

Relational Practice

Social work with children is shaped by interdependence on multiple levels because every encounter in social work with children is relational and interdependent.

Parents, children, carers, and professionals continuously shape one another's choices and actions.

Whether trust grows or breaks, whether families engage or resist, depends not only on intention but on how each actor anticipates and assumes the other will behave/act/react.

Traditional risk frameworks describe behaviour; they don't always explain why people or professionals make choices or engage in actions that appear irrational under stress, fear, or uncertainty.

This resource provides a way to understand these interactions and to design practice that promotes collaboration, fairness, and safety.

It is a way to understand these interactions by focusing on how beliefs, perceptions, and structures influence decision-making, for both families and professionals.

1. First Step - Understanding and Reasoning

Understanding means reducing a complex situation to its most basic, undeniable truths, then reasoning upward.

In practice, this means asking:

What do I know for certain about this family's situation?

What assumptions am I making about motivation, trust, or risk?

What am I assuming or being told about motivation or intent, and what if I am/this is wrong?

What if those assumptions are wrong?

What evidence supports or challenges them?

By stripping away bias ("this family won't engage," "this parent doesn't care") we reveal the *actual logic* behind people's actions.

Before we make a judgment we need clarity. We can get clarity by identifying the truth and using reasoning rather interpretation or frustration.

2. Second Step: The Lenses We Use in Practice

Every social work process and intervention, such as an assessment, plan, or meeting, involves interdependent working.

Children, parents, carers, and professionals all act based on their understanding of each other’s answers, intentions, and likely responses.

Recognising this interdependence helps practitioners design approaches that encourage safety, trust, and collaboration, not fear or disengagement.

Core Elements

Concept	In Social Work Terms	Practice Description
Participants	Children, parents, carers, professionals, community networks, extended family.	Everyone whose actions, information, or beliefs influence outcomes for the child.
Motivations	Hopes, fears, values, and perceived obligations	Each person acts to protect or achieve something meaningful: safety, dignity, belonging, autonomy.
Choices and Responses	Actions or reactions each person may take	Engagement, avoidance, openness, compliance, resistance, withdrawal, or challenge.

Consequences	How each action or response affects others	Increased trust, escalation, improved care, or disengagement.
Information and Perception	What each person knows, believes, or assumes about others' actions and intentions	Determines whether people feel safe enough to be truthful and to participate fully.
Environment and Conditions	Structural, organisational, and contextual influences	Poverty, culture, workload, policy, and local resources shaping what choices are possible.

People behave not only according to facts but also according to what they believe about others' intentions.

For example, A parent who believes disclosure will bring punishment may stay silent, and not from indifference, but from fear. A practitioner who assumes dishonesty may withhold warmth or empathy. Both are acting logically within their perceived context.

Effective social work practice aims to reshape those perceptions so that openness, honesty, and collaboration become the most emotionally and practically safe choices for everyone involved.

3. Step Three: Dynamics in Practice

Every social work intervention contains a strategic structure, which is a pattern of actions, expectations, relations, and feedback/responses. The quality, intensity, and honesty of the actors in the intervention can weaken or strengthen trust, collaboration, and mutual understanding.

Example Situation	Underlying Relational Dynamic	Practice Implication
Parent conceals	Fear that honesty will	Review your

problems at home	lead to removal of the child	engagement so disclosure can feel that will lead to support, not punishment. Focus on safety and non-punitive response to disclosure
Young person disengages from sessions	Belief that "talking changes nothing" or "If I open up, nothing will change"	Demonstrate quick, visible outcomes from participation to rebuild credibility. Demonstrate that honesty leads to visible outcomes
Agencies disagree about thresholds	Conflicting priorities or difference of opinion	Focus on outcomes and clarify shared accountability.

Strategic Relational Practice asks:

How do my actions and tone shape what others choose to do next?

What message does my response send about safety and fairness?

How can I re-structure interaction so that transparency feels less risky than silence?

4. Step Four: Analysis

1. Define what is certain

Identify the observable facts: what is known, seen, or evidenced, independent of opinion.

2. Identify participants and motivations

Who is involved, what do they know, what do they value, and what do they fear?

3. Map choices and information

Who knows what? Who is withholding what, and why might that be rational from their point of view?

What options does each person perceive? What information or misunderstanding influences these options?

4. Identify consequences and incentives

What behaviours does the current situation reward or discourage? For example, does honesty currently bring risk while silence brings safety?

5. Redesign interaction

Shift the dynamic to make openness, engagement, and collaboration the most beneficial routes for all involved. Change the “rules” to reward transparency, fairness, and joint problem-solving.

For example: replace “failure to engage” letters with proactive support calls or material aid that rebuilds trust.

This requires to approach others through empathy, clarity, and reliable follow-through.

5. Step Five: Advocacy

Advocacy is not just only about speaking for others. Fundamentally it’s about changing the conditions, removing barriers, and providing access. Advocacy works on three levels which you can find below

Level	Purpose	Example
Individual advocacy	Ensuring a child’s lived experience shapes assessment and planning	Presenting the child’s voice verbatim and linking it to professional analysis.
Professional advocacy	Challenging other services when their inaction increases risk	Escalating respectfully and documenting unmet statutory

		duties.
Systemic advocacy	Highlighting structural issues that repeatedly disadvantage families	Reporting data on food insecurity, housing, or service access to inform policy.

Effective relational advocacy aims to change the rules of interaction and alters the professional and systemic environment. it changes how power, voice, and accountability operate so children and their families can participate on fairer terms. This means that the rules of access

Knowing When to Pause and When to Escalate

Pause for reflection when:

Behaviour that looks resistant may be protective or fear-driven.

Professional disagreement reflects differing pressures or incomplete information, not neglect of duty.

Escalate when:

Safety cannot be assured through collaboration alone.

Despite efforts to rebuild trust, harm continues or worsens.

Patterns indicate cumulative harm that exceeds support-level intervention.

Pausing is about curiosity and recalibration and escalation is about clarity and proportionality, not for delay and punishment.

6. Step Six: Reflection

Below there is a list of questions that can help with reflection in supervision or in practice.

1. What might each person’s behaviour be communicating that their words cannot?
2. What is each person trying to achieve or avoid?

3. What are they protecting, defending, or hoping for through this behaviour?
4. How might my behaviour or responses influence their next step?
5. What beliefs are shaping these choices?
6. How might past experiences with professionals be shaping current trust or fear?
7. What emotions are present in this interaction, both, in them, and in me?
8. What meanings might the child or parent attach to my role, my tone, or my authority?
9. Where does power sit in this relationship, and how am I using or sharing it?
10. How does the family know that I have truly heard them?
11. What practical change would show this family that participation works?
12. Have I demonstrated empathy before offering challenge or analysis?
13. How am I showing curiosity rather than surveillance?
14. In what ways can I reduce shame and increase dignity in our conversation?
15. What would "feeling safe" look like for this child or parent in this meeting?
16. What is the smallest, most meaningful step that could strengthen trust right now?
17. How can I act in a way that surprises the family positively (e.g., fairness where they expected punishment)?
18. Which of my responses will make honesty safer than concealment?
19. Am I using authority to protect, or to control?
20. What do I need to clarify so that expectations are transparent and realistic?
21. How do I demonstrate reliability? Am I doing what I said I would do?
22. What assumptions of mine were challenged or confirmed in this visit?
23. How is the wider system (poverty, policy, workload) shaping both my behaviour and action and theirs?
24. Which structural factors such as poverty, policy, inequality, are shaping how this family is

judged or supported?

25. Have I named those systemic pressures explicitly in my recording or supervision?

26. What have I learned about what builds or breaks trust in this family's context?

27. How will I use this learning to influence wider practice, not just this case?

Truth does not reveal itself to the eye, but to the relationship. Because every act of genuine connection paints a reality more enduring than any questions or assumptions you have.