

# Reflective Practice: A Quick Guide

This guide has been put together by Siobhan Maclean and Wendy Roberts, as part of the Effective Child Protection Project for Gwynedd Council.

It brings together some core ideas about reflective practice in social work and showcases some models of reflection developed by a small group of social workers working together. With thanks to Julie Bragan, Sara Pozzi, Alisha Jones and Glenys Campbell for their involvement.



# The What? Why? How? Framework

This is the basic framework for reflection and problem solving in social work. Such that when we are working with a family, we should be looking to answer the basic questions of:

- **What** is happening for this child and their family?
- **Why** has this situation come about?
- **How** can I work with them to bring about improved outcomes?

This basic **What? Why? How?** framework is key in social work. However, it is very easy for the 'why?' question to fall off a busy practitioner's agenda. A thought process which considers 'What is happening?' and 'How do I respond?' means that things get done, but in a potentially process driven way. When the why question is missing from our thought process it means that professional curiosity is lost.



The What? Why? How? framework could also be used to explore your planning and what you want to be clear about from supervision discussion. Looking at each family you are working with at the moment are you able to answer the following questions:

- **What** are you going to do in the next visit / meeting or the next few visits with the family?
- **Why** are you going to do these things?
- **How** are you going to do them and how will they impact on the child and their family?

‘Why?’ is the most powerful question we can ask. It prompts real reflection and helps to create hypotheses and build connections in practice.

In their research on supervision Wilkins, Lynch and Antonopoulou (2018) listened to audio recordings of supervision. To consider the quality of supervision they looked at whether this discussion helped the social worker think more carefully about what they are going to do, how and why.

This booklet follows the basic framework of What? Why? How? By exploring:

- **What** do we mean by reflective practice?
- **Why** is this important in practice?
- **How** do we improve reflective practice?

# What is Reflective Practice?

In the simplest sense reflective practice is about the mental process of trying to structure or restructure an experience, a problem or existing knowledge or insights (Korthagen 2001 : 58).

In social work, reflective practice is highlighted in professional training (where it is used as a key learning method), but once qualified social workers sometimes lose sight of the importance of reflection for practice and outcomes.



A reflection in a mirror is an exact replica of what is in front of it. Reflection in professional practice, however, gives back not what it is, but what it might be, an improvement on the original. Biggs (1999 : 6)

depth

theorising

spaces

critical thinking

making time

values

power

learning

next steps

understanding

analysing

emotions

feedback

growth

imagination

hypothesis

re-evaluate

questioning

open

joining the dots

knowledge

barriers

written evidence

zeal

you

# Why is Reflective Practice Important?

Social workers often see themselves as practical 'hands on' professionals. This can mean that the value of reflective practice is not fully recognised. How often do people comment on the value of your thinking? They may, though, comment on the value of something you have 'done'. Working in a reflective way recognises that thinking and doing cannot actually be separated. Action is always influenced by thought in some way. People and their lives are complex. Social work recognises this complexity and good social work challenges routinised ways of working. This is only possible with reflective practice.

Reflective practice is an essential aspect of social work and in many ways should not be seen as something separate to social work – but instead as something which is integral to good social work practice. Indeed, the skills and qualities required for reflective practice are very similar to the skills and qualities which are needed for best practice in social work.

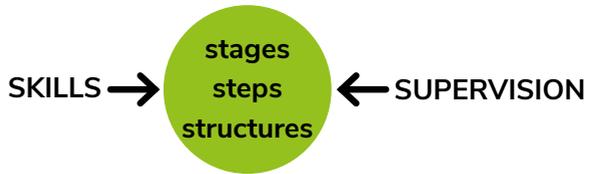
There are many reasons why reflective practice is essential in social work, including:

- Reflective practice can lead to better social work practice and improved outcomes for service users
- If we can encourage families to be more reflective on their own circumstances this can really assist in bringing about collaboration and change
- It helps practitioners to explore the basic assumptions underpinning their work and therefore helps to ensure ethical practice
- Children and families should be able to trust that they are working with practitioners who recognise the vital importance of the work they do and who make the time to reflect on this
- Reflection is intrinsically linked with learning and so can enhance professional development
- Practitioners who reflect on their practice find it supports job satisfaction and confidence in their role
- Reflective practice is a key aspect of professionalism
- Working in a reflective way improves accountability

A phrase that is often used when we are exploring learning is “with the benefit of hindsight...” Social workers should recognise and draw on the benefit of foresight and insight as well as hindsight.

# HOW

When looking towards questions that start with 'how' in social work we are really looking towards skills. How we intervene or how we respond is all about the skills that we use in practice. Essentially the question 'how do we improve reflective practice?' is all about skills. Some of the key skills required for reflective practice in social work have already been mentioned in this booklet. At this point we will look at some other words beginning with the letter S. These three words help us to build on skills in reflection and should be a key aspect of supervision (the 5th S).



## Stages

It is widely accepted that there is a cycle of reflection, which is made up of three stages of reflection:

### Reflection for action

This is the reflection that a practitioner does before engaging the work. They might think through questions such as "What will I do if... how might I ...." It is based on planning and anticipation.

### Reflection in action

This is the reflection that a practitioner does during the work, as things unfold. It involves:

- *Being critical* ("that didn't work very well, I'd better try....")
- *Storing up experiences for the future* ("I could have dealt with that better, if she says it again I will....."). This might also be about identifying issues for reflection on action at a later stage.
- *Analysing what is happening* ("he is doing that to test me, I think I should respond by....")

## Reflection on action

This is separate to, but linked with, reflection in action. It is the reflection done later, after the event – talking things through informally, or formally with colleagues, discussion in supervision or reflective exploration in writing.

Reflection on action is free from urgency and any pressures of the actual event. As such it allows for deeper more analytical reflection. For example, reflection on action provides the opportunity to explore other peoples' views on the event, with feedback from others adding an extra dimension to the reflection.

Therefore, in relation to a social worker's practice, we could consider the three forms of reflection in terms of:

Reflection for action



planning for the interview/assessment

Reflection in action



reflection as the assessment visit is taking place

Reflection on action



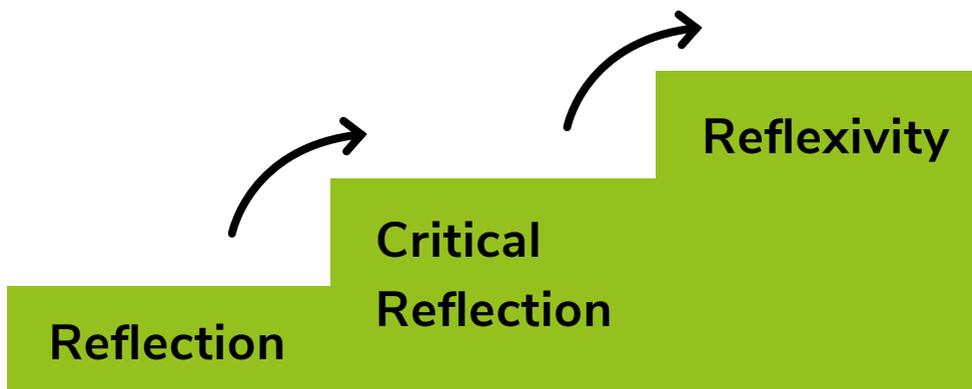
thinking things through after the visit perhaps talking it through in supervision

Cumulatively the three forms of reflection should lead to an ACTION PLAN for taking further action (taking us into reflection for action again)



# Steps

Reflective practice calls for a specific skill set which needs to be developed over time. Development as a reflective practitioner can be considered in relation to the following steps of reflection:



A practitioner who is working in a reflective way incorporates all three steps of reflection into their thinking and their practice. Are you using all three steps? Are all three steps addressed in your supervision?

**Reflection:** Is about thinking actively and persistently, exploring thoughts and insights, feelings and learning.

*Example reflective question: "What went well? What didn't go well?"*

*Example critically reflective question: "What were the power dynamics in the situation? How did they impact on what happened?"*

**Critical reflection:**

Practitioners sometimes misunderstand this as being about focusing on what didn't go well or being self-critical. However, the key difference between reflection and critical reflection is adding issues of power and the socio-political context. This step is also about going into sufficient depth to create meaningful change.

**Reflexivity:** As a concept reflexivity comes originally from research. It adds issues of relationships and inter-connections (connectivity) that are not always apparent. Reflexivity also involves a clear focus on self-awareness.

*Example reflexive question: "Why did I see it in that way? What impact did I have on that family? What impact did the work have on me?"*

# Structures

In many ways, reflection is about structuring thoughts. Essentially, models of reflection provide a structure for thinking things through. There are many models of reflection that social workers can draw on, although only a limited number of models are taught as part of social work training.

Essentially, there are two different types of models – process models and component models.

## Process Models



Process models provide a process to be worked through in a particular order. They are designed to be used to look back on something after an event has occurred and are therefore only useful to reflect on action. These are often the models that are taught on professional training programmes, since the focus there is on reflecting in hindsight to learn from what has happened and improve future practice.

Practitioners are often most comfortable with process models, possibly because their training has equipped them with knowledge about these models. However, process models do not encourage reflection in everyone. Sometimes thinking which is guided by a process model simply leads to process driven practice. If you are using a process model of reflection, make sure that you are drilling into the detail of reflection, using the key steps throughout.

Gibbs (1988) developed a continuous cycle of reflection made up of six stages. Although developed as a framework for reflection on nursing practice, this model is very popular in social work training. The following provides some questions to encourage reflection influenced by the model:

### **Stage 1 Description**

What happened?

Where did it happen?

What did you do?

Who else was there? Why they were there? What were they doing?

### **Stage 2 Feelings and thoughts: Feelings impact on thoughts which in turn impact on actions.**

What were you thinking at the time?

How do you feel now?

### **Stage 3 Evaluation**

What went well?

What didn't go so well?

### **Stage 4 Analysis**

What knowledge were you drawing on?

Was it useful?

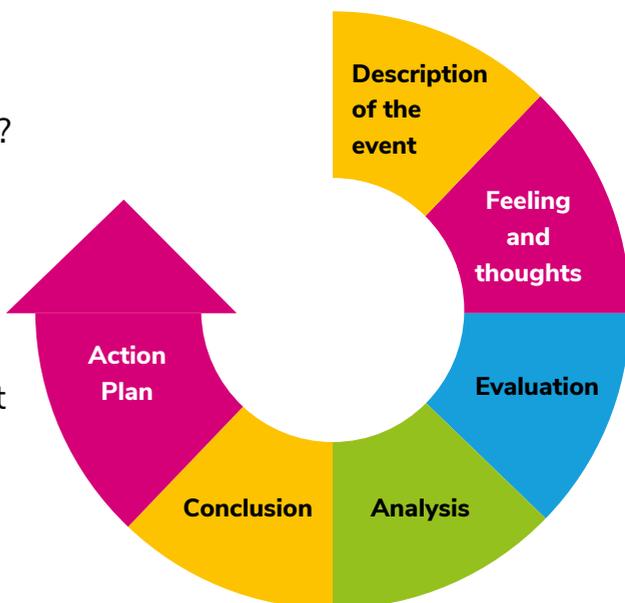
Do you have a different understanding now looking back? Why?

### **Stage 5 Conclusion**

What have you learnt?

### **Stage 6 Action planning**

What will you do differently next time?



# Component Models

Component models suggest a range of issues (components) for reflection, these can be considered in any order although it is important to remember to look at how each of the issues (components) impact on the others. As such, component models can be used at any stage of reflection. Sometimes component models leave practitioners feeling less confident as they do not provide a step by step process but they are much more flexible to be used in a range of situations.

## The Big Six

Critical reflection is made up of six key components:

**Power:** Rethinking where power lies and how it might impact on what is happening.

**Values:** Having an awareness of values and the implications these have in terms of practice.

**Emotions:** Exploring feelings and developing and using emotional intelligence.

**Knowledge:** Drawing on knowledge or developing new knowledge and practice wisdom.

**Self-awareness:** Developing self-awareness and understanding the impact of 'self' in practice.

**Uncertainty:** Reflection often creates uncertainty, and we need to be willing to live with that uncertainty.

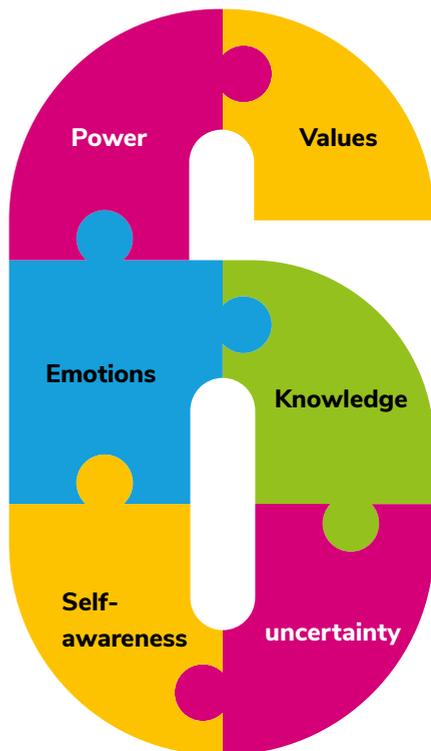
Many of the roles and tasks that social workers have are also underpinned by these six components. For example, think about assessments; decision making; safeguarding practice; multi-agency working. The Big 6 are relevant in every situation.

Think about a family you are involved with at the moment.

Work through each of the Big 6 in turn: what might this



framework highlight in terms of your reflection?



Component models like the Big 6 can help to enhance analysis in practice. They can help you to see the whole picture in light of the parts.

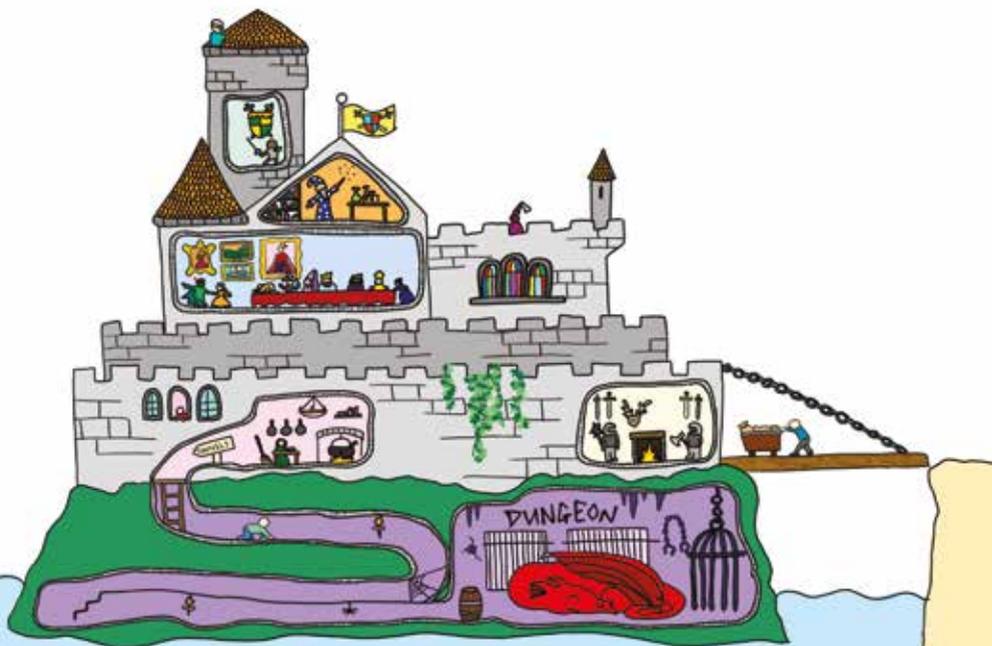
### **Developing our own models of reflection**

Social workers from across Gwynedd came together in a couple of short sessions to discuss how they reflected on situations and to explore the structures of reflection that helped them. As part of these discussions, we worked together to create some new models of reflection. The models created were diverse and we agreed to include a number of them in this booklet as we need to be able to draw on different models in different situations and different models work for different practitioners.

# OUR PROJECT MODELS

## Welsh Castle

The castle model of reflection can be used in a range of ways to support practitioners to reflect on practice with a family, but also to support reflective direct work with children and their families. The image can be supported by thinking through the following parts of the castle and what they might represent:



- **The castle:** What issues are there of power and oppression?
- **The dragon:** What are the risks in this situation?
- **The drawbridge:** What are the protective factors and who is controlling these?
- **The flag and coat of arms represents 'context':** Are you considering the family and community context and the organisational context of your practice?
- **The tunnels:** What is going on beneath the surface? What can't you see?
- **The lookout tower:** What can you see or hear? What do things look like?
- **There are often crumbling parts to a castle** which may enable us to consider what it is that we are trying to preserve – what is our intervention?
- **The strong parts of the castle** may bring about a focus on strengths in the situation
- **The moat represents the barriers:** What are the barriers? What are we trying to overcome and what might help us to overcome them?

These points are just suggestions. What does a castle represent to you? How might that link to reflection? What else can you see in the castle? How might that help you think about things differently?

In direct work you could adapt the questions or add other questions, so that you could use the image to discuss:

The dragon: Does the dragon look scary? What scares you?

What is the magician doing?

What is happening in the castle? What happens in your house?

# In Someone Else's



This model encourages the practitioner to consider the situation from another person's perspective. It provides a range of questions to think through before, during and after a piece of work, encouraging a reflective approach at every stage:

## **Before:**

- Is it a visit, meeting, supervision?
- Is it in person? Or virtual (COVID times!)
- Who will be there (the shoes!)
- What is the purpose? My expectation?
- What might their expectation be?
- What do I need to be mindful of? (language, culture, communication etc..)

**During:**

- Is there a clear structure / purpose to my practice?
- Is it clear to me?
- Is it clear to them?
- Am I being understood? Check. If not, what can I do differently?
- Am I listening to them? Really listening?
- Is there a plan? Do I agree? Do they agree?

**After:**

- Did it go as I expected? Why / why not?
- Did it go as they expected? Why / why not?
- How did it end? Did I feel understood?
- Did they feel understood? How do I know?
- Is there a shared purpose / goal?
- If not, why? Could I have communicated differently? If so how?
- Plan for further intervention - this should be: What have I learnt? What will I do the same / differently in the future?

Working from a position of empathy and compassion are important in social work and in reflective practice, helping to extend reflection from a personal thinking process to wider considerations.



# A Walk in Wales

Reflective practice is often related to a journey. This photograph of the start of a walk in Wales could be used to prompt reflection.

The path is the journey

- Whose journey is it? Family? Individual? Professional?
- Who is on the journey with you? Parents, children, foster carers....

You each have a backpack, in the backpack each person has different tools

- What tools do you carry with you?
- What tools does each individual need for the journey? Do they have those in their backpack?

Each slate you pass on the left is other organisations, what is their input to your journey?

- Education
- Health
- Youth Offending Team
- Police
- Community resources

The fence could represent boundaries:

- How are you maintaining professional boundaries in this work?
- Are there any boundaries which act as barriers? How? How are you managing these?

The Lake is the point of reflection on action

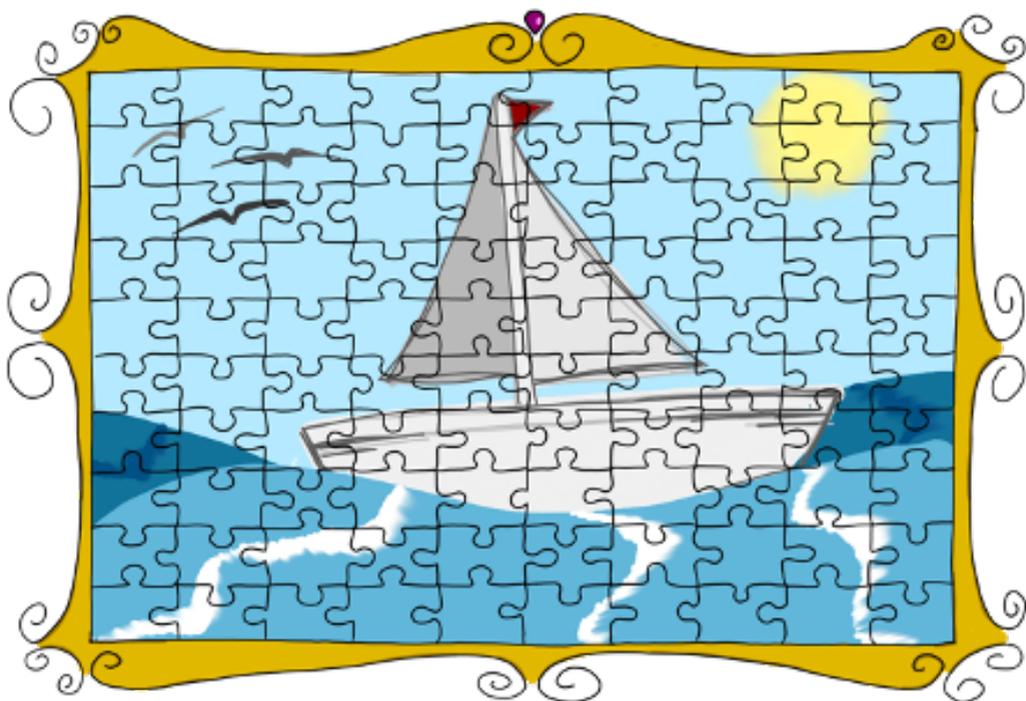
- When you arrive at the lake look in and reflect on what has happened during the journey.
- Who else is still standing with you around the lake, what do they see when they reflect on their own journey?

There are a number of other things in the picture. For example, the mountains might represent barriers.

What do you see in the photograph? How might that help you to think more reflectively about what is happening?

What about the weather? That can make every walk across the same landscape different.

# The Jigsaw of Reflection and Analysis



This model recognises that social work practice is very often like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. Where we are involved in a family's life, there is always a bigger picture to see, but there may be pieces of information missing which make it difficult for us to see the full picture.

In reflecting on the jigsaw in practice, you might want to think through the following questions:

- Who decides what the picture is going to look like? (This can help us to consider power dynamics in a situation and think about where control lies).
- Is there a picture on the box to follow? (Or are you working without much of an idea – making it up as you go along?)
- Are you being systematic and planned, starting with the corners and the edges or are you starting by putting clearly matching pieces together wherever they lie in the whole picture?
- If there are missing pieces, where might you be able to find them? Is the picture clear enough without those pieces or are they essential to see things clearly?

The jigsaw puzzle analogy really helps to identify how component models can assist with analysis and seeing the whole picture clearly. In many ways analysis is like looking at each jigsaw piece to examine it in detail. In social work analysis is often taken forward into synthesis. The dictionary definition of synthesis is “the combination of components or elements to form a connected whole.” Synthesis is about putting the pieces of the puzzle together to form a fuller picture.

Take a look again at page 5. There are a number of jigsaw pieces which contain words relating to reflection. One puzzle piece is blank. By analysing the pieces that are already there can you see what the missing piece would be? Sometimes reflection and analysis in itself is a puzzle.

This guide is based around the simple structure of 'what? why? how?' as you work through the booklet perhaps you could reflect on how you will use the contents.

The guide provides a number of structures which you could use to reflect on your practice. You might find some of the structures useful to reflect on aspects of your practice or to prepare for supervision. Working out which models of reflection work for you is often a good starting point. However, it is important to keep the models you use under review. What starts off as prompting your thinking and aiding reflection can end up part of a routine way of working and the structure might become 'stale'. Keeping reflective practice fresh is perhaps the most important thing you can do.

As part of the project, we hope to develop a range of other materials which you can use to embed reflection into your practice. Watch out for these and take every reflective opportunity you can.

## References

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