

Primary *National Strategy*

Focusing on solutions: a positive approach to improving behaviour

Acknowledgement

The ideas in this training session originate from the work of the Brief Therapy Practice, which brought solution-focused thinking to this country from its origins in the USA. We are grateful to the Brief Therapy Practice for permission to draw on their training materials.

Focusing on solutions: a positive approach to improving behaviour

Objectives

- To introduce a solution-focused approach to solving problems relating to behaviour.
- To practise using solution-focused skills in a safe, supportive environment.
- To gain confidence in trying some of the skills in school.

Resources

- OHTs 1.1–1.10
- Handouts 1.1–1.10
- Flipchart and pens

Session outline	
Introduction and overview	10 minutes
Building on success	15 minutes
Exception finding: when is success being experienced and how can we build on this?	35 minutes
Preferred futures	25 minutes
Rating scales: Where we are now and how close we are to our desired solution?	30 minutes
Conclusion	5 minutes

Introduction and overview

10 minutes

Introduction

OHT 1.1

Aims of the session

- To introduce a solution-focused approach to solving problems relating to behaviour
- To practise using solution-focused skills in a safe, supportive environment
- To gain confidence in trying some of the skills in school

OHT 1.2

Session outline

Introduction and overview	10 minutes
Building on success	15 minutes
Exception finding	35 minutes
Preferred futures	25 minutes
Rating scales	30 minutes
Conclusion	5 minutes

Show **OHTs 1.1** and **1.2**. Briefly outline the aims and structure of the session.

Overview: why this way of working?

In introducing the solution-focused model, emphasise that in these sessions you are working together on issues that relate to one of the most challenging aspects of teaching: the sensitive and effective management of the behaviour of groups and individuals. The management of other people's behaviour can be challenging in itself but is particularly so when the groups or individuals present uncooperative, different, difficult, and sometimes threatening, behaviours.

The key challenge is the subjective and often emotional aspect of behaviour management; there is a significant difference between acknowledging that you do not know how to teach an aspect the Literacy or Numeracy Strategies and not being able to manage the behaviour of children in your class. The difference is a personal one since the price of not being able to manage behaviour is often a feeling of failure and despair. The effect of challenging behaviour on child and adult self-esteem can be profound.

OHT 1.3

What is the solution-focused model?

A positive problem-solving model. The model encourages teachers, and others involved in developing effective approaches to behaviour issues, to adopt a positive stance in which energy is directed towards finding satisfactory ways forward rather than focusing on what is going wrong in a situation.

Explain that behaviour which is difficult to manage is not a fixed entity susceptible to one definition. It is, whatever its characteristics, **a problem containing the potential for a range of solutions (OHT 1.3)**.

The professional development materials which you are exploring together offer a structure for planning effective classroom management which picks up on this idea of problems containing the potential for solutions. The materials use a **positive problem-solving model**.

This model – the solution-focused model – encourages teachers, and others involved in developing effective approaches to behaviour issues, to adopt a positive stance in which energy is directed towards finding satisfactory ways forward rather than focusing on what is going wrong in a situation.

OHT 1.4

Why is a solution-focused model helpful?

Because it acknowledges and addresses:

- the subjective, and often emotional, aspect of promoting positive behaviour
- the effect of challenging behaviour on child and adult self-esteem

by presenting the view that:

- difficult behaviour is a problem which contains the potential for a range of solutions
- a common, solution-focused, language for talking about challenges is a tool for building confidence and bringing about change

Use **OHT 1.4** to emphasise the benefits of the solution-focused approach.

Note that a common solution-focused language runs through all the professional development sessions in these Primary National Strategy materials and ultimately, it is hoped, a common solution-focused approach to promoting positive behaviour will be adopted within the schools using the materials. The use of a common language for exploring solutions should facilitate individual and, ideally, whole-school reflection on aspects of practice that are working well and how these can be increased.

Stress that the solution-focused approach is simple to understand and use and can be taken away today and put into action. It requires good basic listening skills involving:

- genuineness;
- non-judgemental attitude;
- empathy.

But it is **not** counselling and the session will **not** qualify participants to be solution-focused practitioners. It will, however, give them some clear and practical ideas and strategies for promoting a positive approach to solving some of the problems which arise from the challenges of managing behaviour. Participants can feel confident in trying out some of these ideas, because the ideas seek to build on the positive and are therefore not harmful or threatening.

These ideas can be used at **whole-school, class, group or individual level and with adults as well as children.**

Overview: the origins of the solution-focused approach

Say that the approach originated in the 1970s in the USA. Researchers investigated traditional ‘therapies’, which tended to focus at that time on identifying what was not working and looking at ways of reducing the frequency and or intensity of what was not working.

When the researchers looked at videos of interviews and identified moments when clients seemed most positive (i.e. energised, enthusiastic), they noticed that these moments were when therapist and client were:

- talking about the future – where the client wants to get to;
- talking about past successes – where the client has been able to cope.

Solution-focused approaches take both of these factors as key features.

Overview: solution versus problem orientation

OHT 1.5

The behaviour and attendance policy is key to promoting positive behaviour and regular attendance. An effective policy describes the school's:

- beliefs and values about appropriate behaviour
- core principles regarding the development of socially and emotionally skilled young people
- framework for promoting positive behaviour and regular attendance
- systems for minimising and responding to unacceptable behaviour and poor attendance
- framework for monitoring and evaluating practice

Show **OHT 1.5** and explain the difference between an approach that focuses on exploring the problem and one that looks at solutions. Explain that exploring the problem tends to mean:

- focusing on the individual alone rather than the individual in his/her context (yet we all act in a social context);
- examining what's going wrong rather than looking at anything that is working in the situation (for example looking at the children who are misbehaving continually in a class rather than looking at how a teacher is getting others in the class to behave);
- looking at what stops children attending school regularly rather than what makes them attend well/want to attend;
- focusing on the past rather than on where the person wants to get to;
- looking at failure (what's going wrong) rather than areas of success, however small;
- the individual seeing him/herself as a victim rather than one who is coping in some ways (a survivor);
- treating the individual as isolated and 'owning' the whole problem whereas a solution-finding approach offers partnership and empowerment;
- emphasising the negative feelings associated with the problem, e.g. despair or lack of hope, rather than the positive feelings associated with an expectation that things can and will change.

Summarise by showing **OHT 1.6**. The source for the quotation is on **Handout 1.10** (Further information).

OHT 1.6

'Utilising what the client brings with him to meet his needs in such a way that the client can make a satisfactory life for himself'

Steve de Shazer, 1985

Overview: the key features of a solution-focused approach

OHT 1.7

Features of solution-focused approaches

- Building on success
- Exception finding
- Preferred future
- Rating scales

Show **OHT 1.7** and explain that this is a selection from a wide range of solution-focused strategies used by practitioners. They have been chosen because they are particularly accessible and relevant for use in relation to challenging behaviour within the school context. These strategies are:

- **building on success** – strategies to help people focus on what they're doing well rather than what's going badly;

- **exception finding** – a means of reframing the person’s view of the problem by asking when it happens less or less intensely. This gets away from negative blocking and gives information about what coping skills the person is able to use at least some of the time;
- **preferred future** – a means of envisaging life without the problem, which also leads to setting relevant and meaningful goals;
- **rating scales** – a means of ascertaining the person’s perception of him-/herself and the problem area at present, to identify what’s going well (however small) and focus on where the person wants to get to.

Strategy one

Building on success

15 minutes

Take a few minutes to explain the **concept** and the **use of scripts** – a form of words you use frequently to ensure that you say exactly what you intend. Scripts will be referred to in other sessions when we focus on the language teachers use to manage behaviour. It can be helpful to practise scripts so that you begin to feel comfortable in using them. This is particularly important when trying to adopt new approaches.

OHT 1.8

Building on success

The helper's role

- Bringing clients' strengths to their attention
- Using questions to help individuals to focus
- Amplifying small success through questioning
- Ensuring that the description is as concrete and detailed as possible
- Identifying the small things an individual does well
- Giving feedback constructively, objectively, genuinely
- Reinforcing identified strengths in order to increase the likelihood of their being used in future

Show **OHT 1.8** and explain that a key feature of solution-focused work is identifying where people are **already experiencing some success**. Where teachers are experiencing difficulty in managing children’s behaviour they frequently focus only on what’s going wrong and find it difficult to identify anything that is working for them. School cultures can feed into this phenomenon so that it is ‘OK’ to moan about a difficult child or group or class, but not ‘OK’ to talk about any successes that have occurred in teaching them. The less we share success, the less we develop a language to talk about it.

OHT 1.9

Scripts for building on success

- 'What did you do that made that happen?'
- 'What helped you to be able to do that?'
- 'How are you able to use that skill in other situations?'

Use **OHT 1.9** to suggest scripts you might use to explore how a person achieved success.



Activity one: building on success

10 minutes

Handout 1.1

Handout 1.1

Activity one: building on success **10 minutes**

Work in pairs for this activity.

Listener:

- ask your partner to spend a minute or so describing a professional activity he/she has undertaken recently and about which he/she feels quite pleased
- use questions to help your partner to be specific about what exactly it was that he/she was pleased about. For example, you might ask what exactly he/she did that meant that the activity was successful
- ask your partner to identify the skills and strengths he/she utilised to make this a success. Many people will be modest at this point so try to be persistent and ensure that the description is as detailed as possible
- ask your partner to think about what others who might have been involved in or affected by the work (colleagues, children parents, etc.) would have observed and appreciated about the way he/she performed the task
- ask your partner to think about any other times he/she has been able to use these skills and strengths effectively
- ask your partner to think about any ways in which he/she could utilise these skills and strengths further and to identify what other people would see if he/she were doing this
- finally give your partner feedback about what you have observed in this conversation about the personal resources he/she brings to his/her work. Be as specific as you can so that the feedback is concrete and relevant. For example, you might say 'I noticed that you have a lot of skills in the area of ... and that you are really good at ...'

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Distribute **Handout 1.1** and ask participants to complete the activity.

Feedback

5 minutes

Take brief feedback from the group about how it felt to be in the role of listener and how it felt to be asked to talk about one's own successes.

Strategy two

Exception finding: when is success being experienced and how can we build on this?

35 minutes

Take **5 minutes** to explain the **concept of exploring exceptions, how to use exceptions** and the **style of exploratory questioning**.

Concept

Explain that when we are working with a 'problem' situation (whether it be an issue about a child, an issue for a colleague, or indeed a whole-school issue):

- there are **always** times when there are exceptions to the prevailing situation (examples of positive behaviour or at least less negative behaviour) even if the client is not aware of it. Exceptions will be either of intensity, frequency or duration;
- exceptions are often forgotten, ignored or considered non-deliberate flukes. Examining them can give clues to possible solutions;
- exceptions lead to opportunities to emphasise the client's strengths and coping strategies. Clients can be helped to feel less despairing about a situation and to see ways of changing aspects of it;
- individuals tend to do the same thing over and over and get the same responses. This may not be helpful to them; make reference here to the adage 'If you keep on doing what you're doing you'll keep on getting what you're getting'. Exploring exceptions helps to draw attention to these stuck patterns and focuses on small but important details. Once individuals can see that there are times when the undesired thing is not happening, or is happening less forcefully, or less often, they can explore the circumstances which make this possible. Even a small change (which is simply in a person's perception of a situation as well as in his/her behaviour) can lead to a 'ripple effect' which promotes greater change.

Using exceptions

Explain the following points.

- The helper needs to support individuals in challenging their negative generalised view of a situation. When negative experiences happen we often talk in sweeping statements – 'He never listens to me', 'She's always late', 'I feel dreadful' and the helper needs sensitively to challenge some of this generalised thinking.
- The helper may need to be persistent in helping the individual to identify exceptions and can use exception-focused questions to prompt consideration of alternative descriptions of the situation.

Exception-finding questions

Refer to **Handout 1.2** to indicate the type of questions which might be used.

Handout 1.2

Handout 1.2

Exception-finding questions

- General questions
 - Is there a time when the behaviour doesn't occur, or occurs less or less strongly?
 - I'm interested in when it doesn't happen.
 - Can you think of a time when the situation has been better, however slightly?
- Specific questions
 - Are there times when he/she does listen to you?
 - Are there times when you feel less angry about it?
 - Have you ever noticed a time when he/she does finish his/her work?
 - What's the closest you've come to feeling calm when working with this child?
 - Are there times when he/she does play appropriately?
 - During that lesson when did you feel most pleased about how things were going?
 - What things are happening that you would like to see continue?
- Exploratory questions
 - What is different about the times that go better?
 - How can you explain these differences?
 - How did you contribute to the difference?
 - What else did you do?
 - How could more of that happen?
 - What are you doing to stop things getting worse?
- Reinforcing exceptions
 - Is there anything else that might be making a difference at those times?
 - Is anyone else contributing?
 - Who notices the differences?
 - What do they notice?
 - What would colleagues say that you did that helped you to cope?

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Activity two: using exception-finding questions

25 minutes

Talk through the activity on **Handout 1.3**. Participants will work in groups of three if numbers allow. If not, some groups will need to work without an observer.

Explain that the more real the issue is the more useful the exercise will be. If people cannot think of a 'live' issue, however, they could use one of the scenarios from the ratings activity on **Handout 1.8**. Remind the group about confidentiality if participants are using a 'live' issue.

Handout 1.3

Handout 1.3

Activity two: exception finding **30 minutes**

- Work in groups of three. You will all have the opportunity to explore a problem and to use exception finding questions
- All three participants think of a real 'problem' issue that you would like to improve and which you would feel comfortable talking about in a practice session. If you can't think of a relevant issue you could use one of the scenarios from the rating scale activity
- Appoint a helper, a speaker and an observer for the first run through. These roles will rotate later in the activity
- First run-through:
 - Speaker spends **1 minute** setting the scene for the issue/problem
 - Speaker and helper spend **4 minutes exploring possible solutions by using exception-finding questions**. If the helper feels stuck, stop and ask observer for suggestions of possible questions
- Feed back for **5 minutes**:
 - Speaker and observer feed back to helper on what worked, e.g. non-verbal strengths, effective questions, compliments
- Second run-through:
 - Change roles and repeat process
- Third run-through:
 - Change roles and repeat process

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Feedback

5 minutes

- Take brief feedback at the end of the activity.
- Ask what non-verbal strengths were noted, and any effective questions.
- If appropriate these points could be summarised and circulated later.

Strategy three Preferred futures

25 minutes

Take **5 minutes** to explain the **concept**, **how to use the preferred future strategy** and the **scripts** associated with the strategy.

Concept

Explain that this strategy is a way of helping people envisage life without the problem. The purpose of such an exercise is to:

- help an individual explore what they would like to be doing if the problem were not there – this helps to identify goals;
- explore in detail the way the individual him-/herself would feel and behave without the problem, what others (in their personal and professional life) would see and hear, and how others might behave with the individual – this helps the recognition that even a small change in an individual's own behaviour can lead to change in the way others respond to that person.

Explain that the more detailed an individual's description of the preferred future can be, the more the helper will be able to focus on his/her coping strategies and strengths.

- There will always be a tendency to try to focus on talking about the problem. Sensitive but persistent use of exploratory questions is an important strategy; individuals tend to have one or two examples of what might be different but find it hard to explore in minute detail, so 'And what else?' questions are often necessary to flesh out the initial responses. It can be helpful to ask what might seem like 'odd' questions such as 'What is the temperature like in the room?' 'What can you smell?' 'How do your shoes feel?' to get the individual **really** visualising him-/herself in the ideal situation.
- Focusing on what the individual would be **doing and seeing** rather than what he/she would be **feeling** helps to make the potential change more visible and concrete.

Using the strategy

The preferred future can be introduced as:

- a 'miracle' (this is often effective with children), for example, 'Suppose a miracle happened and everything suddenly came right for you. What would things be like? What would you see?';
- b an ideal scenario, for example, 'Can you imagine the perfect lesson with that class? What would it be like?'

Associated scripts

OHT 1.10

Preferred future scripts

'Suppose tonight while you are asleep a miracle happens and the problem no longer exists. You don't know immediately that it has happened because you were asleep. When you wake up what is the first thing you will notice that will let you know that there has been a miracle?'

Show **OHT 1.10** and introduce the idea of the miracle scenario. Refer the participants to **Handout 1.4** for further scripts.

Handout 1.4

Handout 1.4

Preferred future questions

General questions

- If you could wave a magic wand and the problem disappeared what would your life be like?
- What would be the first signs that the miracle had happened?
- What do you find yourself doing that would be the first sign of the miracle?

Exploring the preferred future

- Who else would know that the miracle had happened? How would you know they had noticed?
- Who would be the first person to notice that things were better for you?
- How would that person know?
- What would you be wearing that day?
- Why would you have chosen to wear that?
- How would you walk into the staff room?
- What would the class/individual notice about you when they first encounter you?
- And what else would they notice?
- What would your classroom look like?
- How would you walk around the classroom?
- What would you say to the class/individual that would convey that you were feeling different?
- And what else would you say/do?

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Activity three: exploring the preferred future

15 minutes

Now ask the group to work in pairs on the exploring the preferred future activity on **Handout 1.5**.

Handout 1.5

Handout 1.5

Activity three: exploring the preferred future 15 minutes

- Spend a few minutes thinking of a professional situation about which you are not entirely happy and which you would like to change. It could be a feature of your own classroom management, a difficult child or group, an aspect of your whole-school systems such as playtimes or the use of rewards.
- Decide who will first take the role of listener.
- The speaker then briefly outlines the focus issue.
- The helper takes 5 minutes to guide the speaker through his/her chosen ideal scenario.
- Change roles for 5 minutes.
- Feedback to each other what you have learned about the process.

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Feedback on activity

5 minutes

Take brief feedback at the end about how the participants feel about the process.

Strategy four

Rating scales: Where we are now and how close we are to our desired solution?

30 minutes

Take **5 minutes** to explain the **concept, how to use rating scales** and the **use of rating questions**.

Concept

Start by asking participants to draw a line with 0 at one end and 10 at the other. On this line they put a mark to represent the number at which they would rate themselves now in terms of feeling confident about using the strategies discussed so far. 0 represents no confidence at all and 10 represents complete confidence. Ask a few volunteers for their rankings, which should be slightly different.

Explain that rating scales like the one they have just done are often used in solution-focused work and are effective with children and adults. The scales provide a way of engaging individuals in reflection on their own strengths and coping strategies, and a means of identifying personal goals and steps towards achieving them.

Explain that different scores on the rating activity that participants have just completed are to be expected, because the group will have had different starting points for the session, and their experience of the input will have been different according to prior knowledge, learning styles, personal pressures, etc. The rating technique is an exploration of individuals' perceptions, not of a fixed reality.

Say that rating scales are effective because:

- if repeated on several occasions they are a way of confirming progress;
- by measuring change the helper can encourage more change;
- questioning why people have placed themselves at a certain point helps to elaborate their successful strategies;
- they help the individual focus on the preferred future;
- they are a means of deciding on next steps.

Using rating scales

Explain that rating or scaling is more than a simplistic task of placing oneself on a scale of 0–10. The key for effective use of rating is getting the right descriptors for each end of the scale.

Refer to **Handout 1.6** for examples of the kind of descriptors that might be used. Some are appropriate for adults, some for children and some for both.

Handout 1.6

Handout 1.6

Rating descriptors

- On a scale of 0-10 with 0 representing no confidence at all that you can reach your goal and 10 meaning that although it will probably be tough you will get there, where would you say you are now?
- On a scale of 0-10 with 0 representing you knowing that you wouldn't be prepared to do anything at all to change things and 10 representing your being prepared to do anything it takes, where are you now?
- If 0 is the worst your temper outbursts have ever been and 10 is the most under control, where are you now?
- On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being your reading when you started at this school and 10 representing being one of the best readers, where would you say you are now?
- On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being permanently excluded and 10 being a perfect pupil, where would you say you are now?
- If 0 on this scale means that you always feel high levels of anxiety before teaching this group and 10 means that you feel completely calm and confident about teaching them, where would you rate yourself at the moment?

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Explain that individuals are asked to place themselves on their scale in the way that the participants have just done.

Explain the next stage: once the individuals have placed themselves on the scale the helper then explores with them the successful strategies they are already employing to put themselves at that point, rather than lower down the scale. (If they place themselves at 0 explore with them what they are doing that means they didn't go to minus 1 or lower). This is the key feature – helping individuals to see that they are already doing a number of things which are preventing failure.

The helper then needs to establish where each individual wants to get to on the scale – what would be 'good enough' and how he/she would know that he/she had got there.

Finally, the helper supports the individuals in thinking of something he/she could do more of that might move him/her up one point on the scale – and how he/she would know that he/she had moved up.

Rating scale questions

The helper needs to ask gently persistent questions to establish what strategies are already working – these might include 'And what else?' or could ask for other perspectives, for example 'Is anyone else contributing to you being successful?'

Refer to **Handout 1.7** for examples of questions.

Handout 1.7

Handout 1.7

Rating scale scripts

- So what is it you are doing that means you are at x and not at y?
- What is stopping things getting worse?
- What will tell you that you have moved one point up the scale?
- Where on the scale represents where you want to get to? What would you be doing then?
- What will be the first sign that things are different?
- What will you be doing then that you are not doing now?

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Activity four: using rating scales to establish goals and recognise progress

20 minutes

Now ask the group to work in pairs on the ratings activity on **Handout 1.8**. You may want to suggest that at this stage they work with different partners than previously.

You may want to allocate scenarios from the handout rather than give free choice in order to get a spread of responses.

Handout 1.8

Handout 1.8

Activity four: using rating scales **20 minutes**

- Work in pairs.
- Choose one scenario from the list below.
- Together decide a) what would be helpful rating scales for the scenario you have selected (i.e. how you would best describe 0 and 10) and b) some questions you might use to explore where the person would rate him-/herself now, what he/she is already doing to achieve that rating and where he/she wants to get to.
- Spend about 5 minutes trying out these questions in role-play with one person being the helper and the other the subject of the scenario.
- Discuss how effective your questions were and if there are others you would now add.
- If you have time try another scenario. Choose a different type from the one you have already done.
- At the end of the activity give the facilitator your list of questions and the scenario number so that these can be circulated to the rest of the group.

Scenarios

1. You are working with a teacher who has some children with challenging behaviour in her class. She says she has done 'everything she can' and that 'nothing works'. She feels that she shouldn't have to teach children like this and that these children shouldn't be in a mainstream school.
2. You are supporting a teaching assistant who regularly works with a boy who is on medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. She has a good relationship with him but is concerned that his teacher perceives him very negatively and that the boy is heading for a permanent exclusion.
3. You are supporting a newly qualified teacher who is struggling with aspects of basic classroom management. She tells you that she is feeling very depressed and is feeling that she will not be able to succeed as a teacher.
4. The mother of an anxious and withdrawn girl whom you have taught for the past two terms has asked to see you because she is concerned about the lack of improvement in her daughter's situation.
5. You are working with a child who has outbursts of very aggressive behaviour towards his peers. In a one-to-one situation with you he is cooperative and he says he wants to improve his behaviour.
6. The child you are working with is highly anxious and has all but stopped coming to school. He is an able pupil but his poor attendance is significantly affecting his progress.

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Feedback on activity

5 minutes

Take brief feedback at the end about how participants feel about the process.

Collect the responses at the end of the exercise and arrange to circulate them to the group.

Conclusion

5 minutes

OHT 1.7

Features of solution-focused approaches

- Building on success
- Exception finding
- Preferred future
- Rating scales

- Return to **OHT 1.7** and summarise key points of solution-focused working.
- Give out **Handout 1.9** as a ready-reference sheet of the scripts and strategies that participants have explored.
- Suggest that participants now try some of these strategies in their working roles.
- Suggest that it would be helpful if people could pair up to offer support through informal meetings or telephone calls as they start to try out these ideas.
- Prepare participants to share some of their experiences in the next session.
- Refer to **Handout 1.10** for any participants interested in finding out more about solution-focused ways of working.

Handout 1.9

Handout 1.9

Scripts for building on success

- What are you doing that made that happen?
- What helped you to be able to do that?
- How are you able to use that skill in other situations?

Exception-finding questions

- General questions
 - Is there a time when the behaviour doesn't occur, or occurs less or less strongly?
 - I'm interested in when it doesn't happen.
 - Can you think of a time when the situation has been better, however slightly?
- Specific questions
 - Are there times when he/she does listen to you?
 - Are there times when you feel less angry about it?
 - Have you ever noticed a time when he/she does teach/recher work?
 - What's the closest you've come to feeling calm when working with this child?
 - Are there times when he/she does play appropriately?
 - During that lesson when did you feel most pleased about how things were going?
 - What things are happening that you would like to see continue?
- Exploratory questions
 - What is different about the times that go better?
 - How can you explain those differences?
 - How did you contribute to the differences?
 - What else did you do?
 - How could more of that happen?
 - What are you doing to keep things getting worse?
- Reinforcing exceptions
 - Is there anything else that might be making a difference at those times?
 - Is anyone else contributing?
 - Who notices the differences?
 - What do they notice?
 - What would colleagues say that you did that helped you to cope?

Preferred future scripts

Suppose tonight while you are asleep a miracle happens and the problem no longer exists. You don't know immediately that it has happened because you wake asleep. When you wake up what is the first thing you will notice that will let you know that there has been a miracle?

Handout 1.9 page 2 of 2

Preferred future questions

- General questions
 - If you could have a magic wand and the problem disappeared what would your life be like?
 - What would be the first signs that the miracle had happened?
 - What do you first yourself doing that would be the first sign of the miracle?
- Exploring the preferred future
 - Who else would know that the miracle had happened? How would you know they had noticed?
 - Who would be the first person to notice that things were better for you?
 - How would that person know?
 - What would you be wearing that day?
 - Why would you have chosen to wear that?
 - How would you walk into the staff room?
 - What would the class/individual notice about you when they first encounter you?
 - And what else would they notice?
 - What would your classroom look like?
 - How would you walk around the classroom?
 - What would you say to the class/individual that would convey that you were feeling different?
 - And what else would you say?

Rating descriptors

- On a scale of 0-10 with 0 representing no confidence at all that you can reach your goal and 10 meaning that although it will probably be tough you will get there, which would you say you are now?
- On a scale of 0-10 with 0 representing you knowing that you would not be prepared to do anything at all to change things and 10 representing your being prepared to do anything it takes, where are you now?
- If 0 is the worst your former outbursts have ever been and 10 is the most useful contact, where are you now?
- On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being your reading when you started at this school and 10 representing being one of the best readers, where would you say you are now?
- On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being permanently excluded and 10 being a perfect pupil, where would you say you are now?
- If 0 on this scale means that you always feel high levels of anxiety before teaching the group and 10 means that you feel completely calm and confident about teaching them, where would you rate yourself at the moment?

Rating scale scripts

- So what is it you are doing that means you are at a and not at y?
- What is stopping things getting worse?
- What will tell you that you have moved one point up the scale?
- When on the scale represents when you want to get to? What would you be doing then?
- What will be the first sign that things are different?
- What will you be doing then that you are not doing now?

Handout 1.10

Further information

Further reading

- Ajmal, Y. and Rees, I. (eds.) (2001) *Solutions in Schools*, BT Press
- De Shazer, S. (1985) *Keys to solutions in Brief Therapy*, Norton
- De Shazer, S. (1988) *Clues: Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy*, Norton
- George, E., Iveson, C. and Ratmer, H. (1999) *Problem to Solution*, BT Press
- Rhodes, J. and Ajmal, Y. (1995) *Solution-focused Thinking in schools*, BT Press

Further information and training on solution-focused work in schools

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Aims of the session

- To introduce a solution-focused approach to solving problems relating to behaviour
- To practise using solution-focused skills in a safe, supportive environment
- To gain confidence in trying some of the skills in school

Session outline

Introduction and overview	10 minutes
Building on success	15 minutes
Exception finding	35 minutes
Preferred futures	25 minutes
Rating scales	30 minutes
Conclusion	5 minutes



What is the solution-focused model?

A positive problem-solving model. The model encourages teachers, and others involved in developing effective approaches to behaviour issues, to adopt a positive stance in which energy is directed towards finding satisfactory ways forward rather than focusing on what is going wrong in a situation.

Why is a solution-focused model helpful?

Because it acknowledges and addresses:

- the subjective, and often emotional, aspect of promoting positive behaviour
- the effect of challenging behaviour on child and adult self-esteem

by presenting the view that:

- difficult behaviour is a problem which contains the potential for a range of solutions
- a common, solution-focused, language for talking about challenges is a tool for building confidence and bringing about change



Problem focus

Individual as problem

What is not working

Analysing past

Stuckness

Failures

Victim

Isolated (blamed)

Hopelessness/despair

Solution focus

Individual as whole

What works

Focusing on preferred future

Movement

Successes

Survivor

Partnership (empowered)

Expectation change





'Utilising what the client brings with him to meet his needs in such a way that the client can make a satisfactory life for himself'

Steve de Shazer, 1985



Features of solution-focused approaches

- Building on success
- Exception finding
- Preferred future
- Rating scales

Building on success

The helper's role

- Bringing clients' strengths to their attention
 - Using questions to help individuals to focus
 - Amplifying small success through questioning
 - Ensuring that the description is as concrete and detailed as possible
 - Identifying the small things an individual does well
 - Giving feedback constructively, objectively, genuinely
 - Reinforcing identified strengths in order to increase the likelihood of their being used in future
-

Scripts for building on success

- 'What did you do that made that happen?'
- 'What helped you to be able to do that?'
- 'How are you able to use that skill in other situations?'



Preferred future scripts

'Suppose tonight while you are asleep a miracle happens and the problem no longer exists. You don't know immediately that it has happened because you were asleep. When you wake up what is the first thing you will notice that will let you know that there has been a miracle?'



Handout 1.1

Activity one: building on success

10 minutes

Work in pairs for this activity.

Listener:

- ask your partner to spend a minute or so describing a professional activity he/she has undertaken recently and about which he/she feels quite pleased
- use questions to help your partner to be specific about what exactly it was that he/she was pleased about. For example, you might ask what exactly he/she did that meant that the activity was successful
- ask your partner to identify the skills and strengths he/she utilised to make this a success. Many people will be modest at this point so try to be persistent and ensure that the description is as detailed as possible
- ask your partner to think about what others who might have been involved in or affected by the work (colleagues, children parents, etc.) would have observed and appreciated about the way he/she performed the task
- ask your partner to think about any other times he/she has been able to use these skills and strengths effectively
- ask your partner to think about any ways in which he/she could utilise these skills and strengths further and to identify what other people would see if he/she were doing this
- finally, give your partner feedback about what you have observed in this conversation about the personal resources he/she brings to his/her work. Be as specific as you can so that the feedback is concrete and relevant. For example, you might say 'I noticed that you have a lot of skills in the area of ... and that you are really good at ...'

Handout 1.2

Exception-finding questions

- General questions
 - Is there a time when the behaviour doesn't occur, or occurs less or less strongly?
 - I'm interested in when it doesn't happen.
 - Can you think of a time when the situation has been better, however slightly?
- Specific questions
 - Are there times when he/she does listen to you?
 - Are there times when you feel less angry about it?
 - Have you ever noticed a time when he/she does finish his/her work?
 - What's the closest you've come to feeling calm when working with this child?
 - Are there times when he/she does play appropriately?
 - During that lesson when did you feel most pleased about how things were going?
 - What things are happening that you would like to see continue?
- Exploratory questions
 - What is different about the times that go better?
 - How can you explain these differences?
 - How did you contribute to the difference?
 - What else did you do?
 - How could more of that happen?
 - What are you doing to stop things getting worse?
- Reinforcing exceptions
 - Is there anything else that might be making a difference at those times?
 - Is anyone else contributing?
 - Who notices the differences?
 - What do they notice?
 - What would colleagues say that you did that helped you to cope?

Handout 1.3

Activity two: exception finding

30 minutes

- Work in groups of three. You will all have the opportunity to explore a problem and to use exception finding questions
- All three participants think of a real 'problem' issue that you would like to improve and which you would feel comfortable talking about in a practice session. If you can't think of a relevant issue you could use one of the scenarios from the rating scale activity
- Appoint a helper, a speaker and an observer for the first run through. These roles will rotate later in the activity
- First run-through:
 - Speaker spends **1 minute** setting the scene for the issue/problem
 - Speaker and helper spend **4 minutes exploring possible solutions by using exception-finding questions**. If the helper feels stuck, stop and ask observer for suggestions of possible questions
- Feed back for **5 minutes**:
 - Speaker and observer feed back to helper on what worked, e.g. non-verbal strengths, effective questions, compliments
- Second run-through:
 - Change roles and repeat process
- Third run-through:
 - Change roles and repeat process

Handout 1.4

Preferred future questions

General questions

- If you could wave a magic wand and the problem disappeared what would your life be like?
- What would be the first signs that the miracle had happened?
- What do you find yourself doing that would be the first sign of the miracle?

Exploring the preferred future

- Who else would know that the miracle had happened? How would you know they had noticed?
- Who would be the first person to notice that things were better for you?
- How would that person know?
- What would you be wearing that day?
- Why would you have chosen to wear that?
- How would you walk into the staff room?
- What would the class/individual notice about you when they first encounter you?
- And what else would they notice?
- What would your classroom look like?
- How would you walk around the classroom?
- What would you say to the class/individual that would convey that you were feeling different?
- And what else would you say/do?

Handout 1.5

Activity three: exploring the preferred future 15 minutes

- Spend a few minutes thinking of a professional situation about which you are not entirely happy and which you would like to change. It could be a feature of your own classroom management, a 'difficult' child or group, an aspect of your whole-school systems such as playtimes or the use of rewards.
- Decide who will first take the role of listener.
- The speaker then briefly outlines the focus issue.
- The helper takes 5 minutes to guide the speaker through his/her chosen ideal scenario.
- Change roles for 5 minutes.
- Feedback to each other what you have learned about the process.

Handout 1.6

Rating descriptors

- On a scale of 0–10 with 0 representing no confidence at all that you can reach your goal and 10 meaning that although it will probably be tough you will get there, where would you say you are now?
- On a scale of 0–10 with 0 representing you knowing that you wouldn't be prepared to do anything at all to change things and 10 representing your being prepared to do anything it takes, where are you now?
- If 0 is the worst your temper outbursts have ever been and 10 is the most under control, where are you now?
- On a scale of 1–10 with 1 being your reading when you started at this school and 10 representing being one of the best readers, where would you say you are now?
- On a scale of 1–10 with 1 being permanently excluded and 10 being a perfect pupil, where would you say you are now?
- If 0 on this scale means that you always feel high levels of anxiety before teaching this group and 10 means that you feel completely calm and confident about teaching them, where would you rate yourself at the moment?

Handout 1.7

Rating scale scripts

- So what is it you are doing that means you are at x and not at y?
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Handout 1.8

Activity four: using rating scales

20 minutes

- Work in pairs.
- Choose one scenario from the list below.
- Together decide a) what would be helpful rating scales for the scenario you have selected (i.e. how you would best describe 0 and 10) and b) some questions you might use to explore where the person would rate him-/herself now, what he/she is already doing to achieve that rating and where he/she wants to get to.
- Spend about 5 minutes trying out these questions in role-play with one person being the helper and the other the subject of the scenario.
- Discuss how effective your questions were and if there are others you would now add.
- If you have time try another scenario. Choose a different type from the one you have already done.
- At the end of the activity give the facilitator your list of questions and the scenario number so that these can be circulated to the rest of the group.

Scenarios

1. You are working with a teacher who has some children with challenging behaviour in her class. She says she has done 'everything she can' and that 'nothing works'. She feels that she shouldn't have to teach children like this and that these children shouldn't be in a mainstream school.
2. You are supporting a teaching assistant who regularly works with a boy who is on medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. She has a good relationship with him but is concerned that his teacher perceives him very negatively and that the boy is heading for a permanent exclusion.
3. You are supporting a newly qualified teacher who is struggling with aspects of basic classroom management. She tells you that she is feeling very depressed and is feeling that she will not be able to succeed as a teacher.
4. The mother of an anxious and withdrawn girl whom you have taught for the past two terms has asked to see you because she is concerned about the lack of improvement in her daughter's situation.
5. You are working with a child who has outbursts of very aggressive behaviour towards his peers. In a one-to-one situation with you he is cooperative and he says he wants to improve his behaviour.
6. The child you are working with is highly anxious and has all but stopped coming to school. He is an able pupil but his poor attendance is significantly affecting his progress.

Handout 1.9

Scripts for building on success

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- What helped you to be able to do that?
- How are you able to use that skill in other situations?

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