

The Solutions Focused coach – a framework for support

Introduction

Background:

There is growing use of the breakthrough Solutions Focused approach to strengthening children and young peoples' social learning and wellbeing locally, nationally and internationally. Developed initially as Solution Focused Brief Therapy family in the 1980s, Solutions Focused coaching focuses on students' strengths, resources and self-motivation to make their lives better. In schools, this distinctive type of coaching minimises a need for staff to be experts in everything about the psychology of behavior, mental illness and failure to thrive. Working with the whole person as a member of a community instead of the analytical route, the SF coach straight on with the job of supporting the client in finding solutions to complex problems.

The shift in mindset that underpins the practical action is about seeing the student as the active agent in forging their own future, rather than as the passive recipient of instructions about how to do better.

In Lincolnshire Solutions Focused coaches are being trained as part of Lincolnshire's Ladder of Inclusion, promoting wellbeing and preventing exclusion across the county. In Wales the Solutions Focused approach is broadening the work of primary mental health workers and organisation working in South Wales to support homeless people. Nationally, the Solutions Focused approach is being taken by mental health workers and homeless charities, 'Signs of Safety' and the NSPCC, among many other applications. These are clear signs of the development of SF strength focused language in how we go about supporting children and young people who experience distress and challenges in their lives.

Key ideas; the child's voice, inclusion, student participation, agency, growth mindset, strengths based teaching and learning, rapid change, tracking and reviewing, inquiry and learning, strengthening behaviour policy, professional development.

The Solutions Focused coaching course, support and supervision is provided by:

Dr. Geoff James, Educational consultant, Ph.D. [Education], M.A. [Education], B.Sc. [Hons]; PGCE; Adv. Dip.Sp.Ed Needs; Certificate in Solutions Focused Brief Therapy, Solutions Focused supervision. New book *'Transforming behaviour in the classroom – a solution focused guide for new teachers.'* Geoffrey James: Sage 2016 (Available on Amazon).

What are the intended outcomes of Solutions Focused coaching?

Preventing exclusion, improving behaviour, supporting learning, increasing engagement and wellbeing, building strengths in reflection (metacognition) and resilience. Increasing the capacity of school pastoral staff and teachers with pastoral responsibilities to support students over the full range of difficulties they might experience when established strategies fail to ensure inclusion.

Why introduce Solutions Focused coaching for students at high risk of exclusion?

When routine behaviour management strategy relying on sanctions and external control is unsuccessful in teaching students better ways of managing themselves, it makes professional good sense to take a different approach. Solutions Focused coaching provides a reliable, effective and educational way of working.

Two questions:

To what extent is behaviour an aspect of learning and it be approached from an educational or psychological perspective?

Exclusion disproportionately affects children with additional needs including SEN and mental health difficulties, looked after children and minority groups. Exclusion is known to adversely affect children's life chances. How should we critique the way we go about teaching or managing behaviour as an aspect of our work to promote wellbeing?

What is different about Solutions Focused coaching?

Solutions Focused coaching facilitates learning through inquiry, a pedagogical practice, unlike conventional behaviour management involving punishment or sanctions which is not a teaching and learning approach but is based on psychological conditioning. Solutions Focused coaching develops a relationship of empathy, trust and shared responsibility between coach

and client. With brief training and continuing support staff in schools will be able to rapidly put Solutions Focused coaching into action.

How does Solutions Focused coaching meet the needs of school students?

When students make mistakes, regardless where they occur across the academic and social curriculum, they need to learn something new. Conventional behaviour management strategies may show a student what *not* to do but are not designed to actively teaching them what to do to achieve success.

Failure and punishment may become a repeating pattern, where students make the same errors and get the same response. The Solutions Focused approach breaks the loop by focusing on the present, on strengths rather than deficits and the hopeful future rather than the failed past. In order to learn students have to engage and they find this orientation naturally engaging, placing them at the centre of their learning, taking responsibility for their own actions and creating their own pathway towards success. The approach does not require specialist inputs, multi-agency meetings and expert assessment and intervention. Student's progress is noticed by the people around them, in school and at home, who in turn make changes in their view of the now-successful student. Change is rapid and sustained as the student experiences the effects of their own resourcefulness and agency in bringing about success.

Solutions Focused coaching is suitable for students of all ages, their parents, carers and school staff.

How does Solutions Focused coaching meet the needs of pastoral support staff? The approach is clearly structured and well-supported. Following initial training coaches will be able to start coaching, and support will be readily available as they develop their skills.

Given brief intensive training and subsequent online support the role of the coach is to facilitate learning through inquiry, an educational role well suited to pastoral staff at all levels.

How does Solutions Focused coaching fit into existing school systems?

Solutions Focused coaching can be written into policy statements as agreed by school managers, governors and others as necessary. The key decision is where the Solutions Focused approach is introduced into existing policy statements, for example as preventative work early on in the behaviour strategy or when a student comes to be at risk of exclusion when the Solutions Focused Pastoral Support Programme can be specified, with Solutions Focused coaching scaffolding its planning and delivery.

There are two ways to go about problem-solving.

The solution-focused approach harnesses the resources of the coachee to work collaboratively with them with a focus on the future with the problem solved and solutions in place. This is how Solutions Focused coaching works.

In schools for historical reasons the problem focused approach is largely unchallenged, even though it often fails to ensure students remain securely in school – thousands of children being excluded every year attests to this failure. This way of working concentrates on the past and the problem itself as something separate from a student making errors in the area of learning about themselves in relationship to boundaries and community expectations. It demands an attempt to analyze the cause of failure or deficit and put it right. This is at the heart of sanctions systems written into most school Behaviour Policies and is appropriate for the essential boundary-setting every community demands.

The problem focused professional has the role of the expert, analyzing, advising and supplying strategies, essentially in control of the student's bad behaviour, aiming to eliminate a deficit.

Taking the Solutions Focused approach the child as client is seen as being the expert about their own situation. The solution is already present to some extent and the Solutions Focused coach asks questions that are useful to the client in finding out about their own solutions to their problem, through their own resources.

The problem-focused approach is most effective where a problem is **complicated**, made up of separate parts, in a situation that can be analyzed where the cause the problem can be

objectively identified. Classroom management, setting school rules and regulating children's compliance comes into this field.

The solution-focused approach is most effective where the problem is a **complex**, for example where the cause of a student's under-performance, disengagement or behaviour, cannot be readily isolated and corrected and where there are a number of different views and opinions about 'what's gone wrong.' Taking a solution focused approach means it is possible to get on with providing practical support, with no risk of worsening the situation, and the possibility of rapid change happening even though the causes of the problem cannot be isolated.

The beliefs underpinning Solutions Focused working

Underpinning the Solutions Focused approach are **three beliefs** about people, holding the key to how the SF coach perceives the coaching client; People are **resourceful**, have a **successful** past and a **hopeful** future, in relation to the issues you are working on together.

Keeping these ideas clearly in mind will help you to keep focused on solutions in the course of your coaching work. It means you can continue to look for successes and resources even when it seems that a situation is dominated by failure. It might look like it's all gone wrong, but it hasn't!

The Solutions Focused approach

In solutions focused coaching there are some key questions to keep in mind.

"What's your best hope for this work/meeting/time?"

"What are you doing already that's working?"

"What might you do a bit differently to get you closer to your best hope?"

As the coach you're finding out with client what they hope to change and foregrounding the strengths and resources that are already bringing successes, bringing about the change. Progress is supported and maintained by asking the client to notice things going well or getting better.

The elements of a Solutions Focused conversation

The Solutions Focused approach puts together a number of questioning elements into a flexible framework. You can use the elements, which are outlined below, in any order and put them into language that fits the conversation in the context of the particular work you're doing. In practice the client may be an individual student or member of staff or a group of people - the Solutions Focused elements are always the same.

The Solutions Focused conversation emphasises the resources, strengths and qualities that the client brings to a situation where they are hoping for change and looks out for signs of the change already happening. Past successes relate to the client's strengths and resources. The client describes changes that will bring their own hoped-for, preferred future closer as they see it. The structure of SF coaching supports them in taking practical steps to get closer to their preferred future, through recalling and emphasizing their strengths, resources and qualities and recognizing their successes.

Problem free talk establishes the empathetic relationship that is most likely to produce successful outcomes and gets the conversation focused on successes, strengths and resources. Starting off the conversation with this focus makes it more likely that you can maintain the solution focused, empathic relationship you're building. It's a conversation in which you're listening carefully to the story of hopefulness and resourcefulness of the speaker and recognising the successes this resourcefulness has brought.

What is the client hoping for? Build a picture with them of their preferred future by asking what they are hoping to get out of the meeting, what would be useful to them. You could start with *'What's your best hope for this meeting?'* or *'How could this meeting be useful to you today?'* or

'What would tell you when we finish this meeting that it's been useful?' Knowing what the coachee is hoping for in the meeting leads on naturally to asking about times when they hope to change is already less or is being coped with.

What is already working?

A key to moving towards solutions is finding exceptions, those times when the problem could have occurred and didn't. It's the exception to the story of failure that might be at the top of people's thinking.

For example:

'Tell me about time when you could have had a problem in working in class – but you didn't and things went well instead.'

or

'You told me that it would be useful if we did something about your getting angry with your teacher when she tells you to get on with your work. Tell me about a time when she told you ...and you kept calm.'

Once an exception is found it provides evidence of success already happening and to build future success on. Build on the details to fill out the story of success and resourcefulness.

Acknowledging a problem.

If the client clearly wants to talk about their problem, acknowledge their worry in a way that matches the seriousness of their concern and then return to Solutions Focused talk in a respectful way, as soon as it seems appropriate.

Acknowledgement might sound like this;

"From what you're saying, it sounds like you've been having a really tough time, with all that's been happening to you. Yet somehow you've been able to keep going and you're here today. It's impressive the way you've managed to do that."

This acknowledges that the problem was real and important, but without expanding it and exploring it further. It offers the possibility of a return to problem-free talk about strengths and resources.

This recognises the strengths the client shows in coping with problems and in moving towards their preferred future

Solutions Focused scaling in building descriptions

Solutions Focused scaling is useful in building a detailed description of where a person sees them self now, of the strengths and qualities that enabled them to get to this place and where they hope to get to next. It may also be useful in establishing a timescale for change and showing the strengths that a person has to keep going and to cope with difficulties over time. Solutions Focused scaling is about description, with the client in control of the story. It is not used to force change. It is possible that a person may be doing their best in coping with things, in keeping going and just staying at the same place on their scale, which might look like they're doing nothing, when actually they're working hard.

Evidence-based compliments

Complimenting comes out of the conversation and is based on the evidence you have been hearing. The compliment focuses on times when the speaker has been and is successful. For example if your client tells you about her strength in keeping going in difficult times, you might reflect it back to her as a compliment:

'It seems to me you've been strong in keeping going, when things have been so difficult for you. Is that true about you, that you're a person who can be strong when times are hard?'

Give an evidence based compliment like this, based on the evidence from the story, whenever it seems to be appropriate and check it out for truth.... 'is that true about you?' to make sure it is.

To close a session you can agree a task, arising out of the solution focused conversation. This can extend the work the client is doing outside the meeting to move forward to their best hopes. A good general task is to ask the client to look out for things going better over the days ahead.

Creating balance between safety and risk in coaching work.

Working with vulnerable people means that the professional always has to be aware of risk and the need to ensure the safety of young people. However this can lead to a systematic search for what is going wrong and may neglect the signs of things already working towards young peoples' hopeful futures. In any situation it is important to look for strengths and resources in people that can produce solutions. The reason for the current development of the solutions focused approach is that it can provide a useful structural framework for this work. At all times it is essential for the coach to have a clear understanding of Safeguarding procedure and to engage it if necessary, on the grounds of the possibility of risk.

Resources

- Geoff James *'Transforming behaviour in the classroom – a solution focused guide for new teachers'* 2016 SAGE
- Yasmin Ajmal and Ioan Rees: *'Solutions in Schools: Creative applications of solution focused brief thinking with young people and adults'* 2001 BT Press
- Insoo Kim Berg, Therese Steiner *'Children's Solution Work'* 2003 W W Norton
- Harvey Ratner *'Brief coaching with children and young people'* 2015 Routledge
- Turnell A & Edwards S *Signs of safety: a solution and safety orientated approach to child protection casework* (Web search 'signs of safety')
- Brooks F *The link between pupil health and well being and attainment – a briefing for head teachers, governors and staff in education settings* 2014 Public Health England
- *Focusing on solutions – a positive approach to improving behaviour* Primary National Strategy 2005 DfES

Other resources and blogs on www.thesolutionsfocusedcoach.com and www.solution-support.co.uk

Notes

