



Small is good

Sue Hanna and Peter Topzand explore co-working relationships between professionals as a form of collaboration and pro-social modelling in child protection practice

Collaboration is a word frequently applied to describe the functioning of teams, and interdisciplinary work between teams and between agencies. It is not one that is applied to that fundamental of child protection social work practice, the co-working investigating relationship.

What do we understand by the term co-working? In the child protection context of Child, Youth and Family, it means a working relationship between two social workers. One is a key worker and the other a co-worker, both of whom are assigned a common task – to investigate and assess the safety of a child, and to identify whether anything needs to be done to improve that condition. Co-working brings together the strengths, experiences, capacities, energy and insights of two individuals. These are qualities that are mirrored in contemporary definitions of collaboration and suggest a process whereby different parties work with a situation to explore differences and find solutions that build on their own ideas of what is possible.

Without wanting to be too 1970s, we argue that co-working is about synergy, which ideally occurs when the sum of the parts or contributions of the people involved exceeds the total of their individual values.

The purpose of the co-working relationship is to ensure the child protection investigation has integrity. One of its intentions is to limit the potential for an individual social worker to collude with a client family and undermine safe practice.

Morrison (1998) has identified a number of factors with the potential to impair the integrity of an investigation.

These include:

- worker burn out
- worker accommodation of an unsafe family environment
- personal feelings (positive or negative) toward the child, the caregiver or even the notifier
- positive or negative feelings generated by engagement with a particular gender, or cultural or religious group.

In theory, the presence of a second investigating worker diminishes the potential for any of these dynamics to occur.

It has been commented that practice approaches based on the concept of pro-social modelling have been found to be effective with involuntary clients (Trotter, 1999). This notion uses as a basis the belief that clients are

influenced by the behaviour that is modelled to them by others, and by positive and/or negative reinforcement of their own behaviour. We believe the co-working relationship provides a useful context in which to model respectful and co-operative relationships to clients.

There remains significant potential for the co-working relationship to be underutilised and its full benefits not to be realised. We contend that more thought should be given to the mix of the investigating pair of workers and that this would further enhance the clear benefits of this form of collaborative relationship.

Work is frequently allocated to a key worker intelligently and thoughtfully, but the subsequent co-work allocation can be very haphazard. It seems that social workers who like or who have previously successfully worked with each other will self-nominate and a supervisor, grateful for a willing volunteer, will accept with alacrity, which can be a problem. The fact that these two workers want to work together or like working together may not be a good thing, and they can develop implicitly collusive patterns. These are patterns which can replicate collusive arrangements in the worker family dyad.

Research information about patterns of co-working in respect of the frequency of key and co-worker allocations repeating themselves is scarce, but anecdotal information suggests that patterns of the same people frequently working together do develop.

There are a number of factors that a supervisor could or should consider at this point.

1. The co-working relationship is potentially an important one and that allocation decisions can quite conceivably impact on the outcome of the investigation.
2. If appropriate in the circumstances, mix inexperienced and experienced workers for training purposes.
3. The gender or cultural heritage of the workers may be an issue.
4. The cultural appropriateness and possible cognisance to training opportunities and cultural skill development of workers from other cultures.
5. The individual personalities of the workers and the extent to which they may reinforce positive or negative outcomes.
6. The overall situation that workers are entering.

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Co-working relationships can be taken for granted, but these are collaborative relationships and are expected to achieve a great deal in terms of work, practice safety and pro-social modelling.

So, how do workers construct these relationships in the field? The following models illustrate some of the patterns that can emerge.

The 'Good Cop/Bad Cop' Model

This is a relationship where one worker will deliberately adopt an interrogative and argumentative role with parents or caregivers while the other worker will remain calm and reassuring. This dynamic is intended to unbalance and destabilise the caregivers with a view to obtaining more and better information, leading to an improved and quicker investigative outcome. The disadvantages of this approach

are that it can be very inflammatory in the hands of inexperienced workers and it does not contain the potential for the pro-social modelling discussed earlier. If they are not careful, workers can become caught in these roles compromising their own professional development and damaging the flexibility of the co-working relationship, particularly if it is one that is ongoing.

The Senior Partner Model

This is loosely based on the apprentice model where trainees or new graduates or students are partnered with a more experienced worker with the aim of completing the task and achieving positive training outcomes. This is a good thing, as long as mixing occurs and one new person is not consistently exposed to the same experienced worker, but has the opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge from a variety of people.

The Pragmatic Response Model

This is a short-term relationship that is in place only for the duration of the case and in response to who is available at the time. It is generally the least desirable, being based as it is on expediency, but with close supervision can be made to work well.

The Buddy Model

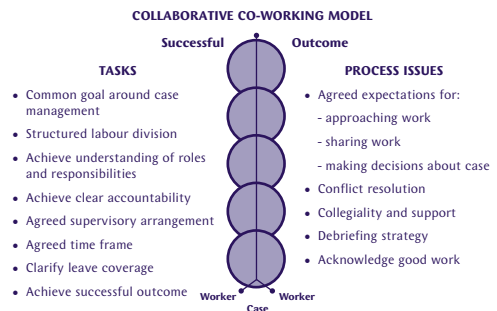
Based on an existing and established relationship between the workers, this may or may not be a good thing. People who work together well will frequently do better work, but the risk of mutual accommodation and the possible absence of critical analysis for fear of endangering the relationship are significant risk factors.

The Collaborative Approach Model

This is our ideal. It is based on an appreciation of what the relationship is expected to achieve at both a task and process level. Here there is thought into how the relationship is constructed, as well as the individuals' strengths and weakness and the impact this may have on the qualities of synergy and pro-social modelling. The Collaborative Approach Model assumes the presence of individuals who are suited to the role and to each other and who have the capacity to manage these various elements successfully.

A consideration of the different ways in which this relationship is constructed raises again the importance of supervision. Workers may or may not be aligned in terms of the findings of an investigation and, quite separately, may or may not be aligned in terms of what, if any, future action they believe is necessary.

The provision of joint quality, clinical supervision will ensure that these possible differences are managed, and that the outcome remains one of integrity. It is important that both the key worker and co-worker receive simultaneous supervision and debriefing in order that any differences in their perspectives are managed effectively.



SKILLS Child focused/family centred, goal setting, requisite clinical, and communications skills, critical reflection, flexibility, ability to share skills, respect and negotiate difference, resolve conflict, articulate appropriate knowledge and value base, problem-solve, consult and persevere.

Our Collaborative Approach Model is further refined in the Collaborative Co-working Model shown in figure 1 on p15. This model also acknowledges the potential for mutual learning in the workplace, which can take place as a consequence of this type of collaborative teamwork (Eraut, Alderton, Cole & Senker, 2003)

The vertical line represents the course of the case from the beginning to end with the spiral indicating the workers as they interact with both the case and each other. The 'tasks' section shows what needs to be completed while the 'process' issues identify some of the relational concerns that may arise. The 'skills' required to take the case from beginning to end are detailed at the foot of the model. The model attempts to portray visually the simultaneous application of all of these factors as social workers co-work with the child and their family/whānau.

Outcomes achieved when co-working is successful as a collaborative relationship include:

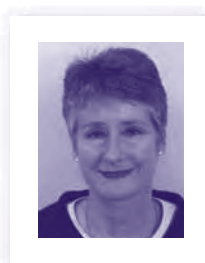
- achieving set goals
- participants getting something they wanted
- participants feeling their involvement mattered
- the pay-off for everyone exceeding the costs
- a fair and educational process.

(Abramson & Rosenthal, 1995)

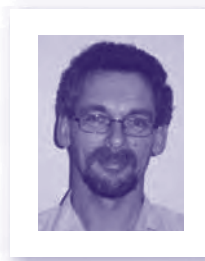
In conclusion, our look into the importance of co-working relationships has convinced us that supervisors and workers should not simply allow these relationships to develop organically. When this has happened, they should maintain a close, critical eye on possible problems. Ultimately these relationships deserve to be developed systematically and with an awareness of the important practice and interpersonal role that they have in child protection social work.

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