



Brief coaching with children and young people

a solution-focused approach

Denise Yusuf describes the brief solution-focused method of coaching and explains why it is so effective when applied to work with children and young people.

The solution-focused (SF) approach to coaching, counselling and therapy involves a different focus from the traditional preoccupation of therapist practitioners. This attention switch was radical in the mid-1980s when Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg developed a whole new approach called solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) at their Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee. Up until then most traditional approaches to counselling and therapy had been problem focused, with the practitioner preoccupied with trying to find out the exact aetiology of the problem, what it looked like, where it came from, its exact causes and, later, how it functioned and what its purpose was. This then allowed for a treatment plan to be designed or an intervention to be constructed, or for a potential solution to be developed with the client. Paying attention to the problem in these ways continues to be an important component in many counselling and therapy approaches and in some coaching models. Coaches might be reluctant to see themselves as problem focused but this often manifests itself in their interest in what gets in the way of change, what appears to be blocking progress, and how clients can overcome these barriers.¹

At the heart of the solution-focused approach, whether it is used in a counselling, therapy or coaching context, is a different way of paying attention to the problems clients bring. It is an invitation to clients to begin to describe their lives in a particular way. Steve de Shazer described it as moving out of *problem* talk and into *change* talk. What he noticed about clients as they began to engage in change talk was that they were more likely to change, and to change more quickly. More recently some SF practitioners see this process of change as happening in the conversation; clients describe what they want to have

happening in their lives (rather than what they don't want to have happening), and the descriptive process – the words used, the way of talking about themselves and the pictures they develop of themselves – helps them start to experience this change in the session. This change process moves out of the sessions too. When we support clients in describing the futures they want to build and what they are already doing that fits with those futures, we repeatedly see that, outside the sessions, they find their own ways of dealing with the problems they encounter.

There are five key characteristics of this change talk.

1 A future focus: that is, a focus on how people want their lives to be rather than the problems they have in their lives. This might be something 'instead' – for example, to have more confidence rather than less anxiety – or it might be something apparently (to the coach) unrelated to what brought the client into the session.

2 A focus on what works and doing more of this: SF practitioners help clients to notice 'exceptions' to problems and 'instances' of success in how they want their lives to be.²

3 An asset-based conversation: looking out for and making space for the strengths, skills and special resources and qualities the client brings.

4 The highlighting of progress: asking questions that make progress visible to the client, exploring it and the difference it makes.

5 The co-construction, with the client, of an evidence-based expectation of a good outcome: the evidence comes through many of the above enquiries and descriptions.

A solution focus with children and young people

The solution-focused approach seems to be one that children and young people find easy to access, non-stigmatising and useful. In my work with children and young people I have found the following to be some of the key factors in this.

1 Children and young people are responsive to and therefore able to engage in this way of talking. Children and young people do not generally respond well to conversations in which 'problem talk' is dominant. It can be uncomfortable, restrictive or just uninteresting to them, especially if an adult is identifying the problems. However talking about strengths and resources, about the future and about small successes is a different way of talking that also, as Therese Steiner says, connects with how children think and see the world: 'After all, the solution-focused approach fits very well with the way children think about and view the world. I have never met a child who liked to talk about problems. When you observe small children, how they solve little everyday problems goes along the predictable pattern of trial and error. They always look ahead, and they almost never sit down and analyse the difficulties in order to come up with a solution. The longer I thought about these characteristics, the more it became clear to me that SFBT paralleled a child's way of being in the world.'³

2 The approach fosters a sense of motivation and self-efficacy in the child or young person. The SF approach centralises the child's best hopes for the coaching (although it may involve 'twin tracking' others' hopes for them at the same time), which increases their motivation to work on change. They are able to talk about what they want and recognise small successes and progress, which helps them to experience a sense of autonomy and agency. This often generates positive feelings and optimism about other things they might want to do differently and a sense of resilience about dealing with setbacks, which inevitably occur.

3 Children and young people like the pace and brevity of the approach. Many young people do not want to spend a lot of their time talking to

adults, even when materials and activities are introduced by the practitioner.⁴ However an SF session can be completed in under 30 minutes and often only one, two or three sessions are needed. This tends to suit younger people and is a better fit for some of the environments in which children and young people are seen – for example, in schools or colleges, where not much time can be spared for sessions outside lessons.

4 The SF approach is very focused. It takes nothing for granted, least of all what a child means or what is meaningful to the child or young person. The SF practitioner will ask them what being more confident or working harder will look like for them and will take time to help them build up a detailed picture. It is the focus on this very personal landscape, connected to their own feelings, values and desires, that helps the young person to engage in the process of change.

5 The SF approach enables the young person to build new stories of self. Children and young people often experience a sense of flux with their identity, and stories of deficit and difficulty can sometimes take hold that can lead to more difficulties. For example, a child may think they are not brave, that they're no good at making friends, or that other people don't like them or they aren't clever or they have anger issues. They then begin to notice the evidence that supports these deficit stories, which will continue to restrict and limit them. The SF practitioner helps children to break out of this cycle by inviting them to pay attention to different things, to small signs and details that can be the foundations for new stories about themselves that can be full of assets and possibilities.

Key techniques

There are a number of key SF techniques or approaches that work particularly well with children and young people. I highlight just three here.

Scales

'On a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 represents all you hope to achieve from coaching sessions and 1 is

the opposite, where would you say you are at the moment?'

Children and young people are happy to give answers to scaling questions. The scale often fits the need for brevity and economy in a session, puts the child clearly in control of how they are seeing their situation and, perhaps most importantly, it also allows the practitioner to be in a conversation with a young person about anything without having to know everything.

Scaling questions invite the child to talk about what is going well and the many exceptions and instances they may have forgotten to notice, as well as small signs of progress. They can be a visual, physical and fun part of the process. I like to construct scales with children from different things that might specifically appeal to that child: for example, different favourite items such as cars, animals or foods. I like to challenge the idea that progress is uphill or tough by constructing scales of slides, ski slopes or fast-flowing rivers. Sometimes the child and I will construct a scale across the floor so that the child can physically move along it. For both children and young people I like to keep the top end of the scale, the child's best hopes, as a cluster of sparkling possibilities, and the bottom of the scale as simply 'the opposite'. This gives many more opportunities for small signs of progress to be noticed rather than tying progress down too tightly. Subscales and multiple scales can also be used, breaking down what the child wants to see into different components or dealing with a multiplicity of issues without the need for the child to prioritise them. Scales are both flexible and precise in how they can measure and highlight progress or potential progress. For example, the practitioner can ask scaling questions about how things have been going in the last few weeks, the last week or even yesterday or today. Scales about the child's confidence in progress, commitment to making progress or significant others' confidence in the child's progress can all be constructed and explored with questions such as: 'How come you are so confident? What do you know about yourself that tells you you can be that confident?'

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Scales are a wonderful tool for helping children and young people to begin to see that change is happening for them in the smallest ways and that they are not stuck in situations or ways of being that don't work for them or cause them distress. This gives them the confidence to see and do more. The practitioner remains curious but not invested; they do not cheer the child on or interpret the meanings of the number (or other values) of the scale. They use 'noticing' terminology ('What will you notice as you begin to move towards the six?') rather than pushing the child in any way ('How will you get to the six?'). This frees the young person from constraints and expectations and allows them to find their own way.

Lists

Children and young people respond very positively to making lists. Lists can be made on paper, on wall charts, on pre-made list sheets,

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in straight lines or circles, on cards and in many other creative ways. If the practitioner asks for one strength or skill or two things that have been better, it can seem onerous or difficult to the child to find an answer, or they may feel they have to find the 'right' answer. However if they are asked for 10 or 20 things that they have noticed, this seems to make it easier to respond, perhaps because it becomes apparent to the child that they no longer need to decide what to include and can include everything. The child will then feel more confident in answering. The more answers there are, the more likely it will seem to the child or young person that the change is a solid part of their repertoire and not just something that happened by luck. The longer the list, the more it will seem acceptable to the child to take their time in finding an answer, and it is the answers that don't just spring to mind that can potentially be most useful to the child.

A range of questions can be used to help explore and create a list. As well as asking what the young person has noticed, the practitioner can ask what others have noticed, and in what different contexts (home, school, classroom, playground etc) things have been noticed. The practitioner can also unpack one answer to help the child discover many more. For example, the child may say: 'I have been a good friend this week,' and the practitioner can then ask: 'Tell me five things you have done that have made you a good friend this week.'

Making lists helps children to add breadth and depth to their noticing of resources and change in a fun way; they find more and what they find resonates and stays with them.

Other person perspective questions

In the SF approach the perspective of others - how they respond to the client and how the client then responds to them - is an important component of exploring a client's preferred future. This relational and interactive aspect embeds the wished-for future into the client's everyday life.

Children and young people sometimes find it easier to think about things from another person's perspective rather than their own ('What will you be doing differently in class?' 'Don't know.' 'What will your teacher see?' 'I'll have my head down.').

Perhaps this is because so much of their world is necessarily driven by the adults around them. Significant others (friends, parents, siblings, teachers etc) can all be invited into the session through the young person's eyes. This can sometimes provide a safe or creative distance for the child to observe themselves and their potential or it can just broaden the possibilities and options for change and noticing change. This does not require the practitioner to add any details or ideas but it is a way of asking questions that helps the child to generate more ideas, observations and thoughts of their own. Sometimes children and young people are willing to do some acting, and the practitioner can then ask them to 'be' the other person for a minute, rather than speak for that person, and interview them in that role. This can produce even more powerful ideas and possibilities.

The challenge for coaches

Many coaching approaches identify themselves as solution focused because of their focus on the future, their emphasis on skills and resources and their interest in solutions, not problems. However, while these are characteristics of a SF approach they do not in themselves constitute the SF approach. One of the key challenges I see for coaches who want to use the SF approach is that it does not involve setting goals with or for the client; instead it invites a description of the client's best hopes and preferred future. It does not use action plans to 'nail down' these goals; instead it trusts the client to do whatever is right for them, and it sees the descriptions as indicative rather than contractual. Coaches who want to use the SF approach will need to step away from pushing the client towards change or getting them to do something and instead move towards inviting the client into a conversation of describing, noticing, highlighting and ultimately trusting them to know what is best for them. Perhaps this is the greatest challenge when working with children and young people, when we often believe we know what is best for them. However, standing back and remaining curious rather than becoming invested in any particular outcome allows the child or young person the space and opportunity to find the right ways to make the right changes for themselves.

References

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