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What is Practice First?

Family and Community Services (FACS) developed Practice First as a model for child protection service delivery in 2011. Its approach is unique to NSW, and draws on the best of national and international models and contemporary research.

The focus of Practice First is on changing the practice culture across the spectrum of work with families including assessment, intervention and collaboration with partner agencies. Practice First aims to achieve safety for children and families through skilful child protection practice, shared management of risk and building genuine relationships with families and the community.

The model is based on 10 principles of practice that are evidence-based and reflect contemporary research. The principles influence our systems, culture and people. They unite the organisation around the shared goal of making long-term improvements to children's lives and where safe, keeping families together. Anchored by structured and rigorous Group Supervision and emboldened by leadership that encourages more time with families to build meaningful relationships, Practice First is changing the foundation of child protection in NSW.

What are the Practice First principles?

1. ethics and values are integral to good practice
2. families have a right to respect
3. an appreciation of context strengthens practice
4. language impacts on practice
5. good practice is built on both knowledge and skills
6. practitioners do best in a culture that fosters learning, hope and curiosity
7. reflection leads to better outcomes
8. sharing risk leads to better decision making
9. the quality of the relationships makes a significant impact on effectiveness
10. relationships have a cascade effect.

How does Practice First change our work with partner agencies?

Practice First values collaboration with families, the community, government and non-government sectors. Our relationship with partner agencies has always been important - Practice First now embeds this into practice.

Greater collaboration

Group Supervision is at the heart of Practice First. Caseworkers, managers, psychologists, casework specialists and support staff meet each week to discuss cases and reflect on practice. We talk through, scrutinise and challenge our thinking and decisions. Group Supervision also helps staff manage any emotional response to their challenging work, by creating the space to share their worries and hopes about their work with families. Caseworkers can draw on multiple viewpoints, research and practice expertise to support their practice – saving time and sharing the risk.

We regularly invite partner agencies to Group Supervision sessions. This genuine partnership creates faster and more effective referrals and information sharing, more purposeful wrap-around services and case plans, greater transparency around decisions, and ultimately, better outcomes for children and families.

You will also notice more practitioners, know more information about each client. Practice First builds a team around a family, meaning you are more likely to be able to talk to multiple practitioners or support staff about a case you share.

Better communication

Greater communication with partner agencies helps us create a clearer picture about a child's safety and their family's situation. Practice First encourages FACS to seek feedback from partner agencies on its work and areas for improvement. Regular communication also creates opportunities for innovative and responsive support for families, tailored specifically to their needs.

More time with families

Practice First encourages practitioners to spend more time with families. This could be taking them to appointments or joining in family activities that lead to stronger safety assessments and genuine relationships that support change. We may invite partner agencies to join us on home visits or family activities more regularly to work together to build trust and support clients.

Determined effort to keep families together

Practice First requires practitioners to explore all avenues to keep a family together, where it is safe for the children involved. This means we will be collaborating with, and relying on the expertise of our partners more than ever, to support families through change and create safe homes for children.

What is the evidence?

Practice First operates at 36 of the 82 FACS Community Services Centres (CSCs) in addition to three specialist units.

The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of NSW, together with the University of Melbourne and the Parenting Research Centre, is currently conducting an evaluation of Practice First before its eventual implementation in all CSCs.