Practice Tool

PSDP—Resources and Tools:
Social discipline window

Introduction

This learning tool explores the social discipline window, a way of thinking about behaviour and communication commonly used in restorative practice.

The first part of the tool explains what the social discipline window covers. This is followed by suggestions about how to use it in one-to-one or group supervision to critically reflect on a practitioner's work with a child and family, and how to make an action plan for working more collaboratively with family members.

Introducing the social discipline window

Restorative practice originated many years ago in criminal justice and education and has now been adopted as a collaborative practice framework by many local authorities in England.

With restorative practice, there is a deliberate shift towards collaborative approaches that:

> value the intrinsic worth of the individual

> provide opportunities for individuals to talk about and hear how people are affected by a problem incident or behaviour, to repair and strengthen families and communities.

Wachtel (2003) describes restorative approaches as a move away from traditional forms of social control that can be experienced as punitive or oppressive. In contrast, restorative interventions treat each incident as an opportunity for learning and growth, and there is a focus on 'participatory learning and decision-making processes' (Wachtel, 2013 in Mason et al, 2017, p24).
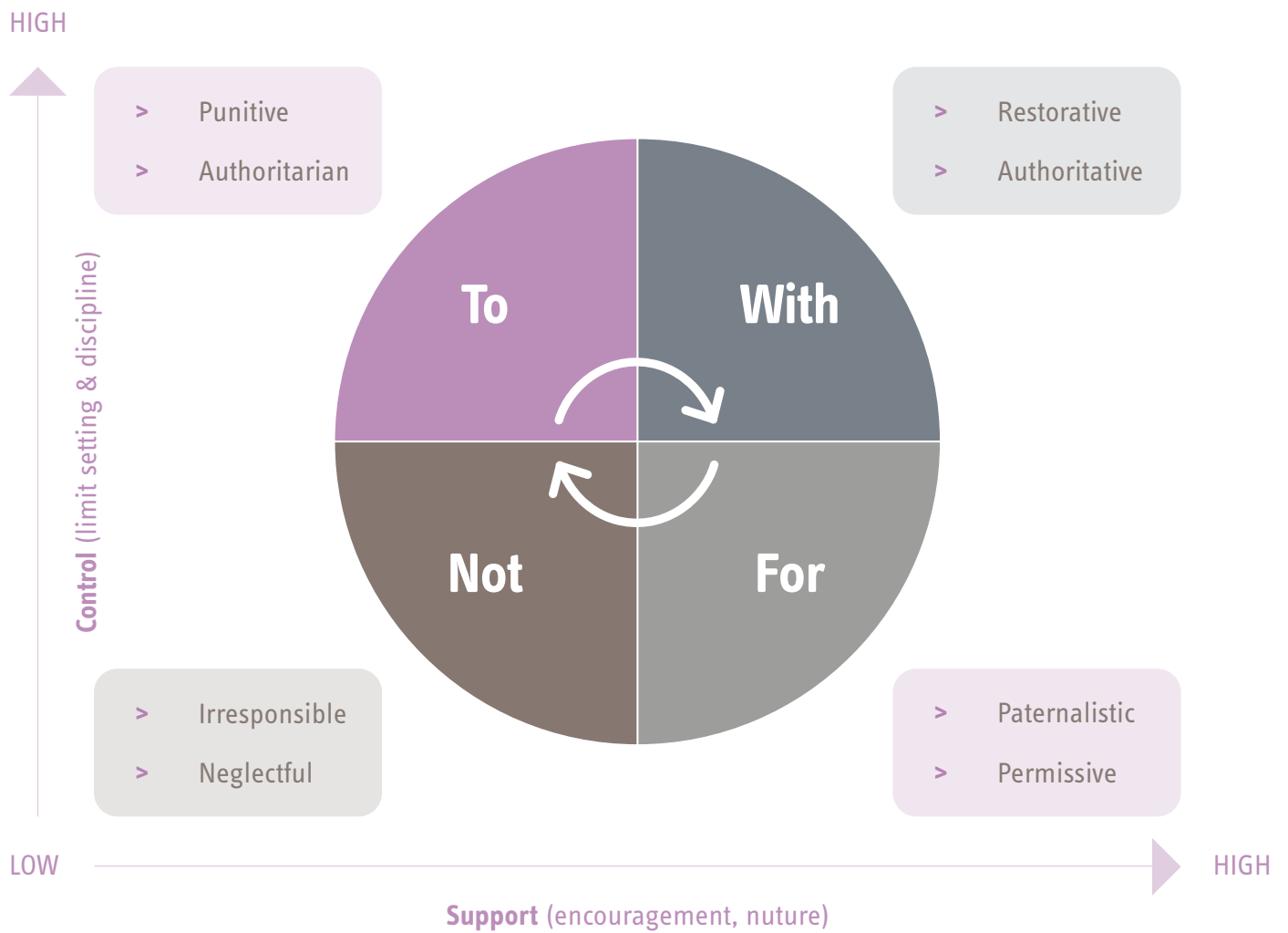
The social discipline window is a foundational concept in restorative practice and is used in many different settings. It provides a way of thinking about how we communicate with others.

In figure 1 on the next page you can see that the window is divided into four quadrants. If you look at the axis on the outside of figure 1, this indicates where the communication style in each quadrant sits in relation to offering more or less control and support when we are communicating with others.

The goal when working restoratively is to work with others to achieve high challenge and high support. An approach that is: 'characterized by doing things with people, rather than to them or for them' (Wachtel, 2013, p3).

The social discipline window is particularly useful in helping us think about how social workers communicate with families and how families communicate with the staff you supervise.

Figure 1 The social discipline window

HIGH

Control (limit setting & discipline)

> Punitive
> Authoritarian

> Restorative
> Authoritative

To

With

Not

For

> Irresponsible
> Neglectful

> Paternalistic
> Permissive

LOW

HIGH

Support (encouragement, nuture)

(Adapted by McCold & Wachtel, 2001)

With: top right

Restorative practice resides in the top right-hand quadrant and is characterised by practitioners working **with** children and families, where the professional is highly supportive and responsive to them.

An example of this approach could be where professionals are worried about the children in a family where the parents have lots of violent disputes to the point where the police are called to the home when the children are present.

Working to communicate in a way that offers high support and high challenge, the social worker arranges for a meeting for family and friends to come together to share their perspective on the impact that the arguing is having on the children, and to make a plan for what happens next.

To: top left

In the top left quadrant, professionals who do **to** are also responsive but may not be as adept at working collaboratively and transparently with the family. This may result in families experiencing their communication style as punitive.

For example, using the same scenario as above, the social worker may decide that the children are not safe at home and advise the parents that they need to ask a friend to look after them until the parents resolve their issues. Or, in a residential setting where the children get into a fight and it's not clear who did or said what, the staff send the children to their rooms and switch off the internet until the next day.

The behaviour of workers who communicate and use power in an authoritarian, non-collaborative way, which is less likely to take into account diversity and individual difference, would be included in this quadrant.

For: bottom right

Professionals who behave in a way to do things **for** families are highly responsive and supportive but make fewer demands on the family to make and maintain changes themselves.

It may be that these professionals find it more challenging to share feedback or highlight issues and concerns. Without meaning to, they avoid communication of this kind.

For example, a mother who has been struggling to get her children to school on time calls the social worker to say that the children have gone without their coats and she is waiting for the health visitor so can't go out. The social worker goes to collect the coats and takes them to school.

Not: bottom left

Finally, in the **not** quadrant, professionals are neither supportive nor demanding of the family. Here, an example might be that the parents tell the social worker their teenage daughter has been away from home for two nights and they don't know where she is. The social worker acknowledges and records this, but doesn't ask the parents what steps they took to find her or why they didn't report her missing. Later, the social worker visits the young person but doesn't raise this issue in a meaningful way with her.

You might want to spend some time looking at the social discipline window and thinking about the communication styles described in the different quadrants.

Do any of these approaches resonate with you? Can you identify particular styles that you see mirrored in the way your supervisees engage with children and families?

The next part of this tool provides guidance on how you can use the social discipline window in supervision as a basis for discussion about working with a family.

Using the social discipline window as a tool for discussion in supervision

A helpful way to use the social discipline window in supervision is to invite your supervisee to suggest a piece of work with a family where there is some kind of conflict with the practitioner, or where the worker feels 'stuck'. Similarly, you might suggest that they identify a piece of work in which there is a confusing or unhelpful dynamic or power struggle with family members or the wider professional network.

In the activity outlined below, you will use the social discipline window to help the worker identify areas of practice with this child and family where they've inhabited different areas of the quadrant.

You will then ask them to think about how other professionals and family members speak and behave in relation to the four quadrants, and the impact of this in terms of how they respond.

The final part of the discussion should focus on what the exercise has taught your supervisee about how they communicate with a family or other professionals, and on constructing an action plan that focuses on working to provide high support and high challenge.

Before you begin, you need to establish ground rules to make sure that you have a clear understanding about confidentiality. This is important because reflecting on some of the communication styles may move into a discussion that includes the worker's personal experiences and what influences their communication.

Activity in supervision

1. Have the social discipline window handy while you introduce the activity so that your supervisee can look at it as you explain what it is. Then look at each quadrant of the window and invite your supervisee to reflect on whether or not they can identify examples of practice or communication that fit with each one.

2. Invite your supervisee to summarise a dilemma they've encountered when working with a family, to give you sufficient information about the key features of that family's experience so you can draw a genogram or ecomap of their network. If you are not familiar with drawing genograms, you might find it useful to look at the learning tool 'Drawing a genogram', and accompanying film clip, available from the 'Understanding the lived experience of children and families' section of this website. Using a visual tool can be helpful in providing a focus for discussion, and to consider any patterns or connections that emerge.

3. Then engage in a discussion with your supervisee to explore how different people in the network communicate with each other about the changes the family are trying to make. It is important to ensure that you leave space in the discussion for your supervisee to reflect on how they communicate with family members, what happens as a result, and any other thoughts that arise.

4. In the last part of the activity, you invite your supervisee to think about how they can move their own practice and the behaviour of the professional network towards a **with** approach. A number of questions are provided below that might be useful in shaping that discussion. There are also some questions that will ask the worker to reflect on their own experiences of power within a family.

Prompt questions to focus on working in the *with* quadrant:

Thinking about when you visit a particular child and family, where do you see yourself on the social discipline window?

What about in your written or telephone communication? Is there any difference between a visit at home or when you see family members in a meeting or at court?

What aspects of family life do you feel you neglect or avoid talking about?

When are you tempted to do things or make decisions for the family rather than ask them to find a solution, what affects this?

When you challenge family members or a professional, what aspect of the window are you enacting?

How do [grandparents / other professionals] speak to [the mother / father / child] when things are [going well / problems arise]?

Is there anyone you are more (or less) motivated to offer support to?
How does that make you feel? How do you manage this?

If I asked [the child / parent / family / friend / professional] where would they think your practice with this family sits? In which areas would they want you to work **with** them more? Are there times when they would want you to do **for** or **to** or **not**?

Are there any family members you find it easier or harder to challenge?
Why do you think that is? How does this impact your intervention?

Are there times when you switch between two or more intervention styles?
Why? Do you do this deliberately, or without realising?

Where do the other professionals and family members sit in the social discipline window, in terms of how they communicate about making changes to safeguard a child's wellbeing?

What areas of the quadrant do you feel most comfortable working within? How do you think it feels to be a parent working with you when you practice in that way? What are the pros and cons?

Where would you place yourself on the diagram if we were talking about other aspects of your life e.g. parenting, within the team, within your own family dynamics? Are there any connections between this and your professional communication style?

Are there any aspects of individual differences in relation to the social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (a model that describes aspects of personal and social identity like gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality – Burnham, 2013) that impact on how you work (**with**, **to**, **for** or **not**) in different contexts? How is that received by families?

Where would you place the adults who raised you? How did that feel? How does that affect your sense of self or the decisions you made as a child, and now as an adult / practitioner?

Does the design or ethos of the service help or hinder a restorative or collaborative approach? What about in our own organisation and team?

Using the social discipline window to plan how your supervisees can work more restoratively with families and other professionals

By now you may have established that some aspects of practice within the network exist in the domains of **to, for** and **not**. Decide together which of these to prioritise for discussion and identify what should be included in a plan, focusing on how to move the communication and intervention towards **with**.

Prompt questions

If there was one area of practice with this child or family that you could move from **to, for** or **not** into **with,** which would it be? Would you want to achieve this straight away or over time? What are the barriers and enablers?

What would the next family meeting sound like if you managed to make this change? What would [the child] see when the adults talk to each other?

Who in the network would be a supporter of this? Who could help make it happen?

What strategies could you employ for returning some control to the child and family when you are tempted / asked to do things for them? Are there any conversations that need to happen with other professionals or family members in order to enable a shift?

How will you keep motivated to start work in areas you feel you've avoided or neglected? What are the consequences of not starting this work? Are there any barriers that affect other aspects of your work? What support do you need?

Conclusion

Now agree any actions you're going to take as a result of these discussions.

Finish the session by asking the social worker whether they found the exercise helpful or enlightening. Is there anything it has brought up that they'd like extra support with?

Other ways you can use this tool

You could use this tool for individual reflection to think about how you behave as a practice leader, and what styles of leadership and collaboration are modelled to you and your team by senior leaders. What ways can you work towards doing *with* your team more often?

This model could also be used in a whole-team discussion and learning activity to think about an aspect of your work e.g. how to respond to parents and children who are angry and abusive to staff, how to work through professional disagreements with another team in the organisation, or how to respond to children who break rules where they live.

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

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