

The Interactional Helping Model

The professional interview is the purposeful medium or tool through which the worker moves through the phases and steps in practice models useful in child welfare. One of the practice models widely adopted in child welfare work is the Shulman Interactional Helping Model developed by Lawrence Shulman, PhD. The model is strengths-based and places high value on building and maintaining the worker/client collaborative partnership.

Although the Interactional model is a helping-oriented model and assumes the worker has assured child safety, many of the skills used in the helping model are equally effective in the investigative and assessment stages in the casework process.

Preliminary Phase-the phase of work prior to the worker engaging with the client. Purposes of this phase are to develop a preliminary empathy about the client's issues and concerns. To create the opportunity for the worker to explore personal attitudes, feelings and beliefs about the client/case situation that might interfere with the intervention/helping process, and to identify supports and resources that the worker may need to accomplish the purposes of the interview, and to assure worker and client safety.

Key steps and considerations in the Preliminary Phase:

Preparation for the interview:

- What is this interview about?
- Who do I want to be present?
- Where should this interview occur?
- What are the outcomes that I want to achieve?
- Are there any safety issues that I need to take into account?
- Do I have the necessary supports (supervisor; coworker; police)?
- What forms or documents do I need to bring?
- What factors may be operating to help or hinder the interview (personal feelings or fears; presumptions; client physical or mental impairment; cultural considerations, workload, etc.)?

Beginning/Engagement Phase-the beginning or engagement phase of work is the phase during which the worker contracts with the client by clarifying the purpose of the agency involvement or the session, the role he or she will play, and by reaching for client feedback on the content of the work. Individuals may deal with authority issues in this phase.

The Interactional Helping Model (cont'd)

Key steps and considerations in the Beginning/Engagement Phase:

Greeting and engaging the person with respect:

- How am I going to greet the client/other, i.e. words and actions?
- Is my greeting likely to be compatible with the client's culture or situation?

Setting a clear purpose:

- How am I going to phrase my purpose in clear, non-jargon language?
- Is my purpose statement consistent with the outcomes I hope to achieve?

Identifying the agency and family's goals:

- Can I explain my goals in terms the client will understand?
- Am I prepared to listen and be open to the client's needs, goals, and perspective?

Developing a clear "contract" for change:

- Have I formulated and articulated a realistic plan that is consistent with my mission and agency goals, and includes the input, needs, and goals of the client?
- Are there adequate client, agency, and community resources to support the plan?
- Is the client in agreement with this plan?
- Is the client committed to working the plan to achieve the goals?
- What level of protective authority do I need to use to secure client cooperation and move the plan forward?

Middle/Work Phase-the phase of work in which the client and the worker focus on dealing with issues raised in the contracting phase (or new issues that have emerged).

Key steps and considerations in the Middle Phase:

Helping the family make the desired changes:

- What strategies and skills do I need to use to facilitate the plan?
- What connections to resources do I need to make and the client needs to make?
- Does the level of protective authority required to sustain the work need to be increased, decreased or remain the same?
- Is there evidence of a genuine protective/collaborative partnership?

Ending/Transition Phase-the termination of the work phase, in which the worker prepares to end the interview session or the relationship with the client if the case is being closed or transferred. The purposes are to help the client and worker review their work together as well as to prepare for transitions to the next interview session or new experiences beyond this specific worker/client relationship.

The Interactional Helping Model (cont'd)

Key steps and considerations in the Ending Phase:

Closing the process and evaluating outcomes:

- Have I included feedback about client strengths in my summarization of the interview?
- Have I given the client an opportunity to validate or challenge my perception of the interview process and outcomes?
- How will I measure progress and success in regard to the desired goals?
- Have I articulated next steps?

Documenting the interview in writing:

- Have I documented promptly?
- Have I accurately, clearly and concisely represented the facts of the interview?
- Have I included assessment and conclusions regarding safety?

These phases operate at the level of each individual interview session with the client as well as throughout the life of the case, forming the framework for the entire helping process. The steps may unfold somewhat differently depending on the specific purpose of the interview. In all cases, the interview requires planning, clarity about the necessary outcomes for the case and each session, a command of essential skills, as well as a willingness on the part of the worker to engage the client and others as partners in the process of assuring child safety, permanence and family well-being.

