

Case study: Using Five to Thrive materials with a vulnerable family

A Family Centre manager gave this example of her work, after saying that she thought perhaps they had got it wrong, as they had used the materials in reverse order, and the blocks would have been upside down! She was reassured that this is not a fixed programme, but a set of resources and, most importantly, ideas to be used in whatever way helps in work with parents. Here is the case study she provided:

Anne is 19 years old, a care leaver, and a very angry young woman. She was completely rejecting of all work with professionals and very resistant and angry about any parenting suggestions made to her. Her first child had been removed from her and placed for adoption. Her second child, Maya, was three months old and in care at the time Anne was referred to the Centre, where she was to be assessed having contact with Maya. The purpose of the contact was to assess whether there was any chance of Maya being able to live with her mother, and Anne was compelled to work with the Centre as a condition of having any chance of caring for her child.

At the Centre they displayed Five to Thrive posters and banners. Anne could not connect at all with using the booklet, so they worked entirely from their observations of her behaviour as a parent, mapped against the posters. This work continued over several months of contact visits.

Anne hardly ever talked to anyone, she always shouted. The Family Centre worker noticed when she did speak quietly and calmly, and helped Anne to see the effect this had on Maya.

“So now let’s think about play.” “I can’t play. I don’t know how to play.” “Well let’s play together and see what happens with Maya.”

“So now Maya seems to have had enough of playing, so let’s just relax.” “Piss off. I’ve just bloody played with her and now she’s getting in a strop.”

“Perhaps she needs you to help her to calm down by relaxing yourself.” “What do you mean, relax? Just tell me what to do.” “How does it feel when you massage your hand or your head like this? Does that feel different? That’s relaxing. So what happens when you do this relaxing with Maya? ... OK ... Play and then relax, and she gets less stropy. That’s stimulating and soothing. That’s what parents do that builds their baby’s brain.”

“Look at what you’re doing now. That’s cuddling Maya. How does that feel to you? How do you think it feels for Maya? That’s you building her brain to trust you and to feel safe.”

“And now look at you responding to Maya – you know what she needs, and you’re doing it.”

So now finally (and back to front!) Anne can claim Maya and meet her attachment needs. She started by saying “I can’t be a good parent”, then she began to say “I think I can be a good parent.” Now she says “I am a good parent – most of the time!”

Maya is home with her Mum, under supervision. Anne is proud to have a Five to Thrive booklet as she now feels it describes her parenting of Maya, and reminds her of what she is achieving day by day.

Some questions to consider

- 1** What do you think might make Five to Thrive effective in work with vulnerable families?
- 2** How could you use Five to Thrive materials, and the ideas these embody, in your own work?

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