multi-family group training course.
- When considering resources, time for preparatory work before each session such as making a timetable, addressing risk issues, discussing group dynamics, as well as post-session debriefing meetings need to be factored in.
- Peer discussions between family group specialist and school partner are crucial so that the approach is coordinated and goal directed.
- The skills and knowledge exchange between the school partner and family group specialist are mutually personally and professionally enriching.

- The groups benefit enormously from the joint endeavours of the two leaders who come from different professional disciplines, usually with significantly different training experiences and frequently with marked differences in professional language, priorities and perspectives on how to best help children presenting with difficulties and their families in school.
- As already stated, it may be that a family group specialist is not available to run a group. In this situation it is possible for two school partners to jointly deliver a family group with some close support or supervision from a suitably trained family group specialist.



Roles and tasks of the family group specialist

- ✓ Negotiate the agreement to run a multi-family group in school with Senior Leadership Team.
- ✓ Agree timings and location for the group.
- ✓ Discuss requirements for school partner and agree recruitment.
- ✓ Present theory and practice of multi-family group to school staff meeting.
- ✓ Meet with school partner to establish parameters for group and identify children, young people and families.
- ✓ Develop working relationship with school partner and learn about how the school functions. Visit classes, assemblies and observe the playground.
- ✓ Arrange for the school partner to visit an existing multi-family group. Go together and discuss experience and observations.
- ✓ Jointly design a parents' information leaflet with the school partner.
- ✓ Meet prospective children, young people and their families with school partner – one family at a time.
- ✓ Attend a coffee morning or other group welcome event for prospective parents with school partners.
- ✓ Take the lead in the meeting with new parents in relation to engagement and explanation of multi-family group practice and procedures.
- ✓ Mediate creation of child or young person targets.
- ✓ Debrief with school partner after each meeting.
- ✓ Share thinking and plan for next phase of engagement.
- ✓ Meet with school partner to plan first multi-family group. Share responsibility with school partner for the design of multi-family activities.
- ✓ Arrive 45 minutes before group is scheduled to start to sort out last minute plans and catch up with school partner.
- ✓ Take lead responsibility during the group for therapeutic direction and structure.
- ✓ Debrief with school partner for 45 minutes after the group and plan for next week and any follow-up arising from the session.
- ✓ Meet with individual children, young people and their families as necessary.
- ✓ Support families in accessing additional resources as necessary.
- ✓ Manage outcome data recording and monitoring processes.
- ✓ Lead on communication pathways and needs of the group across the school.
- ✓ Negotiate with school partner and senior school leaders to present workings and outcomes of the family group for other school staff.
- ✓ Attend review meetings for children, young people and families with school partner.

The school partner

The choice of school partner is crucial to the effective setting up and running of a family group. They are chosen by the school's head teacher or other senior leader.

The school partner may be:

- Teacher
- Teaching assistant
- Special needs coordinator (SENCo)
- Inclusion manager
- Learning support assistant
- Learning mentor

Or another school professional deemed to have the aptitude for the role.

- The school partner has a vital role in ensuring the pragmatics of running the group, managing the day-to-day needs of the group as well as liaising and communicating with colleagues across the school network.
- Although systemic training is not necessary, a systemic outlook is useful.
- Vital characteristics are enthusiasm, warmth and a belief that working with families within the school context is an effective and desirable way to help children struggling with personal difficulties at school.

Roles and tasks of the school partner

- ✓ Meet with family group specialist to discuss and identify potential referrals.
- ✓ Develop working relationship with family group specialist and learn about family systems approach.
- ✓ Discuss with class teachers, SENCos, learning mentors and other relevant staff which families may be suitable for the group.
- ✓ Visit existing family groups in other schools and observe sessions.
- ✓ Jointly design a parents' information leaflet with the family group specialist.
- ✓ Contact targeted families (letter/flyer/phone call) and arrange joint school meeting with the family group specialist.
- ✓ Complete referral form with school-based information for the family group specialist.
- ✓ Jointly run an initial target meeting with each child, family, the family group specialist and relevant school staff. Debrief with the family group specialist after session identifying additional assessment needs and discuss, if necessary, alternative help needs on advice from the family group specialist.
- ✓ Inform school staff that the family will be attending the family group. Share targets and expectations of other staff (marking targets, giving verbal feedback, etc.).
- ✓ Meet with the family group specialist and plan for first multi-family group. Share responsibility with the family group specialist for the design of activities.

- ✓ Collect weekly feedback from class teachers, SENCOs, learning mentors and other relevant staff to pass on to group.
- ✓ Maintain paperwork and target sheets, providing copies and checking in where necessary.
- ✓ Encourage school staff to refer to relevant targets as necessary.
- ✓ Disseminate information from the group, by agreement, to some or all the school staff, as appropriate.
- ✓ Invite staff to attend the family group when appropriate.
- ✓ Contact parents on the day before the group via text, email or phone as necessary.
- ✓ Raise the possibility of whole staff training related to the group and the understanding of the systemic model.
- ✓ Meet identified families with the family group specialist separately as necessary.
- ✓ Jointly participate in the evaluation process.

The parent partner

Once multi-family groups have been running for some time, there will be parents who, having graduated from the group, are motivated to contribute to the success and running of future family groups.

These parents, who have had a good experience in the group, will often want to remain involved to help other children and families to get the benefit that they feel they have had. Having access to a parent partner who acts as an 'expert by experience' can be most useful and is a very effective way of:

- Engaging nervous or unsure parents
- Linking with parents and staff throughout the week
- Helping the culture of the group to continue to develop

Parent partners often find that being offered this helpful role continues to support their own development and confidence; some of them have also gone on to enrol in further training for themselves, commonly in one of the many fields of childcare.

It is also possible to recruit a child or young person as a mentor or graduate buddy for future family group work. They may come occasionally to a running family group to contribute their perspectives. Often, they can be most helpful in mentoring a child or young person who attends the same school, during typical crisis times, such as in breaks, or before or after school.

Summary

Key ideas

- Many different types of professionals can be family group specialists, but they do need particular skills and training
- The family group specialist and the school partner should work closely together and share expertise
- The family group specialist and the school partner are jointly responsible for discussing and agreeing referrals to the group and leading the group once established
- The group leaders are context managers
- The school partner should liaise with the school and keep other staff informed about the group
- Parents who graduate from their own group may want to continue supporting other groups

Core concepts

- Decentralising self (p. 95)
- Living proof (p. 85)
- Communicating beyond the group
- Families helping families (p. 95)

Checklist

- Do you understand your role and responsibilities in setting up and leading the multi-family group?
- Have you considered the resources, including your time, that will be needed to run the group?
- As a group leader, are you:
 - Being flexible and not overly predictable?
 - Keeping in mind the wider system – both family and school?
 - Remaining curious but being economical with words?
 - Enabling change and not overly accommodating existing family patterns?
 - Being actively inactive?
 - Working closely with the other group leader?
- If you have already run a group, have you identified graduated parents who may be suitable parent partners in other groups?

Your notes

Setting up in schools

Primary schools

Secondary schools

Special schools

Alternative provision schools or pupil referral units

Practical steps

Summary

Primary schools

Family groups are ideally suited for primary schools. Early intervention for younger children with mental health difficulties through this approach is both effective and cost efficient.

With nurture and care being more in balance with independence and autonomy-seeking behaviours at this stage of the family life cycle, primary schools are commonly central to the lives of children and their parents.

Primary school staff have daily experience of needing to think about and be actively involved with parents of the children they teach. The teaching and learning processes at this stage necessarily pay close attention to the rapidly changing developmental needs and abilities of the children.

Through the intimacy of the teacher–pupil relationship engendered in a typical primary school classroom, teachers can frequently become concerned about a child’s emotional wellbeing. They will often have close knowledge of family circumstances and may become involved in trying to help in times of difficulty.

Teachers hear about births, marriages, deaths, divorces and stresses associated with poverty or housing difficulties. They are often the first to feel the effects of social or political changes impacting children and families around them.

Sometimes teachers can feel overwhelmed by the predicament of children in their care. They know these children are experiencing difficulties at home that are inevitably going to be harmful for their emotional wellbeing or mental health as well as impairing their ability to learn to their fullest potential.

A teacher’s core training does not equip them to be able to manage these situations.

Bringing mental health expertise into the school via the family group and the partnership with a skilled family group specialist invariably relieves some of this strain and worry.

From the mental health professional’s perspective, intervention with six to eight children and their families over a two-hour period is extremely efficient.

By working in partnership with a colleague from the school a family group specialist will likely have much richer information from the outset and will also have great support in the engagement process with families.

The systemic spread of the family group approach across the wider school staff and pupil population multiplies the impact much beyond that of a single-family intervention.

Secondary schools

Some people have said that you cannot run family groups in secondary schools. They are wrong: we have been running successful groups at this school phase for many years.

There are different challenges to working in secondary schools but the fundamental principles of working with children and young people and their families in groups in the school setting still apply.

The developmental task of families has moved on by this stage with both school and parents having clear expectations of the children becoming increasingly independent as they make the transition from the more nurturing primary phase.

Secondary school teachers and the way secondary schools operate accentuate graduated moves to greater and greater autonomous functioning of the students.

Teachers generally don't know the young people so well, with subject specialists not usually being required to become involved in any of their students' wellbeing issues.

The young people themselves are more likely to be less open or welcoming of attention from adults and parents may be struggling with how to manage the changing requirements of relationships with their adolescent children.

Secondary schools are big organisations with highly complex staffing structures and operational processes.

They function much like small to medium-sized businesses with intricate communication systems and closely monitored teaching and learning procedures.

Having said this, young people still experience mental health difficulties and they often display them in, or associated closely with, their secondary school.

Many young people fail to make a successful transition from their primary to secondary school. They may still be living in families struggling with difficult issues or new difficulties may have arisen for some young people. Many find it extremely hard to match the expectations of a secondary school education in terms of the needs to perform in more mature and independent ways.

Many are still immature and struggle to manage themselves in relation to the new curriculum demands as well as finding it hard to cope with the lower amount of care and attention to their continuing needs. As their adolescence progresses, young people may experience complex feelings and emotions that they can find difficult to adjust to or to make sense of. Unfortunately, many adolescents can be unwilling to take up offers of therapeutic help via the usual clinic-based services. This can be the case even when family members and professionals are able to see clearly that they are failing to cope and struggling in very difficult circumstances.

Given all these difficulties, it is worth the effort to set up a family group in a secondary school, particularly for years seven and eight where the transition issues are most powerfully felt and observed, both by the family and the secondary school pastoral or inclusion staff.

The staff in secondary schools who have the delegated responsibilities for the care of the mental health of the young people in school know they need extra specialist help from mental health professionals.

Working together in partnerships helps to bridge the gap between school and families. The family group is an ideal context for developing such partnerships.

Special schools

Feedback from colleagues who have set up family groups in special schools has always been extremely positive. The de-isolating effect of the groups for parents of children with special needs is enormously beneficial.

Supporting a child through the statutory procedures to produce an education, health and care plan invariably places enormous stress and strain on parents and other family members.

It can be a worrying and complex process, both in terms of the requirements to become involved with a range of professionals and also in just managing the day-to-day difficulties presented by the child.

It can also unfortunately be the case that coping with difficulties sometimes presented by having to deal with a network of professionals can be equally, if not more upsetting for parents, than living with their own child's challenging physical, learning, emotional or mental health issues.

Whatever problem or condition the child presents with, it is hugely helpful for parents to have the chance to meet together in a group to compare notes, share experiences, offer mutual support and develop resources in support of their children.

Questions raised by professionals considering whether to set up a multi-family group in a special school, often focus on the goals and target-setting processes that are core to the multi-family group approach described here.

Special school staff have shown us how these can be modified to fit particular populations of children and young people in the specific schools.

The goals are designed to be communication devices between the child, the teacher and the parents in order to help develop improvements in whatever targeted areas that everyone feels are appropriate and achievable for the child.

It is a process that seeks to make things transparent for all and has, at its heart, the concept: **'What would be even better if...?'**



Alternative provision schools or pupil referral units

These schools and units, such as our own alternative provision school – the Pears Family School, which is based on a multi-family approach – are designed to help some of the most challenging children and young people who have been excluded from mainstream schools.

These children and young people are frequently extremely troubled with long histories of difficulties at school and also often have had problems that required involvement with mental or physical health services as well as social services.

Families can appear to be disaffected and unable to make good use of helping agencies. They are not always easy to engage or persuade to join in collaborative arrangements with professionals, often having reached the point of disenchantment or oppositional attitudes to offers of help.

However, the population is desperately in need of effective help and we have seen practice that is showing that a multi-family approach can offer hope and change in the most difficult circumstances.

To implement a family group in this sector of the education system requires clear ambition, significant training input and strong support with a dedicated staff group. If these are in place the outcomes will be worth it.

Practical steps

The first step is to seek an invitation from the head teacher and the school's senior management or leadership team to make a brief presentation at one of their regular meetings.

It is a bonus to be able to invite a parent who has been helped by attending an existing family group to join the meeting and co-present.

As school senior managers' time is usually very pressed, the family group specialist should aim to present the multi-family group concept in 15–20 minutes, providing answers to these questions:

- Why parental presence in the school or classroom?
- Who benefits?
- What outcomes can be expected?
- What is the time commitment?
- What space and time are required?
- What staffing is necessary?
- What is the cost?

Explaining the benefits of a multi-family group

A multi-family group can:

- Introduce, or develop and enhance, the school's model of supporting children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and their families
- Improve classroom and playground behaviour
- Improve relationships within the classroom, teacher/pupil relationships and school/home relationships and communication
- Contribute to improving the pupil's emotional wellbeing within school and within families via early identification and on-site interventions
- Improve the pupil's attendance, attainment and academic performance
- Work positively within a multi-disciplinary framework in a 'joined-up thinking' way
- Achieve social and educational inclusion
- Provide access to mental health professionals in a stigma-free setting
- Reduce staff stress levels
- Reduce rates of exclusion and behavioural incidents at school
- Improve Ofsted (school inspection body in the UK) score by offering a whole-school environment for dealing with children with emotional wellbeing or mental health issues

Following the meetings, a firm commitment needs to be given by key figures within the school, for example by the **head teacher, senior leadership team, deputy head, heads of year, heads of key stage or SENCo**. These professionals will need to understand the aims and rationale for the multi-family group, its intended outcomes, as well as its possibilities and limitations.

The family group should become an integral part of the school that is known about and accepted and acknowledged by as many staff as possible.

The participating children or young people stay part of the school with the aim of changes initiated in the family group being transferred as quickly and effectively as possible into the general functioning of the classroom and the wider school activities.

Children, young people and families with highly complex behavioural and emotional needs and their families may not find the once-per-week model enough to promote significant changes and may require a more intensive intervention (such as the Pears Family School). Some special schools have decided to run multi-family groups on site two or three times a week to better match the high level of need of their students.



Key ingredients for success

For a family group in school to be successful, the following elements are required:

- A school partner with enthusiasm and desire to work with problematic children and their families and a belief in the possibility of change, with full support for this from the senior leadership team
- A commitment to clear lines of communication between key support staff, for example learning or teacher assistants and playground or lunchtime supervisors, class teachers and the school partner
- Sufficient time allocation during the week for the school partner to devote to family group support and delivery (half a day per week for the planning, running and supervision elements of the group, as well as an additional three hours, spread over the remainder of the week, to ensure the target and communication systems are working effectively)
- Suitable space and facilities for running the group.

Suggestions

- It is helpful if as many of the school staff, including mid-day supervisors, assistants, catering and other support staff, as possible have basic information about the new child and family-based initiative. This is best achieved via a short presentation at a regular staff meeting. The aim is to explain to school support staff the model and that working in school-based multi-family groups is an effective way of bringing about significant changes in pupils' conduct and behaviours.
- Staff also need to be persuaded that, without their participation and support the intervention is unlikely to succeed. It is important to make the presentation relevant and closely connected to the school context and particularly the day to day experiences of the teachers and support staff.
- Showing a film of parents and children describing the groups and what can be gained from them is often helpful.
- By the end of the presentation and the subsequent discussion, the teachers who have children attending the group, should understand that their cooperation in completing the target cards will be crucial to the group's success.
- Teachers should be encouraged to record their opinion about the child or young person's behaviour both on the target cards as objectively as possible. They should not feel obliged to give the child good scores if they are not merited and should note any attempt by the child to persuade or manipulate them to give better scores than are justified.
- Teachers can be reassured that if they experience any of these behaviours from a child it is very helpful for the group leaders to know so that they can be helpfully addressed as part of the family group. Each teacher will need to negotiate with the child how and when the target cards will be filled in.

Before running a group, the following things need to be agreed:

- A named school professional to be the school partner who will co-lead the group and act as the main link across the school
- The amount of time that the school partner will be released to work for the group
- The space and time for where and when the group will run – and for how long
- Which year groups are to be targeted
- A date to present the project to other school staff
- The desired outcomes and how these are to be measured, discussed and shared

Engaging families

Parents can be approached about attending the family group in a number of ways. If their child has a history of difficulties and there has been prior involvement of the parents with school staff, the approach may be direct:

There is a new group starting for children and families. Would you like to attend?

Additional pressure may be applied by stating that other initiatives have not worked in the past and that school staff are at a loss about what else to suggest if the parents do not take up this offer. In primary schools the school partner may make informal contact with parents if they see them in the playground prior to picking up their children. The idea is introduced to the parent then or at a meeting arranged for a later date.

Parents who have been graduates of a previous family group can often be the ones to make the first contact with other parents and speak about their own positive experiences. Some schools invite a group of parents to an informal coffee morning to describe the group and inviting them to join. Again, experienced parents are helpful at these occasions as they represent living proof of the helpfulness of participating in a family group.

Once an approach has been made and a family expresses interest in joining the group, a more formal meeting is set up, attended by the child, their family, the school partner, the family group specialist and any other key staff from the school. The aims and functions of the group are described in more detail, paying closer attention to the specific issues concerning each child and their family.

Parents can be approached in a number of ways

If the family agrees to attend, there is an expectation that this will be for at least six weeks, at which time there will be a review of progress and a decision made about whether to carry on in the group.

The family group specialist's description of the group to the family, preferably in the presence of the school partner, should include the notion that it is a setting where parents can share ideas about how to help their children manage better in school and sometimes at home as well.

You might acknowledge how difficult it can be to struggle on one's own with the child's difficulties and how easy it is to feel like one is a failure as a parent. Other parents attending the group who have faced similar difficulties might also give reassurances about the empathic and supportive nature of the group.

When engaging families at the outset, the following points should be explained:

1. The structure of the group
2. The target-setting process, leading to discussion about the family's view of how this could work for them
3. Some time will be set aside for parents to meet to discuss matters best talked about after the children have gone back to class
4. There is some discussion about the ground rules of the group in terms of creating a safe place where people don't feel that their private business will be spread all round the school or the local neighbourhood
5. Child protection procedures in relation to the group
6. Regular attendance will be necessary if change is to happen and that staff need to be told in advance if a parent cannot attend so that no one in the group need worry about why they are not there
7. The use of video feedback

The group can be advertised in schools with posters with a brief description and contact details, or put on the school website. Approaches via other social media (Facebook, Twitter) can also be considered.

Identifying children

The school senior leadership team should define the categories of children or young people to be targeted for the group. This is often done in collaboration with the school's SENCo, inclusion manager or pastoral lead. There should be a narrow focus on a two-year age span for the children or young people attending.

The group should not concentrate only on the most disruptive, 'acting out' pupils or students to begin with. Rather, a more mixed group is preferable, including both boys and girls, with a range of difficulties. This might include anxiety, stress, attendance issues, communication problems, peer group relationship difficulties, depression as well as the usual behavioural presentations. A mixed group avoids any risk of the family group getting to be known as just the 'naughty boys' group'.

For the first one or two family group cohorts, it is advisable to select primarily parents/families who are considered likely to be motivated to participate.

Choosing a format

As already explained, there are many possible formats for delivering multi-family group interventions in schools. In this section, we describe a range of possible ways of structuring groups that we have seen to be successful.

Family group

This is the simplest structure and requires minimal expenditure and disruption to the usual functioning of the host school. The typical features are:

- A once-weekly 2 to 2.5 hour session
- Space to accommodate 16–20 people

School heads teachers and senior leaders usually find that a family group that makes minimal demands on their space and organisation needs is the easiest structure and format to support at least in the first instance before their effectiveness has been fully experienced and proven.

The level of difficulty being experienced by the child and their family needs to be significant enough and troubling enough for the family to feel a strong sense of needing to seek help.

Once the family group has become more embedded in the school and the group leaders have gained experience of successful outcomes and developed confidence in each other's practice, the more highly problematic or so called 'hard to reach' families can be considered.

They will become easier to engage once the culture of the family group or family classroom has been established in the school and once there is a cohort of supportive parents who have benefited from being in the group with their children.

The school has to commit a member of staff's time for approximately one day per week, but school leaders appreciate it if they do not have unreasonable pressure placed on them in relation to physical space requirements.

On the following page, we set out an example of a four-week start-up programme for a family group approach.

	Activity	Outcomes
Week 1	Composite portrait painting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The group sits in a circle - Each person writes their name on a large piece of paper - They pass it to their neighbour, who paints a partial portrait of the named person, based on the group leader's direction (neck and shoulders/eyes/nose/mouth/ears/hair/skin colour/etc.) - The paper is then passed to the next person and another part of the face is painted - By the end, each portrait has had a part painted by each person in the group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Getting to know each other - Parents – often painting for the first time in a long time - 'Having a go', not worrying about getting it 'wrong' - Enjoyment - Similarities and differences – discussion - Sharing (managing paint etc.) - Observation skills - Eye contact - Interactions
Week 2	Giant Snakes and Ladders/Giant Jenga <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents and children agree the rules together - Parents are encouraged to take the lead in managing the game, helping each other and their children - 'Cross-fostering' – swapping and working with other children/parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Team work/helping each other - Taking part - Following instructions - Turn taking - Managing disappointment/losing/frustration
Week 3	Lego construction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make a shape out of five pieces of Lego - Child and parent sit opposite each other across a desk - One makes a shape without the other person being able to see it (a large book can be used as a barrier) - The person making the shape then describes the shape to their partner who tries to only use words - Partners then swap over so they work with different, unfamiliar people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Instruction giving and receiving, - Adapting language according to need of receiver - Sensitivity and attunement - Interacting - Listening - Language development - Patience - Dealing with frustration
Week 4	Play-Doh modelling 'a moment in our life' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parent and child (own families) together make a 2D or 3D model that represents 'a moment in our life' - On completion each family presents it to the others, then takes questions - Many families from other countries produce pictures of their original home, offering them the opportunity to describe, construct, reflect and make connections through similarities and differences with others - The day their child was born is another theme that often elicits empathic discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parent – child attunement - Enjoyment in each other - Shared memories - Reflection on a moment in the past - Sharing of own culture/home/life - Speaking, listening and presentation skills - Development of respectful curiosity

Allotting time in each session

To start with, groups usually do well with a higher proportion of action and less reflection, possibly as group members check out each other's and the group leaders' trustworthiness and competence.

As groups progress and individuals gain more confidence in each other and the overall process, it is possible and useful to increase the proportion of reflection opportunities, mostly at the expense of reducing planning and action timings.

Celebrating success: marking change

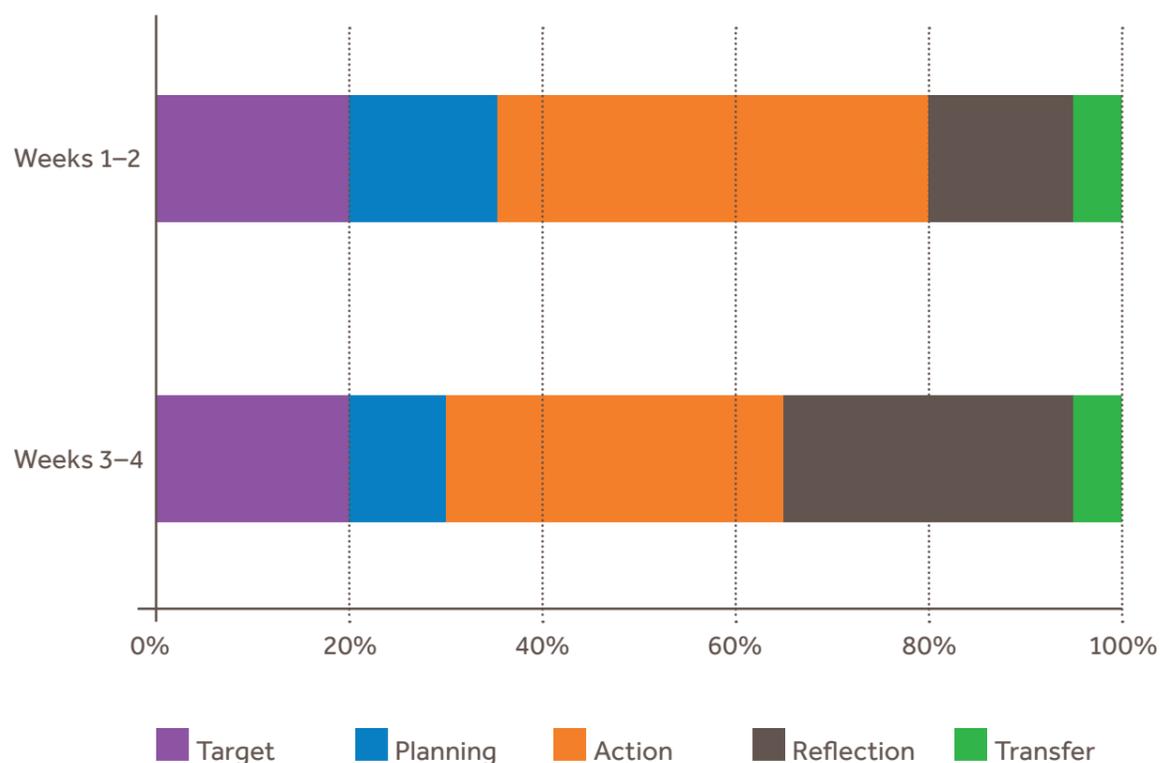
Certificates can be issued as proof of achievements made during the group. These are often allocated during the target phase, prepared during the ensuing week and awarded during the next family group meeting.

Celebration of success is important for many families and laminated certificates or other documents are often taken home and displayed prominently.

Having some purposeful fun helps.



Proportions of timing recommended for phases of the first four group meetings



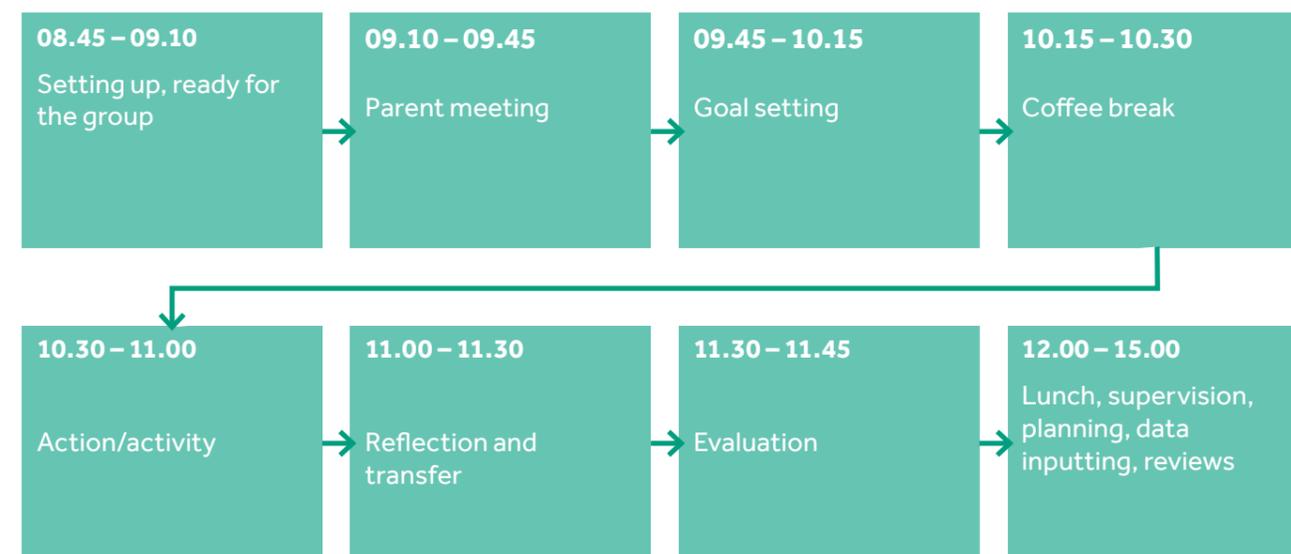
Family class

Another variant of a school-based multi-family group is often known as a family class. These are more commonly run in Scandinavian or other European countries and represent a multi-family group fully accommodated in, and staffed by, a school. The principles and practice elements described throughout this manual apply equally to a family class structure. The typical features are:

- One, two or three multi-family sessions per week of 3 or more hours per session
- Dedicated permanent space for the family class
- Family class teachers or leaders employed by the school

Equipment and space needed

- A room with enough space to accommodate up to 20 people
- Chairs and tables for teaching and learning sessions, seated activities and games
- Tea/coffee making equipment
- Audio-visual recording and replay facilities (camera, TV screen, laptop or interactive whiteboard/projector screen)
- Paper, flipchart, pens, paint, balls and other props for specific activities



Summary

Key ideas

- Different school settings, for children of different ages and needs, present particular challenges and opportunities for multi-family groups
- Primary schools offer the chance for early intervention, but multi-family groups in secondary schools are also successful
- It is important to get buy-in from school heads, teachers and other school staff
- When setting up, it is critical to consider resources – including physical space for the group and the time required for setting up
- There are different ways to select families and to engage them
- There are also different ways to structure the groups in terms of time and frequency
- The balance of time dedicated to each TPART phase will change as the group matures

Core concepts

- Flexibility and adaptability
- Whole-school approach

Checklist

- Did you fully engage senior school leaders in all set up arrangements?
- Have you informed all school staff about requirements and possible impact of the group?
- Have you used a range of ways to engage parents?
- Have you decided on the group structure and timings?
 - Family group:** 2–2.5 hr meeting once weekly
 - Family class:** meeting of up to 3 hrs, once, twice or three times weekly
- Do you have a plan to vary proportions of TPART elements as the group matures?

Your notes

Theoretical underpinnings

The multi-family group approach

Living proof

Mentalization-based framework

A mentalizing curriculum in school

Fostering attachments, building epistemic trust and learning to learn

Summary

The multi-family group approach

The multi-family group approach (Asen & Scholz 2010) combines principles and practices of systemic family therapy with those of group therapy. In group therapy, mutual support and constructive criticism, role play and feedback are important aspects of the approach, as is the recognition that living with psychological, emotional wellbeing or mental health difficulties is not an isolated experience and that other individuals may live in similar circumstances. The hope for change, often visible and embodied in other members attending group therapy, is another critical factor. There are some important practices and principles that are specific to multi-family groups as their dynamics are in several ways quite different from other therapeutic groups. These result chiefly from the combination of systemic and group therapy ideas leading to a different way of conceptualising boundary issues within the group and around the group.

When working with groups of families, rather than just with individuals, there are multiple interactions and processes that take place simultaneously:

- Within families (intrafamily)
- Between families (interfamily)
- Between family group leaders, teachers and individual family members (interpersonal)
- Within the large group which is composed of families, teachers and family group leaders (intragroup)
- Between families, family group leaders, teachers, the group and the wider school and family context (extragroup).

In a school-based multi-family group, a helpful dynamic evolves between families who all have children or young people experiencing some form of problems accessing education and/or who present with emotional wellbeing or behavioural difficulties, parents start to compare notes, begin to share familiar dilemmas, suggest ideas and provide advice for each other.

Sharing seemingly similar experiences helps families and their individual members reduce social isolation and overcome feelings of being singled out or stigmatised, no matter whether this is based on reality or imagined. Parents and children become less defensive when they feel that they are 'all in this together'. This leads to a greater degree of openness and to experimenting with being more self-reflective and open in front of others. This is further enhanced when families see themselves also reflected, or mirrored, in others.

In a group setting, families observe each other and comment on what they like, or dislike, in the way other families manage specific issues. New social contacts and connections are made and families, over time, develop considerable interest in and usually empathy for each other's stories and struggles. All this helps families and their individual members to generate new and different perspectives on seemingly intractable dilemmas.

Living proof

When families are encouraged to exchange their perceptions of others, including challenging ones, it is common that their comments and observations are often better heard and understood than when very similar ones are made by professionals. Parents can find it difficult to be open-minded or objective about their own situation particularly when feeling highly aroused, upset or in the midst of personal conflicts. Yet, the very same person may well be able to be sensitive and thoughtful about the problems of other people. This phenomenon can be used in a family group if a trusting context, in which mutual sharing of problems and solutions can be safely explored, is created.

A key aim of a multi-family group is to enable families and their individual members to go beyond their usual limits of thinking and feeling and to discover, or rediscover, their own personal resources and strengths. To achieve this, families are encouraged to actively help other families, by observing and understanding their dilemmas and problems and by making suggestions. Being helpful to others increases people's own feelings of self-worth.

A multi-family group approach can be used as a stand-alone intervention, but it is often applied in conjunction with other therapeutic work.

A multi-family group is not only a specific therapeutic method, but also a setting which permits the delivery of other therapeutic inputs, such as single-family work, couple work, or indeed work with just one individual, be that a child, young person or an adult.

When families attend for several hours in the 'real life' context of a classroom, spontaneous realistic situations and crises tend to arise which can be addressed and resolved on the spot. Convening ad hoc therapeutic sessions with an individual for perhaps no longer than 10 minutes can be more meaningful and effective than a scheduled longer session a few days later, as the issues are both fresh and relevant.

As groups are quite structured, with tight timetables and frequent transitions from one context to another, family members need to change their roles and tasks continuously, often within the space of a few minutes. At one point they are members of a large group, a bit later they can be required to be parents in charge of their children, then members of a parents or children-only group, and shortly after one family among six or seven other families. These continuous context shifts generate a kind of hot-house effect, with families as well as group leaders being always on the move and having to adopt multiple positions and experiencing multiple perspectives. In turn, these rapid transitions lead to increased pace of change.

Mentalization-based framework

Mentalizing (Fonagy et al. 1991, Bateman & Fonagy 2016) refers to the attitude and skills involved in understanding mental states, both one's own as well as those of others, and their connections with observable behaviours. Examples of mental states are a person's feelings, needs, desires, wishes, purposes, perspectives, reasons, thoughts and beliefs. Mentalizing is a form of imaginative mental activity, namely, perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states. It can be described as the process of trying to see oneself from the outside and others from the inside. Mentalizing is an ongoing activity rather than a fixed state of mind or an individual characteristic. Much of mentalizing occurs automatically, without effort or specific consciousness. However, when working with a mentalization-based framework, the focus is explicitly on the mental states of others and self.

Mentalizing is central to regulating and communicating emotions, since feelings relate very directly to one's desires or goals, and to one's beliefs as to whether these are being met, frustrated or threatened. This process occurs in the context of early attachment relationships. Disrupted and disordered attachments can affect the development of meta-cognitive capacities (Fonagy & Target 1997).

The relationship between attachment and mentalizing is bidirectional as the inability to represent the mental state of the self and difficulties with reflecting on the mental states of others can disrupt attachment relationships. In turn, a poor attachment relationship undermines the natural emergence of mentalizing capacities. A child who feels better understood will understand the parents or teachers better and any resulting interactions are likely to be more readily understood by the parent or teacher.

This circular process can enhance each person's mentalizing capacities and improve relationships all round.

Signs of absent or poorly developed mentalizing skills in children and young persons are:

- Being stuck in a point of view
- Not using humour and playfulness to engage in social relationships, but with the intent of hurting and distancing peers
- Lacking the ability to solve problems by 'give and take' and making appropriate use of one's own perspectives and those of others
- Believing that one's behaviour just 'happens', with little sense of agency and taking responsibility for it
- Showing little curiosity about other people's minds and perspectives and not expecting to have their views and understanding extended by others

Mentalization-based therapeutic work (MBT) aims to identify, validate and develop a person's capacity to understand mental states of self and others – like their feelings and thoughts, needs and desires. This is thought to open minds to improved social communication and interaction, both within the family

and school, and to navigate the social environment. MBT also aims to address the difficulties in effective mentalizing that contribute to or maintain relationship problems.

The overarching assumption of MBT is that difficulties in mentalizing have pervasive impact on the capacity of a family, or indeed on the performance and ability of a child to function effectively in school. Feeling misunderstood has the potential to create acute distress and chronic distortions of relationships and it is likely that mentalizing problems will emerge with different strengths, with differing severity and presentations at different times and in particular situations. Some of these difficulties may be relatively mild and specific, but they can also include rigid non-mentalizing attitudes that have long-term effects on the wellbeing of children and their families.

A multi-family group is a unique setting in which to promote and practise effective mentalizing. For example, when observing other families and their interactions, each family member can be encouraged to actively speculate about the mental states of the people in the other families. Seeing oneself or one's family 'mirrored' in others who have similar problems is a stepping stone to self-reflectiveness. Furthermore, being exposed to multiple descriptions of one's own mental states by the other participating families and their individual members and checking these descriptions with one's own perceptions of oneself, unleashes a circular process of mentalizing one's self and others.

Adults and children with problematic attachment relationships who find it difficult to see or address these within their own family, can spot similar difficulties in other families from a safe distance and without heightened levels of arousal. This can, over time, stimulate interest in how and why certain interactions happen, or specific emotions are elicited in families – including in one's own.

Experimenting in a family group with new 'attachment behaviours' by having, for a period, a relationship episode with the child of another family may give the parent and that child direct experiences of different forms of child – parent interactions. Parents tend to be less aroused by the challenging behaviour of another family's child than by their own child – allowing mentalizing to continue past a point when it is normally 'switched off' due to heightened emotions blocking reflective capacities.

Experiencing and reflecting on attachment and other relationship issues in a group setting opens new perspectives. In a multi-family group difficult themes and issues can be worked with via playful multi-family activities, allowing adults and their children to explore mental states in playful ways. As a family group has the potential to intensify feelings and other states of mind due to emerging interfamily dynamics, this can be used by helping families and their individual members develop affect-regulation exercises.

The use of audio-visual equipment for recording sessions permits rewatching these at a later stage and, with arousal levels being diminished then, provides an opportunity to practise effective mentalizing. The multi-family approach uses activities and games to improve mentalizing abilities in children, young people, parents, and even in the group leaders. For example, the ability to take the perspective of others and be able to predict and understand the impact of oneself on other people, and vice versa, can reduce the difficulties that impulsivity can cause for children or young people and enables them to potentially form more harmonious relationships with peers and adults.

Games that require turn-taking, patience, managing winning and losing, following instructions and so on, are likely to be difficult for children and adults who may have poor mentalizing capacities. When life's difficulties are dominant and relationships are suffering, playfulness, curiosity, flexibility in thinking, turn taking or reflective contemplation, can become less available with more rigidified relational processes coming to the fore.

It is important to always keep in mind that the multi-family activities are designed to be a vehicle for producing relational events and not an end in themselves. Although the content of an activity may well be important, the mentalizing processes elicited and set in motion through the activities are the real catalysts for change.



A mentalizing curriculum in school

From a school and teacher perspective, mentalizing concepts are a set of ideas and principles that sit easily with core teaching and learning processes in the classroom.

Good teachers will seek to know children in their care 'from the inside' and be aware of the need for children to learn or develop **perspective-taking skills**, above all in order to develop harmonious and appropriate relationships with peers, teachers and the important learning tasks.

Turn-taking and impact awareness are necessary mentalizing skills required for children and young people to be able to manage themselves in all areas of school life. And **curiosity** is vital for successful learning to take place.

Knowing that the multi-family group approach embraces the need for children and their families to develop these mentalizing skills in relation to producing improved functioning in the school makes the groups very popular with teachers, head teachers and senior leaders of the school.

Similarly, for parents who may be sceptical about joining a group and participating in some of the more playful activities, it is helpful to be given clear explanations of the approach.

Parents value being told that, for example, an activity is designed to focus on perspective taking or impact awareness and is targeted at developing key skills that will help their children manage better with the teacher and other children in the classroom or playground.



Fostering attachments, building epistemic trust and learning to learn

There is mounting evidence that effective mentalizing strengthens attachment relationships and that mentalizing capacity is developed and strengthened in good and close attachment relationships. Apart from its evolutionary function (protection from predators and other dangers), attachment regulates a person's physiological arousal, affect and attention. Children with problematic or disordered attachment relationships usually have considerable difficulties with affect regulation and these are often enacted, if not acted out, both in the family and school settings.

The formation of attachments is not a one-off event that only happens in the first few years of a person's life. Attachments are formed and modified throughout life and not just to the primary carers but also with partners, friends and teachers. Infants find their mind initially in and through the minds of their parents. Not only infants, but also children and young people of all ages as well as adults, are dependent on being 'seen' and understood by their caregivers, partners, teachers and significant others. This, in turn, requires trust and a belief that one is being understood and valued by the trusted person.

People's experience of having their (very individual) minds accurately reflected back to them primes them to open their minds to absorb new knowledge and to learn. The concept of 'epistemic trust', that is trust relating to the acquisition of knowledge, refers to a person's openness to receive social communication that is personally relevant and of generalisable significance. Trust is the most important ingredient for any form of learning, and the vital qualities of a trustworthy person are benevolence and reliability.

When parents or teachers want a child or student to learn important information, this is best achieved by using ostensive cues. The addressee, the child or student, can then metaphorically sit up, pay attention, understand and remember.

Ostensive cues are the signals that new and relevant information is being transmitted. One example of an ostensive cue is eye contact. For example, 'If I catch your eye, you will (hopefully) be listening to me.'

Sensitive responding to a pupil's needs fosters not just a general confidence that they matter as a person but also serves to open their mind more generally to receive new information and learn.

Emotional tone ('motherese') is an ostensive cue, as is turn-taking contingent reactivity, that is, when somebody responds to us immediately – 'contingent' on our behaviour.

Reliable ostensive cues shared between individuals over time help to develop interpersonal relationships characterised by epistemic trust (Fonagy & Allison 2014). They open a channel that allows the recipients – children, students – to receive knowledge about a personally relevant social world. The notion of epistemic trust can be most easily understood as an almost instinctive, unquestionable and totally reliable form of trust.

Each individual has a personal narrative and the need to be recognised as a person in their own right. This is often visibly, as well as audibly, the case for so-called problem pupils who tend to escalate their negative behaviours to meet this basic need. What happens next depends on how this negativity is being 'listened to', or contingently responded to. If the pupil is noticed as having agency, which means as a person with a mind containing a range of mental states rather than being merely defined as a troublemaker, this will increase the pupil's ability to open their mind to information that is relevant to them.

To make real contact, they need to feel that something is relevant and is linked to recognition that 'I am a person, I have agency'. Feeling recognised, believing one's subjectivity is important, makes the child or young person trust the source of information, for example the trusted teacher figure.

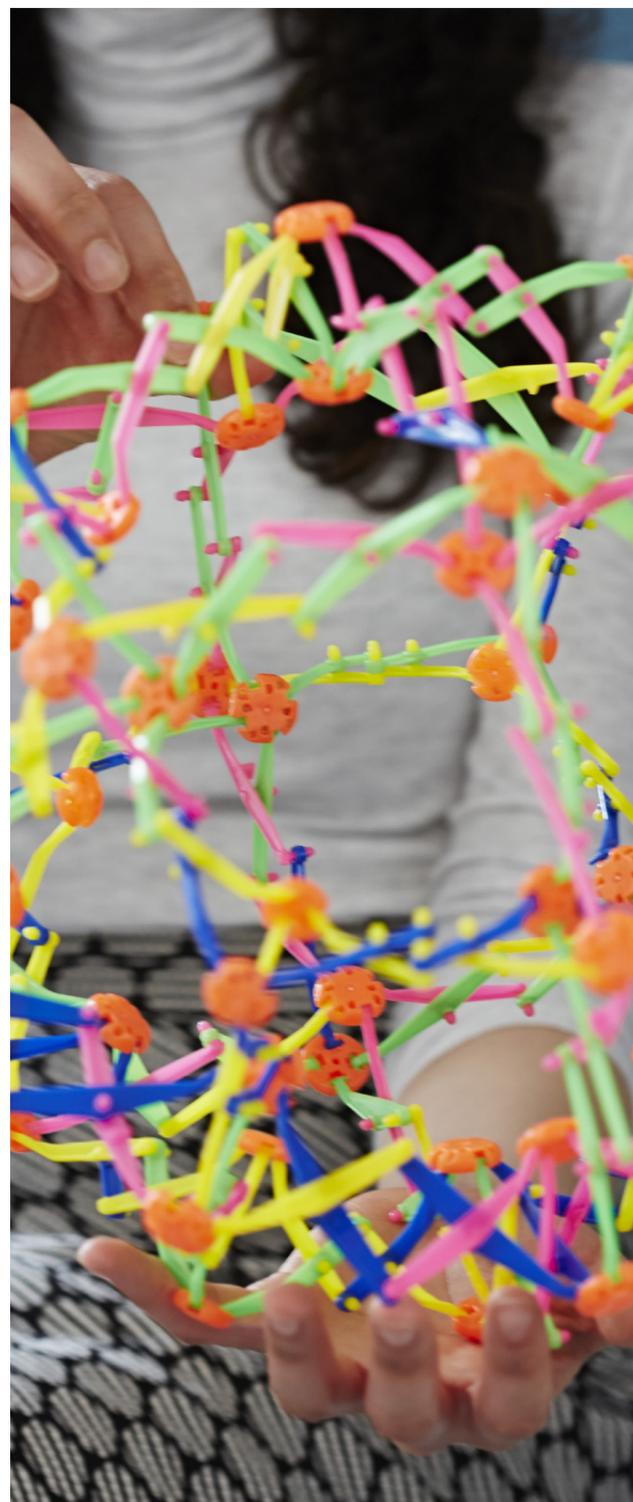
However, if the child's attachment figure, be that a parent or teacher, is a source of both fear and mistrust, the child will feel confused and may become hypervigilant and be constantly on alert.

Building epistemic trust means rekindling the evolutionary capacity to learn from others. If or when a child or young person co-creates a trusting relationship with a teacher/parent, they will be able to learn from that person.

In the context of school, teachers learn early in their careers that if they are to survive and succeed in the classroom with groups of children, they have to be able to convey an air of confidence that they have knowledge that they are capable of conveying to others. They quickly learn which ostensive cues are likely to work and perfect the ability to scan a large group of children, both visually and via highly attuned listening skills.

Teachers who, for example, do not master the skill of employing extensive peripheral vision and instead get trapped in narrow tunnel vision, transmit a lack of self-confidence to groups of children who will then not trust them to be successful teachers. Voice tone modulation, for example, is crucial as are multiple representations of body language that combine to demonstrate to classes of children and young people that this is a person of merit who can be epistemically trusted to be worth listening to and learning from.

The multi-family group, focuses on creating multiple contexts that help children, young people and their parents trust both the source of information, as much as the content of the information



Summary

Key ideas

- Creating solidarity – 'We are all in the same boat together'
- Overcoming stigma and social isolation – 'We are not the only ones with these problems'
- Stimulating new perspectives – 'I can see things in them which I am blind to when it comes to us'
- Learning from each other – 'I like the way others manage this'
- Being mirrored in others – 'We do this just like you'
- Positive use of group pressure – 'We can't cop out'
- Mutual support and feedback – 'Terrific how you do this; how do you think we are doing?'
- Discovering and building on competences – 'I can do more than I thought, I am not helpless'
- Experimenting with switchover – 'We can manage other children, and I like the way you deal with my child'
- Intensifying interactions and experiences – 'It's like a hot house: things happen here'
- Raising hopes – 'Light at the end of the tunnel – even for us'
- Practising new behaviours in a safe space – 'We can experiment here, even if things go wrong at times'
- Strengthening self-reflectiveness – 'I can see myself more accurately – and differently'
- Promoting openness and increasing self-confidence through, public exchanges and interactions – 'Nobody is after us; we can open up'
- De-isolation

Checklist

- Do I understand the rationale for the multi-family group approach in schools?
- Do I understand the core concepts?

Your notes

Overview of skills and techniques

Introduction

Engagement and joining

Warmth, mutual respect, trust and motivation

Explaining why things are done

Children and young people present and talking

Families helping families: decentralising the leader's self

Matchmaking

Role reversal

Speedy interview format

Multi-positionality

The mentalizing loop

Goldfish Bowl

Flashlight

Yellow, red and green

Certificates and other documents

Deconstructing problematic behaviours

Summary

Introduction

Parents attending multi-family groups in school can be wary of feeling that they are being treated as either 'patients' or failed parents. The primary reason for attending a group in school is to be a parent helping their child be more successful at school. The notion of success varies from family to family and ranges from the child or young person needing to become happier and less anxious, to stop behaving 'badly' or start better attending, through to being able to achieve more academically.

The groups are located in school to help make the multi-family group approach accessible for more children and families. The school context sets expectations for the treatment methodology. This is so that practice is consistent with the aims and objectives of a school: that children should be in a good enough state of emotional wellbeing to learn and achieve to the best of their ability.

Skills and techniques that the family group specialist may have learnt through their mental health, family systemic or mentalization-based education or training may need to be adapted to fit this context. The school partner can be extremely helpful in guiding the family group specialist in what techniques are likely to fit well in a school environment.

Engagement and joining

The multi-family group needs to be described to school staff as an intervention that is likely to solve some of their more intractable problems. Presenting qualitative and quantitative data evidencing previous effectiveness in bringing about change helps. First-hand accounts from parents, children and young people of what the group has done for them is always compelling. Parents, children and young people need to 'buy-in' to the group approach if they are going to be willing to attend. **The family group specialist and school partner need to use their presentation and organisational skills to take on this aspect of group functioning.** It is not enough to name a time and place for the group to run and hope that people will turn up: they won't.

Warmth, mutual respect, trust and motivation

Once the group is running, the family group specialist and school partner need to create a context that is characterised by warmth, mutual respect and challenge. They should aim to have parents, children and young people feel that their distress and isolation can be understood, able to be empathised with but capable of being changed for the better. Warmth and fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and developing trust are essential for group coherence but will not be sufficient without motivation.

All the children and parents should be encouraged to have an ambition for what they want to achieve through attending the group. As a head teacher who commissioned a family group for his school said:

It won't be sufficient if you run a group where everyone just becomes happier, we need the children and young people to leave in a better position to learn.

Explaining why things are done

Parents will want to know what activities are for:

I've come to this group so that my child can concentrate better in class, why are you asking me to switch to help someone else's child?

I don't see the point of all these activities, how are they helping my child do as he is told?

I think that all this talking is a waste of time, I was never expected to talk at school. Why can't they just be told to be quiet and get on with their work?

Parents will do things in the group if they believe they are good for their children more than if they think they themselves are the target of the activity.

The family group specialist and school partner should be ready to explain their thinking:

We are doing this is because if children are going to be successful in class, they need to be able to listen to the teacher, start to see things from their point of view and understand what they are being asked to do.

The teacher will want the children to know how to get on with each other in class so that they are aware of the impact that their behaviour has on others.

All the mentalizing activities are easily explained as being in support of the teaching and learning experience and general successful participation for the child or young person in school. From the adults' perspective, these mentalizing activities can be demonstrated to be good for helping parents become more familiar with the expectations and perspectives that the teachers will have in relation to their children.

Children and young people present and talking

The family group specialist and school partner should have good skills in enabling children to participate fully in all aspects of the group. A good school-based multi-family group has children's voices that are prominent. Even though they are the ones required to carry the flag for change in the family, there should be no sense of the parents 'doing change' to their children.

It can be that the school partner, by virtue of their usual role in school, is more comfortable with encouraging children's participation in activities and discussion and that the family group specialist may be more confident in talking with adults in therapeutic scenarios. Although this is not a universal, the skills and knowledge of each professional should create a rich combination that allows both adults, children and young people to get the most out of the group.

Families helping families: decentralising the leader's self

Each group leader should have the ability to be central so that they can actively lead and direct the group as it moves through its different phases. They need to be able to show authority, confidence, optimism, tolerance and forgiveness – all with good humour! In this way the families will feel securely held and encouraged to believe that the group has something to offer.

At the same time the group leaders need to develop the skill of decentralising themselves so that the group members can have opportunities to look to each other for new experiences and learning.

It is usual for both the family group specialist and school partner to find this the hardest multi-family group skill to acquire. If the leaders stay too central for too much of the time, the group will become overly compliant and little sustained change will result.

How to decentralise self in support of group cohesion
What do you do when a parent or child says they don't understand or aren't clear about what to do?

You could accept that you weren't clear enough and simply repeat the instruction. However, there could be a potential missed opportunity by taking this route. It may be that you have been very clear and that the 'non-understanding' is a repeating pattern which may be associated with any number of issues – lack of confidence, poor understanding of English, response to any voice of authority etc.

You could decentralise yourself to encourage someone else to repeat the instructions. This can offer the opportunity for the group leaders to observe the same words being said by someone else and thus to witness any difference that this creates in the group. The person who takes the chance to repeat the directions for the activity is 'promoted' within the group with the assumption that they have the competence and skills to carry out the task. This has benefits for this person and potentially gives the group a different perception of this person's resources.

Matchmaking

As a step on the way to becoming less central, the family group specialist and school partner should look for opportunities to connect members of the group with each other around specific issues or themes:

Didn't you say earlier that you were struggling with getting your daughter to get to bed on time? What was it you said you tried that worked?

Then encourage the two or three people to talk together about this item.

Wasn't there someone who said they had managed to help their child complete their homework and hand it in on time? How did you do it? What did your mum do or say that encouraged you to get it done?

Then set up a mini context that allows interested parties to explore mutual expertise and options.

Role reversal

Set up role plays of situations that represent realistic situations either in school or at home. It is always interesting to have children and young people play adults and vice versa. Children playing teachers as they attempt to teach a non-compliant or distressed pupil or student can feed useful discussion across the group. Similarly, parents role playing children who won't do as they are told with the children playing their parents always gives rich material for humour and reflection.

Speedy interview format

Speedy planning has been described earlier as a way of organising and energising a planning session (see page 31). The speedy interview format is a technique that can also be used in a number of situations in the group to good effect.

When a problem occurs in any phase of a group the family group specialist and school partner can quickly set up a speedy interviewing event.

Example 1 A parent says, 'I feel completely stuck and out of ideas about what I should do or say when my son comes home two hours later than we had agreed.'

The family group specialist and school partner can set up a speedy interview format with the parents sitting in the inner circle and the young people in the outer. The task is for the parents to consult each young person about what they might say or do in this situation. Each mini-consultation should last no more than two minutes before moving on round the circle.

Example 2 A young person says, 'I really hate that teacher, she's always picking on me.'

Set up a speedy interview format with the parents in the role of the interviewers, asking 'What could you think, say or do when you feel that someone is picking on you?'

There are very many speedy interview permutations the group leaders can come up with to help with rapid and immediate problem solving and to create multiple perspectives on reflection topics.

Multi-positionality

A major aim of a multi-family group is to connect families with families. It is the family group specialist and school partner's task to act as catalysts, making reactions and interactions possible that might otherwise not take place. To do this, the group leaders should take it in turns to step back, review how the group is functioning overall and notice which processes are becoming apparent.

The leader who is adopting this meta-position should then be free to move to making connections between families as common themes arise. As soon as families or their individual members have established some meaningful contact, the family group specialist should gradually leave so that they can continue talking with each other without needing professional presence. The family group specialist or school partner can then move on to mobilise and connect other families.



The five-step model

This is a basic systemic intervention technique, which lends itself to guiding interventions in the course of a multi-family group. It is a fitting tool when used during a session, with evolving intra- and interfamily interactions.

There are five separate but linked steps that the family group specialist takes to focus an intervention in the moment. These are:

1. Observing problematic interactions and communications
2. Checking perceptions
3. Inviting evaluation
4. Determining the wish to change
5. Encouraging experimentation and action

Step 1 The family group specialist describes what they believe to be an unusual or problematic intra- or interfamily interaction. (The family group specialist should emphasise that it is their own construction or punctuation, selected from a wide range of possible observations.) It needs to be non-blaming and as neutral as possible.

Step 2 The family group specialist checks their observation: 'Do you also see it this way – or am I way off the mark? How do you see this?' Because a family group specialist can never know in advance whether their observations are also shared by others, they need to check this. If family members do not recognise what the family group specialist is talking about, then it is best not to insist on the alleged accuracy, or otherwise, of observations but to

retract these: 'I probably got that wrong.' However, if the family agrees with the observational statement, it is time for the third step.

Step 3 Invite evaluation from the concerned family and its individual members: 'Are you happy that it is this way, or do you mind?' This question is meant to be open-ended and it allows each person to reply with 'yes' or 'no' and should then lead them to explain how they arrived at their respective positions. The family group specialist can explore in detail why specific answers have been given and how they connect, if at all.

Mostly, the response will be that other people share the observations and this allows proceeding to steps four and five. However, if the general answer is a wholehearted 'no' and the family group specialist still insists on pursuing their line of inquiry, then they are likely to meet a lot of resistance. For example, if parents say that they do not mind that their child continues to shout at their mother, the family group specialist can observe:

You say that you don't mind that Josh continues to shout – what might be the advantages and disadvantages of that? What do other people think?

At times this helps families to identify what is appropriate and what not – and what the implications of challenging a child or a parent are. The aim is always for the family group specialist and families to work together and if a family, or some of its members do not agree with the observations of the family group specialist, the latter needs to accept this. Family group specialists do well not to get caught up in a symmetrical escalation, but to stimulate reflective thinking instead:

What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages if he continues to shout at his mother? What would happen in the class? What might be the consequences? What do other families think?

In this way family members are encouraged to consider the pros and cons of action – or inaction.

Step 4 Invite family members to share their views about change: 'So, if you do not want things to continue in this way, how would you like it to be?' In the above example, parents may reply: 'Well, obviously, we want him to stop shouting!'

Step 5 Encourage family members to identify how to go about achieving this change: 'What would you have to say or do now to make it become the way you want it to be? What would be the first step?' Often families respond to this with some hesitation, inviting the family group specialist to provide the answers. The family group specialist can then continue, 'What is stopping you from doing what you think you should be doing? What is the first little thing you might need to do? Who else has some ideas?' This last question aims to draw in the expertise of other families.

This seemingly concrete and simple format for framing and intervening helps family group specialists to pinpoint and address emerging interactions in the here and now. Often families behave as if they have no ideas about what to do differently and they almost inevitably turn to the family group specialist for guidance and advice. They can see the family group specialist as an 'expert' and themselves as 'helpless'. Instead of merely answering questions put to them by families in a straightforward manner, the family group specialist can divert the action by referring to the expertise of other families and their resources, for example by asking circular questions.

The approach can be summarised as follows:

1. Observe and punctuate interactions and communications: *I notice you....*
2. Check perceptions: *Have I got that right – do you see it that way?*
3. Invite evaluation: *Do you like it that way?*
4. Determine wish to change: *How would you like it to be?*
5. Invite experimentation and action: *Why don't you try now?*

Or, in short: **OCECE**

Observe

Check

Evaluate

Consider change

Experiment

The five-step model does not always have to be a focus on problematic interactions and can be helpful in noticing and rewarding new or positive behaviours or emotions.

The mentalizing loop

While the five-step model can be used as a route map for devising interventions, it implies a linear progression of successive steps that lead to making changes in the here and now – perhaps prematurely so. By doing so, the model may not sufficiently allow the family group specialist's observations of family interaction to relate to the family members' underlying feeling states and related thoughts and may instead focus too much and too soon on changing behaviours. The mentalizing loop is a related framework for intervention but emphasises particularly the 'here and now' mentalizing and a process of continuous checking and reviewing. It is the recursive process of reviewing, leading to new observations, of explicit mentalizing of self and others leading to checking and newly observing, which is captured by the word 'loop'.

As in the five-step model, with the mentalizing loop the family group specialist observes and punctuates a specific interaction and then checks with all family members whether they can connect with it. If there is some acknowledgement between family members and they engage with the family group specialist's observation then the process of mentalizing the moment can begin.

The family group specialist models a mentalizing stance, showing respect for and curiosity about, the minds of others, thereby conveying that learning about how others are thinking and feeling is enlightening:

What do you think this is about? What do you imagine Josh is feeling that makes him behave like this and how does this affect others?

Maybe I've got it all wrong – what do you think Ms Jones?

I wonder, dad, what it feels like for you when Josh looks at his mum in this way?

If one could see thought bubbles come out of your partner's head, what might be in there about how she thinks Josh feels right now?

The invitation to undertake 'emotional brainstorming' encourages family members to express feelings, with the family group specialist then facilitating discussions between family members, rather than merely leaving the action between the family group specialist and individual members of the family:

Let me see if I got this right – are you saying that when your dad talks that it makes you feel a bit lost and you look at mum because she is worried? Do you think she is – or does anyone here have a different view? Can you all discuss this with each other?

To jump-start effective mentalizing by each member of the family, a whole range of different techniques can be employed. Overall, it is the family group specialist's task to slow down the interactions between family members, questioning or expressing a specific interest in exactly what each person is feeling as this interaction unfolds. The aim is to temporarily pause the flow of exchanges between family members and permit further reflections all round.

As the mentalizing process develops between people the family group specialist will attempt to help family members to generalise, moving away from discussing the specific interaction and to widen the perspective. This opens the loop by inviting family members to generalize and to come up with some more general observations and reflections on how similar interactional patterns tend to evolve spontaneously at home and what feeling states these elicit.

So, we saw that when dad talks, mum feels anxious and Josh picks this up...maybe this is the only time it ever happened, but maybe it is not... Can you talk together about whether you recognise this as something that happens at home or elsewhere.

What has been observed in the 'here and now' of the session is extrapolated into real life situations, in an attempt to identify and address typical problem situations. This leads to family discussions of problem-relevant situations but with the focus remaining on eliciting and highlighting emerging feeling states and how these express themselves in behaviours.

The family group specialist actively encourages family members to label their own feelings, to reflect on what that must be like for them:

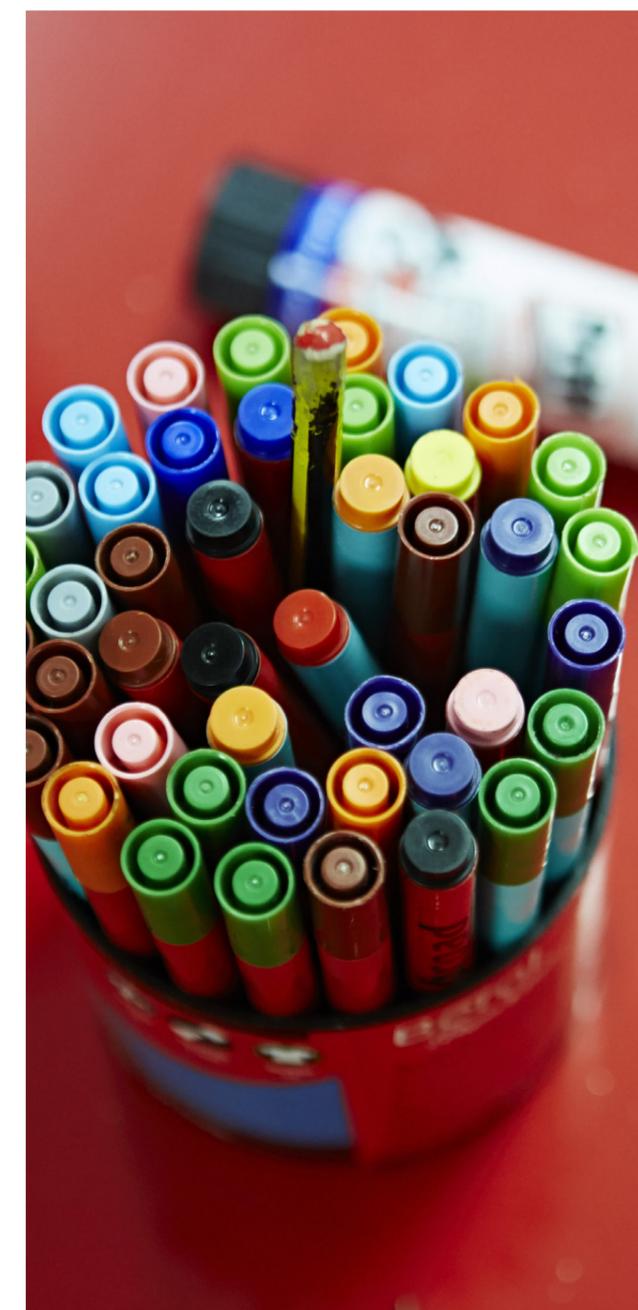
You may want to find out how feeling leads to doing; how a few snowflakes can launch an avalanche.

As befits a loop, it is essential to continuously review what this experience is and has been like for everyone to check the feeling states of each individual family member. This helps to evaluate how a new and emotionally charged experience has registered with the different individuals and it provides an opportunity to reflect together about what happened and the possible consequences:

What did you make of what happened? Can you talk together about what this was like for each of you? Are there any conclusions you can draw from this?

What do you think your child/parent was feeling when this happened? If you could step into his shoes at this moment, how do you think he is feeling right now? What would make things easier/harder for him?

The family group specialist will repeatedly consider the pros and cons of using the more action and change-oriented five-step model or the more reflective mentalizing loop during the family group.



Goldfish bowl

A considerable number of techniques and practices used in multi-family groups are derived from reflecting team techniques (Andersen 1987). These are based on the principle that an outside observing team sees and experiences things differently from those who are directly involved in the group process. In multi-family groups it is not only the family group specialist and school partner who have the potential for being a reflecting team, but also the other families and their members. The goldfish bowl technique uses an inner and outer circle. For example, teenagers (goldfish) can sit in an inner circle to discuss a specific theme, with the parents listening and observing this discussion.

After some time, there is a changeover, with the parents then sitting in the inner circle, reflecting on the discussion they had listened to and with the teenagers now assuming the outer circle listening position. At a later stage, the young people can return to the inner position, reflecting on the reflections of their parents about their discussion. It is also possible, for example, to get mothers to discuss an issue and for the fathers to be in an observing position and then to switch over. The goldfish bowl technique not only furthers interfamily interactions and makes people aware of the frequent circularity of interactions, but it also helps to emphasise the difference between thinking and doing.

Flashlight

This is a dedicated time slot during which action is temporarily suspended and time for reflection created. This implies a rapid context shift, from the heat of action to the relative coolness of reflection. The family group specialist can say: 'It's getting pretty hot here – a lot of noise, a lot of conflict. I think we should have a brief pause right away, to sit down and think about what's been happening just now.' Flashlight is a form of 'taking the temperature', not only of the whole group but also of its individual members. All other actions are frozen for a short while to create a reflective space.

Yellow, red and green

Just as yellow and red cards are issued by the referee in football matches for fouls or unsporting behaviour, coloured cards can also serve as useful signals during multi-family work.

At certain times, and when in the course of group work specific issues have been raised, yellow and red cards can be given to one member of the group, a child or a parent, who is for a short time a 'referee', flagging up violations of established group rules. There may also be two assistant referees who the referee can consult if in doubt.

For example, if specific interactions have been agreed by the group as being problematic, like swearing, or talking too long, or a child being disruptive – the referee can raise a yellow card as a first warning and a red card the second time around. The consequences of being shown a red card are then discussed between families, as well as whether the 'foul' deserved such severe punishment. Green cards can be held up when a family or an individual group member is performing well.

Certificates and other documents

Certificates and other documents can be created as evidence of achievements made during the multi-family group. These public acknowledgments of success can be very powerful for children, young people and their families who may not have previously experienced many recognitions or celebrations of accomplishment.

We have found it to be helpful to support and encourage families to produce their own photo album record of their experiences during their time attending the multi-family group. They can be formally handed over at a leaving celebration. We know they have been highly prized and on occasion, much referred to after graduation from the group.

Deconstructing problematic behaviours

This technique is useful for addressing behaviours or interactions which are perceived as being problematic by families themselves, like distractibility, hyperactivity, rudeness, aggression, sadness etc. For example, if one or more children are said by their parents to have been behaving in hyperactive ways, the family group specialist can suggest the following task:

You have said that Mia and Calvin have been very hyperactive this morning. Why are children hyperactive? What might the reasons for this be? We would like you to form subgroups of four to six people in working parties, whose task is to list and discuss all the different reasons why you think children are hyperactive. You have about 15 minutes for this and we will then exchange the different ideas that have come up in your groups.

Once the groups have exchanged their ideas – and these have been listed on a flip chart, each subgroup can be reconvened, now with the task of designing interventions or responses to specific forms of hyperactivity.

Actions and behaviours can also be deconstructed by looking deliberately for, or attributing, the positive intentions that might have led to these behaviours.

For example, when a family member shouts at another member, his intention might be to:

- Discharge energy
- Be heard and recognised
- Defend a territory

However, caution needs to be exercised as such intentions may not justify the actions and negative intentions may also need to be explored.

Let's take this example, of a child being hyperactive because he is bored. How can or should parents respond to this? What about the teacher? Can each group develop some ideas – and then also think of how to manage the other forms of being hyperactive that the groups have identified?

Summary

Key ideas

- Skills and techniques that the family group specialist may have learnt in their other training may need to be adapted
- Presentation skills are key – both to setting up in schools and in attracting and engaging members
- While group leaders need to be central to coordinate the group, they must also learn to decentralise themselves to encourage families to learn from each other
- Group leaders should shut off their own need to problem-solve and instead enable others to do so
- It is important to work from the feedback rather than having too rigid an agenda
- A good multi-family group is one in which children's voices are prominent
- Questioning enables all members to make connections and share experiences
- Group leaders need to stay aware of not being disorganised by any one family in the room

Core concepts

- Decentralising self
- Curiosity
- Neutrality
- Mentalizing
- Multi-positionality

Checklist

- Did you avoid stepping into a vacant parental role?
- Did you avoid accepting the locus of control, while also not being afraid to be assertive?
- Were you able to illicit an observation from a family member?
- Did you connect discussions back to school requirements?
- Did you summarise discussions and observations, and coordinate and collect ideas and advice?
- Did you notice change or celebrate success?
- Could you explain to parents why things were done?
- Did you look for connections between families and their situations?
- Did you take it in turns with the other group leader to step back and look at how the group was working?

Your notes

Special issues

Participation of family members

Managing challenging situations

Bad language and swearing

Verbal abuse and physical violence

Confidentiality

Language barriers and interpreters

Participation of family members

Children cannot participate in the family group programme on their own. One parent accompanying their child is most usual although sometimes two parents might attend, and this is always welcome. If, however, neither is available, another important family member, for example an aunt or uncle, adult sibling or grandparent, is welcome to attend instead. If there is a group member who does not want to join in an activity, it can be suggested that they watch and join in later if they change their mind.

Contra-indications

- ✗ Individual adults (parents or other adult carers) who present with major and acute psychiatric conditions should not participate in the family group or class because of the serious disruption they can cause to the group while being unwell.
- ✗ Another contra-indication is current and ongoing substance misuse and intoxication. Adults who are intoxicated should not be allowed to participate in the family group or class on that day.
- ✗ Adults and teenagers who are suspected or convicted sexual abusers must not participate in family group or family class, as they present a significant risk to the children of other families.
- ? Divorced and separated parents (or other significant carers) can attend together. However, if there is a risk of violence between them during family group or class attendance, or if there are court orders in place which stipulate them not being in each other's presence, then this constitutes a contra-indication to them jointly taking part in the group.
- ? There are families who refuse to take part in a family group or class. While this is not unusual at the outset, given that sharing experiences with strangers can feel off-putting and anxiety provoking, most families will eventually engage in the process.



Managing challenging situations

If interactions between children and parents take place that are felt to be harmful to the child, the family group specialist or school professional should take responsibility to intervene to stop them happening.

This is based on the principle that safeguarding and child protection take priority over therapeutic intervention.

When members of one family behave aggressively or abusively towards other members of their own or another family, this needs to be dealt with immediately. However, the way in which this is done varies according to the form of aggression or abuse. **For example, no form of physical chastisement or punishment (hitting, or what is euphemistically termed 'smacking' or 'slapping') is allowed in schools. If it occurs, the family group specialist or school partner must stop it immediately.**

If it is the first time a parent resorts to this behaviour, then it initially is best to discuss the issue in a parents' group to determine what has happened, what the effects of physical chastisement are on children or vulnerable adults, and what the consequences should be if it occurs again.

Making it an issue for the group in the first instance, instead of excluding the parent from further involvement, helps all group participants address this probably all-too-familiar issue, reflect on it and get the group and its individual members to take a position and responsibility

If such events happen during a group in school, it is the responsibility of both the family group specialist and the school partner to liaise and coordinate closely with the school's designated safeguarding lead member of staff.

Bad language and swearing

Bad language can happen in the family group with some families. Suppressing or excluding those displaying such behaviours is one solution and can help to provide a sanitised and orderly setting. This can also run the risk of missing the chance of working with what can be common and familiar experiences for some of the families. Therefore, having these situations enacted in the family group can allow the possibility of helping to change how people communicate with each other. However, this can at times be a very complicated path to negotiate, as not raising and challenging unacceptable communications or behaviours may be constructed by families as professionals tolerating or indeed welcoming these.

Verbal abuse and physical violence

All agencies and institutions have their own specific rules and regulations, some of which are written down and explicitly stated, whereas others are not. These can cover a whole range of issues, including confidentiality, equal opportunities, anti-discriminatory practices, as well as how to deal with threats of verbal or physical violence, the use of drugs and alcohol on the premises and using physical chastisement. The family group specialist and school partner will also be guided by the rules and codes of ethics their own professional organisations have laid down. There may be a disparity between institution-specific rules and the rules established in the course of family group or class. It lends itself to co-constructing or co-developing the rules and regulations that should govern the group's functioning.

Instead of presenting families with a barrage of 'dos and don'ts' at the start of the group, participants are asked: 'What do you think should be the ground rules for the group?'

This is not a one-off question but should open up an ongoing discussion, with 'old' rules being questioned and different ones introduced as new situations arise and new experiences are made. As a core component and aim of a family group is for individuals to use their own resources, their ideas on what the rules should be are of major importance.

The group can also discuss how to reinforce the ground rules. There are clearly quite a few potential issues that one could 'legislate' about and if families do not raise these, the group leaders may ask whether some of the following might be relevant:

- Use of mobile phones and computer games
- Cleanliness and tidiness – that is, who clears up whose mess?
- Racist, sexist and other discriminatory remarks and behaviours
- Responsibility for own child's behaviours

- Attendance of family friends or acquaintances
- Health and safety issues
- Talking and listening rules

If any of these issues are not suggested by the families themselves, the family group specialist and school partner can flag up those they regard as important by asking: 'Do you think we need to think about what happens if...?' They may also encourage discussions on any sanctions if specific rule-breaking are broken and whether sanctions for first-time round should be different for rule-breaking on subsequent occasions.

Involving the families in devising rules and sanctions helps group members experience their own sense of agency. It is extremely rare that the rules made are in direct conflict with institutional rules, but if this is the case, the family group specialist and school partner can point out the arising dilemma and invite families to help resolve it.

Confidentiality

In a multi-family group, confidentiality issues need to be addressed as the building of mutual trust is essential for the sharing of sensitive personal information between families and their individual members.

A rule that may need to be agreed at the outset is that nobody should talk about anything they do not want to talk about in the group and that each person is responsible for what personal information they disclose to members of other families.

The family group specialist and school partner may also raise the question of whether all group members should sign a piece of paper, committing them not to talk about the group outside of the meetings. Confidentiality can be an issue for families who have known each other before starting in family group or who live in the same neighbourhood or small and tight-knit communities where 'everybody knows everybody' and acute anxieties arise about gossiping.

Children also need to be involved in these discussions, with their parents, as confidentiality issues frequently mirror issues to do with what should be kept in the family, what can be shared with others – and what cannot. Remind participants about the promise of confidentiality.

To feel secure is important at the start of the group, and, when a new member joins, the issue of confidentiality must be raised again and clarified. It is vital that if children and parents are to open to new ideas and talk about beliefs and behaviours they will need to be assured that their issues and personal business are respected and not gossiped about either in the school or in the community. Children can, for example, be invited to think about what they themselves would want their friends in school to know about what goes on in family group and about their own family.

Exploring with a family or an individual member why certain pieces of information cannot or must not be disclosed to others may help to clarify matters for all concerned. **The importance of safeguarding children must be very clear to all participants. There should be no possible doubt that if any information comes to light that indicates a child or adult is at risk the appropriate procedures will be carried out to ensure that individual's safety.**



Language barriers and interpreters

Working with groups of families who do not speak the country's dominant language requires a lot of patience and tolerance on everybody's part. Every word and sentence spoken by family members may need to be translated backwards and forwards into each of the languages represented across the families attending the group. For this to work, high levels of respect and self-discipline are required, as everyone has to wait until the interpreters have finished their translation.

Most families find this very laborious at the beginning, as it slows down the group process, and it is not at all uncommon that, for example in the British context, English speakers challenge 'foreign' families openly and question adults: 'Why have you still not learned to speak English? How long have you been here?'

It is only over time that the 'otherness' of 'foreigners' becomes intriguing, and that English-speaking families begin to tune into the different sounds and the related experiences and cultural values. It is generally the case that over time almost all families acquaint each other with 'the other' and say they feel enriched by the cultural diversity they have encountered.

A multi-family exercise, 'Tower of Babel' can help to facilitate this process. Here everyone, including English speakers, is asked to talk in some ancient and now utterly incomprehensible fantasy language. The aim is to help people make themselves understood by everybody participating in the group. A specific task is set, such as discussing going to the supermarket to do the shopping, which has to be carried out without using English or any other dominant or recognisable language.

Some family members can be promoted to 'ad hoc interpreters' and guess what specific communications mean. The person or persons whose utterances have been 'translated' can non-verbally signal whether this translation is correct or not.

The exercise can be followed by a discussion involving the whole group, now with the assistance of professional interpreters if needed, to compare their experiences. This can be related to the different families' positions, not only in the group, but also in society or when visiting a country where they cannot speak the language.

Interpreters are essential and help family members to communicate with each other during the group. The group leaders should take care to encourage family members, using an interpreter, to interact with other members of the group so that they do not become isolated through a potentially exclusive interpreter-client relationship.

During reflections meetings, the interpreter must provide a simultaneous translation of the group discussion. The often lively exchanges mean this is no easy task. It requires patience all round and conversations frequently need to be put 'on pause'. Usually other families are patient and understanding. It can be that a parent feels temporarily excluded from comprehending what is going on while their child has already fully understood. The family group specialist needs to be aware of that dynamic and include the parent where possible.

When there is another parent or family who also speaks the same foreign language is present in a group, using them rather than the professional interpreter can be preferable as it allows significant cross-family connection.

In practice, interpreters can be asked to be present for specific discussion groups, perhaps a planning or reflections phase of the group, or when discussing what people made of a specific exercise.

Interpreters may be requested to assume a participant observer position, in some physical distance from their family. Subsequently they can then provide their ideas and perspectives, not only on their family but also on others, for the benefit of all members of the multi-family group.

When families meet other families from different cultures and social backgrounds, this can provoke anxieties, as well as fears of 'the other', with prejudices becoming increasingly overt and painful.

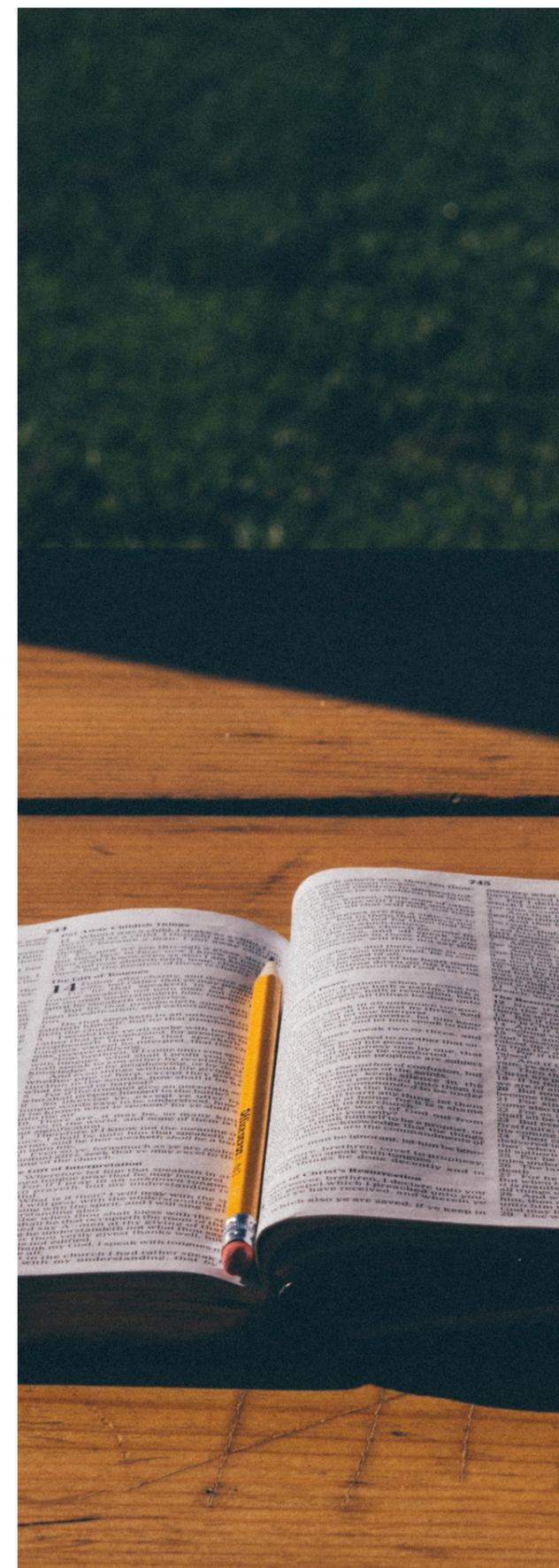
Intercultural work has a huge potential to help families develop respect for difference.

Different skin colour, unfamiliar languages or dialects, different gestures and mimics, 'foreign' values and beliefs, unusual food and smells – all these together can provoke anxiety, distance and rejection.

Despite these initial difficulties during the formation of a group, it has been found that intercultural work has a huge potential for families to face the 'other' and the 'alien' and to develop respect for difference.

A regular and very helpful group activity is to encourage families to prepare and cook a meal together. Everyone contributes foods and recipes from their countries of origin and they also begin to talk about stories from their own individual perspectives.

Gradually this leads to the exploration of difference and in this way the family group can become a form of informal anti-racist or anti-prejudice experience, allowing families to get closer to previously unfamiliar worlds and cultures.



Summary

Key ideas

- The importance of safeguarding must be clear to all participants
- There are some situations in which certain family members must not participate in the multi-family group
- Families should be involved in devising 'ground rules', both at the outset and throughout the life of the group
- The commitment to confidentiality should be raised at the start of the group and with all new members
- Acts of aggression and abuse must be dealt with immediately
- If aggressive or abusive behaviour happens in school during a group, the family group specialist and the school partner are responsible for liaising with the school's designated safeguarding lead
- There are ways to help cohere the group when members are from different ethnic backgrounds and some may not speak the dominant language

Core concepts

- Safeguarding
- Confidentiality
- Language barriers

Checklist

- Did you ask families to suggest ground rules for the group?
- Do all participants understand the importance of safeguarding and that information suggesting a child or adult is at risk will be acted on?
- Have you explained the need for confidentiality and re-explained this if a new member has joined?
- Do you understand your responsibilities as a group leader when it comes to dealing with aggressive or abusive behaviour in the group in school?
- If your group includes non-English speakers, have you tried using exercises to help group integration.

Your notes

Impact, evaluation and evidencing change

Evidence for multi-family groups in schools

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families research programme

Evidence for multi-family groups in schools

The multi-family group approach has been successfully applied in different settings and for a considerable range of presentations and disorders (Asen & Scholz 2010). Many different studies have proved its effectiveness and efficacy, as summarised by Cook-Darzens et al. (2018) and Gelin et al. (2018).

Morris et al. 2014 assessed the outcomes and effectiveness of the multi-family group in education approach. The results are statistically significant and evidence behavioural change, sustained over a 12-month period. The approach has been replicated in Cambridge schools, originally in two secondary schools. Data analysis independently carried out by Cambridge University showed that:

'The multi-family group intervention led to significant improvements in functioning, behaviour and overall symptoms demonstrated in both schools and by all raters, parents, students, teachers and therapist.'

There have also been many other local evaluations that have consistently reported the positive impact of the multi-family groups in school approach.

Other local evaluations have consistently reported the positive impact of the multi-family groups in school approach, as have evaluations from Denmark, Germany and across Scandinavia, where many schools have successfully adopted the approach.

However, despite these good findings there is a need to implement research that is both quantitative and qualitative on a more systematic basis. As the approach is innovative in relation to the joint working between mental health-oriented and school-based professionals and is new practice as far as schools are concerned, there is a need to rigorously evidence the impact and outcomes of the delivery.

From a school's perspective, the impact desired is usually defined in terms of improved behaviour, learning performance and attendance for the child or young person.

From a mental health perspective, the aim is to show improved mental health and wellbeing primarily for the child but also for the other family members attending the groups.

Without reliable evidence, head teachers and other commissioners are less likely to be willing to fund a programme in their schools or local areas.

On the other hand, it is important to remember that the family groups are designed to engage children, young people and their families in effective help in ways that will feel tolerable for the maximum number of those in need. Therefore it is critical to decide which research measures are used and how they are presented.

School-focused measures are easiest to implement as parents will readily accept that gathering information about how their child's performance at school has changed is sensible and appropriate.

Mental health measures can be trickier as some use language and mental health diagnostic terms that some parents feel are off-putting.

Many parents are extremely uncomfortable with the idea that their children might be defined as having mental health difficulties. We have encountered this even in the Pears Family School, where all the children's difficulties are marked and complex.

Parents have expressed concern that they don't want their children to have a mental health label because of the fear of stigma attaching to them.

This is unfortunate in societal terms but until things improve across the wider population we are faced with choosing measurers that will give maximum information with minimal risk of alienating families.

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families research programme

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families is implementing a programme of research into the effectiveness of the multi-family groups in schools' approach.

A research design has been developed to evaluate the impact of the intervention on the child, their parent(s) and the teachers using a range of measures.

The research protocol is using a mixed methods design including quantitative and qualitative measures.

The key research questions include:

- What is the impact of the multi-family groups in schools' intervention on pupils' mental wellbeing, peer relationships, attendance, and attainment?
- What is the impact of the multi-family groups in schools' intervention on parents' mental wellbeing?
- What are the perceived benefits of the multi-family groups in schools' intervention to pupils, teachers and parents?
- Have parents and/or teachers seen the child using any of the multi-family groups in schools' skills?
- Have there been any changes in teachers' confidence/awareness of mental health issues?

Schools will be asked to provide pre- and post-intervention data for the evaluation. Comparisons will be made between pre- and post- intervention scores on the child's self-report, the parent's report and the teacher or school report.

Child self-report:

- Child's mental health will be measured with the 'Strengths and difficulties questionnaire' and 'Me and my school questionnaire'
- Family connection will be measured with the subscale of the 'Student resilience questionnaire'

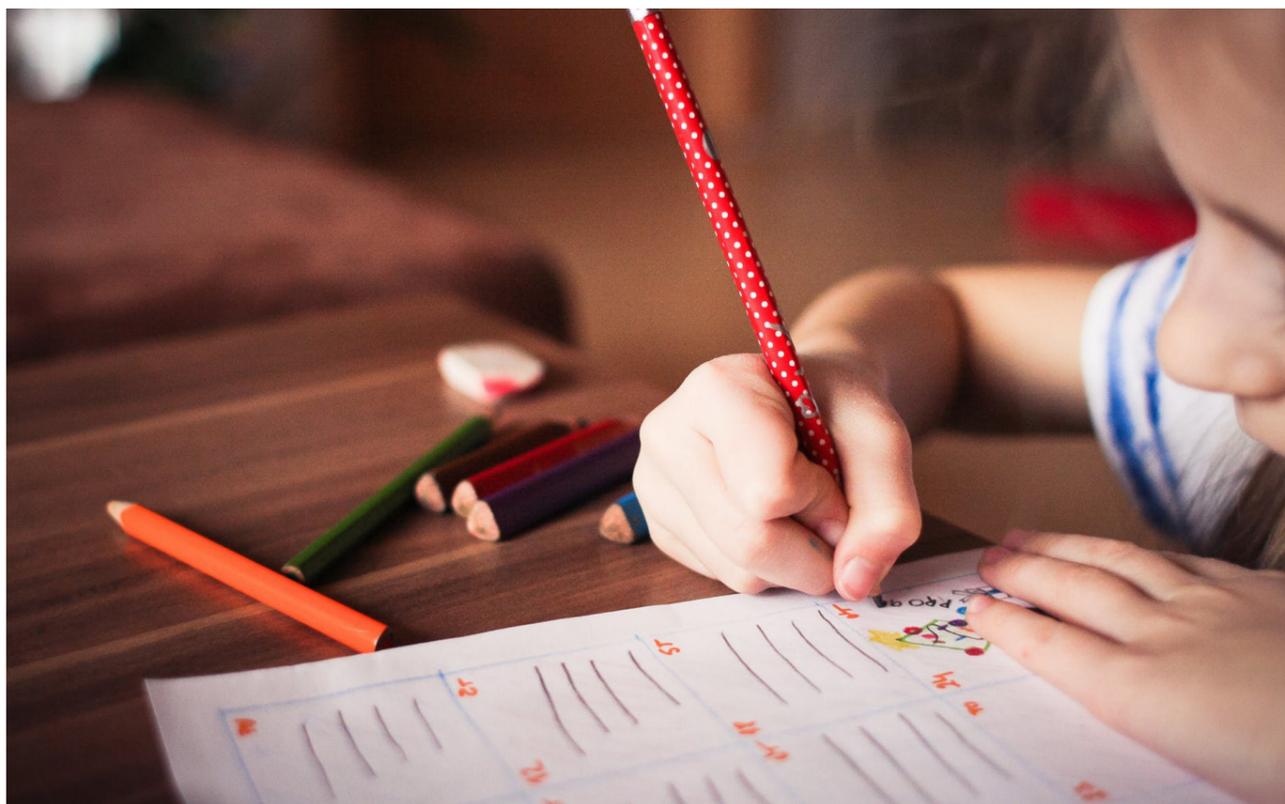
Parent report:

- Parents will report on children's mental health by completing the 'Strengths and difficulties questionnaire'
- They will also report on their relationship with their child by completing the 'Parenting stress index – short form'

Teacher/school report:

- Teachers will report on children's mental health by completing the 'Strengths and difficulties questionnaire'
- Teachers will provide attendance rates and report on academic achievement via curriculum levels from maths, English and science.
- Schools will provide the special education status of the child, whether the child is eligible for free school meals, the ethnicity of the child and whether English is the child's second language.
- Activity data from number of sessions and target data that has been already collected will be used.

We recommend using a similar research protocol wherever new programmes are implemented so that comparative data can be gathered across many sites and situations.



Summary

Key ideas

- There is evidence demonstrating the success of multi-family groups in schools
- Evidence is needed to encourage funding for continued or new multi-family groups in schools
- When setting up and leading a multi-family group, it is important to rigorously document the group's outcomes and impact:
- School perspective: improved behaviour, learning performance and attendance
- Mental health perspective: improved mental health and wellbeing for the child and other family members attending the groups
- It is important to consider which research measures will be used and how they will be presented
- The Anna Freud Centre is implementing a programme of research into the effectiveness of multi-family groups in schools

Core concepts

- Evidence
- Impact
- Presentation

Further reading

- Asen & Scholz (2010)
- Cook-Darzens et al. (2018)
- Gelin et al. (2018)
- Morris et al. (2014)

Your notes

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