

Using the Interactional Helping Skills

Your effective use of the Shulman Interactional Helping Skills is crucial to engaging families to meet the needs of children/youth involved in the child welfare system. Below you will find the four phases of the casework process as well as the associated Interactional Helping Skills. Note, just because the skill appears in a certain phase does not mean that this is the only phase in which you would use the skill. The skills are useful at all points of the casework process.

PRELIMINARY/PREPARATORY PHASE: (During this phase, the child welfare professional makes an effort to sensitize himself/herself, before each session, to themes that could emerge during the work.)

1. Tuning in to Self: the worker’s efforts to get in touch with actual and potential feelings/concerns/beliefs/values that the worker him/herself brings to the helping encounter.

NOTE: This skill can be used *in preparation* for an encounter with an individual (e.g., with a supervisor), and used “live” while interacting with the individual during any phase of the relationship.

Steps:

- a. Pause and reflect. “How can my cultural context affect my interactions with/understanding of the family and their situation?”
- b. Ask yourself, “What are my emotional, physical and cognitive reactions to this situation or family?” (“I’m nervous about being in this neighborhood; I think that’s what’s causing my upset stomach.”)
- c. Ask yourself, “How will this reaction likely affect my actions?” (“I might get angry with the individual or rush my contact so I can get out of here.”)
- d. Ask yourself, “What is the primary outcome that I want right now in working with this individual?” (“I want the individual to know that I am here to help with her situation and that I have skills and resources that can help. I want her to be able to trust me as a helper.”)
- e. Ask yourself, “What do I need to do with my reaction?” (“I need to be aware of my pacing and not rush through things. I need to calm myself so I can focus on her situation and not my upset stomach. Maybe taking a few minutes to think about a pleasant situation will help me to relax and focus on her.”)
- f. Implement your answer to question “d” without any verbal discussion about your feelings or verbalize an “I-Feel” message as needed (e.g. “I feel defensive about the fact that this person just said that my agency and I are just “baby snatchers.” I need to realize that this person is angry at the situation and whom I represent. They are not angry at me. What is my next constructive step?”)

Using the Interactional Helping Skills (Cont'd)

2. Tuning in to Others: the worker's effort to get in touch with the primary feelings and concerns that the family member(s) might bring to the helping encounter.

Steps:

- a. What are this person's possible emotional, physical, and cognitive reactions to this situation? Example questions to discover this might include:
 - i. "Why might they have those reactions?"
 - ii. "How can I check to make sure that I understand the reactions?"
 - iii. "What are the non-verbal/verbal behaviors I see that help me know this?"
 - iv. "What is the person saying that helps me know this?"
 - v. "How can I let him/her know that I understand these feelings?"
 - vi. Implement your answers to questions "ii" through "v" and observe/analyze the other person's responses.
- b. Use of focused listening encourages the individual to talk so you can identify the primary (or most basic) part of the individual's message. Focused listening requires:
 - i. Paying attention to, and analyzing, the individual's verbalizations and non-verbal behaviors;
 - ii. Using facial expressions and body language that reflect interest, concern and respect;
 - iii. Blocking out all other distractions from your mind;
 - iv. Centering your attention on the individual's words, behaviors and feelings; and
 - v. Avoiding interruption of the individual with questions.
- c. Display your understanding of the individual's feelings by:
 - i. Reflecting, or asking for clarification of, what you identify as the individual's primary feelings ("You sound fearful of caseworkers.") and thoughts ("You believe that I think just like your last caseworker?").
 - ii. Ensure that your words, voice tone, gestures, facial expression, physical posture, and touch (when appropriate) all match and communicate respect and concern for the individual and the individual's situation.

Using the Interactional Helping Skills (Cont'd)

BEGINNING/CONTRACTING PHASE: (During this phase, the child welfare professional's task is to develop a better understanding of the family's situation, as well as to develop a contract for work ahead.)

- 1. Clarifying Purpose, Function, and Role: simple (without jargon) opening statements by the worker regarding (a) their role/function at the agency, specifically as it relates to the stated problem or issue at hand, and (b) the general purpose of the meeting/encounter.**

Steps:

- a. State your name, job title, and the name of the agency you represent.
 - i. Show identification as needed
 - ii. Use words rather than initials (Child Protective Services instead of CPS, Family Service Plan instead of FSP, Children & Youth Services instead of CYS, etc.)
- b. State the reason why you are making the contact.
 - i. Use clear, simple sentences without jargon or technical terms
 - ii. Respond to questions as needed
- c. State the purpose/outcome of the contact.
 - i. Clarify what you will be doing (asking questions, talking to relevant others, looking at the home environment, etc.) and approximately how long you expect the contact to last.
 - ii. Clarify, as needed, what will happen if you are not able to accomplish the purpose of your contact.

- 2. Dealing with Issues of Authority: using the least amount of protective authority required to achieve the legally mandated outcomes of safety, permanence, and well-being for children. This means dealing with issues, raised directly or indirectly, about the worker's (and agency's) authority, such as requiring the acceptance of mandated services or the individual's past and possibly negative experiences with authority figures or social workers.**

Steps:

- a. Invite and clarify expressions of confusion, dissatisfaction, resistance, and complaints about you as the worker, the helping process, or prior experiences with protective authorities ("You sound doubtful about what I am saying; is there something you disagree with?");
- b. Tune in to and assess the individual's understanding and cooperation with your purpose ("I can hear that you both have strong feelings about talking to me.")

Using the Interactional Helping Skills (Cont'd)

- c. Tune in to Self as a way to manage your own defensiveness, anger, fear, etc. (“I’m feeling increasingly defensive the more he sounds angry and suspicious about my visit here today.”)
- d. Realistically and simply clarify what is, and what isn’t, within your role and the authority of your agency (“If we are unable to develop a safety plan for your daughter, that we both agree upon; then my agency will have to ask the courts to step in.”)
- e. Clarify your purpose and mission in working with the individual (“My agency works really hard to help keep families together whenever possible, and removing children from home is only a last resort to keep them safe.”)

3. Reaching for Feedback: Is [a]n effort by the child welfare professional to determine the family’s perception of their needs. The working contract includes the common ground between the services of the setting and the felt needs of the family.

Steps:

- a. Ask the individual to offer their perceptions concerning the situation that brought them to the child welfare agency’s attention. (“Ms. Jones, I just shared with you the information from the referral that our agency received, I’d like to hear your perspective of the situation.”)
- b. Recap what the individual said to you and ask them to clarify any points of confusion. (“You look anxious whenever we discuss investigating the allegation, and I’m wondering what you’re thinking about this process.”)
- c. Make sure that body language matches what the individual says and vice versa. It may be necessary to address inconsistencies; what is said compared to non-verbal cues. (“Ms. Jones, you said that you agree with the plan; however, you appear frustrated with the situation. Am I right? If so, can you tell me more about where the frustration is coming from?”)

MIDDLE/WORK PHASE: (This is where the work occurs. The work is based on the issues and concerns identified in the Beginning/Contracting Phase.)

1. Questioning: the skill of making requests for more information related to the problem or situation so that you have a fuller picture of the concern that has been expressed. There are five (5) types of questions used for interviewing.

- a. Closed-ended questions are useful for eliciting specific information such as date of birth, social security number, and address. (“What is your social security number?”) Yes/No questions and multiple choice questions fall under this category, but are more specifically considered to be forced choice questions. (“Were you present when Johnny got hurt?”)
- b. Open-ended questions are used for the purpose of stimulating conversation. (“How can you ensure that Johnny will be safe?”)

Using the Interactional Helping Skills (Cont'd)

- c. Probing questions are used when an issue needs clarification at progressively deeper levels. (“So, you keep telling me that Jessica’s father is not a fit parent. What makes you believe that Jessica’s father is not a fit parent?”)
- d. Directive questions are used to tell the other person what information is needed, without being authoritative or bureaucratic. (“We can best help Isaiah if we know some specific information. What can you tell me about the events that led to Isaiah being harmed?”)
- e. Redirective questions are used to interrupt if the information being given is unproductive or not relevant. (“What can you tell me about your discipline techniques, which we were talking about earlier?”)

2. Reaching Inside of Silences: being able to explore the meaning of an individual’s silence by putting possible feelings into words.

Steps:

- a. Be comfortable with silence;
- b. Offer non-verbal support in posture (leaning in slightly toward the individual without violating personal space needs) and facial expression to indicate that you are listening and want the individual to continue talking;
- c. Encourage the individual to share their thoughts (“You are very quiet. Could you tell me what you are thinking? I’m not sure what you’re thinking about right now... could you share your thoughts with me in words?”); and
- d. Articulate what the silence may mean (“I can see that this is hard for you to talk about; Many mothers in this situation have felt angry, frightened, sad, etc.; Does your silence mean that you’re having a hard time finding the right words to tell me what you are thinking?”)

3. Communicating Information: imparting important information or clarifying issues about the casework process, including mutual expectations, goals and services, legal issues, timelines, court processes, and next steps.

Steps:

- a. Provide information (facts, outcomes, deadlines, reports, diagnoses, values, beliefs, etc.) that the individual needs in order to manage the task at hand (“The first visit is scheduled for Saturday the 15th, and we’ll need to arrive by 9:00 am. So we need to leave here by 8:15.”);
- b. When possible, information is provided in a manner that leaves it open to challenge by the individual (“Dan does have the right to see his children and it’s important that the kids stay connected with him, wouldn’t you agree?”); and
- c. Give the individual an opportunity to ask questions and express feelings about the provided information (“Please be sure to check in with Justin

Using the Interactional Helping Skills (Cont'd)

and Sara periodically to see how they're feeling about visiting their dad and any questions they have. Are you comfortable doing that?")

ENDING/TRANSITION PHASE: (The session or case is brought to a close. During this phase, the child welfare professional makes connections between the session/working relationship and future work or issues in the life of the family member(s).)

- 1. Summarizing and Identifying Next Steps: summarizing and reviewing important information or clarifying issues about the casework process (including mutual expectations; goals and services; legal issues; timelines; court processes) and next steps, while giving others the opportunity to ask questions and express feelings.**

Steps:

- a. Be specific, clear, and to-the-point when reviewing the main themes of the meeting ("We spoke about what can happen if you get help for this problem, and what will happen if you don't, right Ms. Pruitt?");
- b. Ask the individual if s/he has any questions or strong feelings about these themes ("Do you have any other thoughts, feelings or questions about our meeting today?");
- c. Articulate the next steps and timelines to be taken by both the worker and individual ("So your next steps are to first, contact the detox center by tomorrow and find out what they may be able to do to assist you. Second, call your Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor and let her know what's happened recently. Third, you know it's always important to be sure that all of the kids are in school on time in the morning. My next steps are to first, identify other possible resources, other than the detox center, that might be able to assist you, second I will continue to contact the school to monitor the children's attendance."); and
- d. End the encounter by asking the individual if they understand and agree with the next steps ("That wraps up our meeting for today. So, you know what is expected of you and will do these things as we agreed, right?")

(Shulman, L., 2006)