

Formulation in Risk Practice 2

Carole Murphy, CYCJ

Being able to formulate is a key skill for practitioners working with children whose behaviour presents a risk of harm to others; however, it is not an easy skill to master. CYCJ [Information Sheet 68](#) detailed what formulation is, its purpose and the elements that create a good formulation. This information sheet provides some practical suggestions about how to use formulation with children and their parents/carers.

A good formulation is like a really good story, which explains in detail how someone's life has developed. In the youth justice context, this includes a story that explains why the child has engaged in offending behaviour. Some children have no story at all about their life, or a confused story, or a story dominated only by themes of abuse, threats and violence. Our job is to help them develop a story that offers them a comprehensive explanation of their experience and behaviour. Developing the formulation should be a collaborative process between the practitioner and the child and the child's family/carers where this is appropriate, and should draw on information from the multi-agency team.

In order to be useful, a formulation should be understood by and acceptable to the child. As a starting point for collaborative discussion, it is helpful to ask the child about their views on both the request for the assessment and what they see as the presenting problem. Whilst practitioners are the experts in assessing and managing/reducing risk, the child should be considered the expert on their experiences, and the meaning of these experiences, so it is important that they are given the opportunity to contribute as much as they can. At the same time, there are children who have no idea why things have happened and are at a complete loss to explain most of their experience. These children will need the practitioner to take a lead role in writing the story based on files. It can often take time to build up trust with the child, so the assessment and resulting formulation should be expected to take a few sessions. It can also be helpful at the outset to agree that the report will be discussed with them first and that they will be able to make comments and have these incorporated into the report prior to it being shared with others. This does not mean that you will necessarily change your view, but you want to ensure the child's view is balanced with your view, and that the report is factually accurate.

The information most relevant to the behaviour of concern can be organised and integrated using a framework such as the Four P's in order to understand the co-dependency of factors (Weerasekera, 1996). The language of the Four P's asks practitioners to consider predisposing factors (why me?), precipitating factors (why now?), perpetuating factors (why does it continue?) and protective factors (what can I rely on?) (Henderson & Martin, 2014). In addition, The Mindful Formulation method can be particularly useful for those new to formulation as it takes practitioners through three logical steps in the process (for a detailed explanation and case example see [Havighurst & Downey, 2009](#)). In summary, this method facilitates the process of understanding complex cases by examining patterns of strength and difficulty across the child's environment, then systematically provides an explanation of these using the Four P's to structure thinking. This systemic approach promotes an understanding of the intergenerational nature of many problems, and has [three steps](#):

- 1) Assessment. This should include the presenting problem; relationships, home and social

environments; experience of adverse events and attachment; developmental history; safety concerns; resilience factors; and any missing information.

2) Identifying patterns. This is where strengths and difficulties are identified across i) the child's functioning, ii) the parents/carers/siblings/significant other's functioning, iii) relationships with the child and among significant others, and iv) relationships with and amongst the community. Each of these four domains are considered across the three elements of emotions, behaviours and thoughts, to create a matrix from which patterns can be identified. Patterns can include typical behaviours, beliefs, affective expression, skills, relational patterns, actions and responses.

3) Summary and formulation. Following a brief summary, the Four P's are used to give the formulation structure and it is recommended that a separate paragraph is used to explain each of the Four P's (how the patterns have developed, how recent events have precipitated current patterns, how the patterns are maintained, and how patterns of strength are protective). Each of these paragraphs should draw on the information from the previous two steps and theoretical and practice knowledge.

A strengths focused approach such as the [Good Lives Model](#) can be used to assist the child to list the things that they value in life, for example, their primary needs and to consider whether/how they are currently being met. Using a [motivational interviewing approach](#), some of the problems their behaviour has generated for them can be considered and goals for the future discussed. Through being curious, responsive and empathic, the process of formulation provides an opportunity to discuss and negotiate a shared understanding of the behaviour with the child. Within this process, it is important to consider the purpose (functional analysis) of the behaviour and to consider whether it serves as a coping style or defence mechanism due to attachment or trauma experiences. The use of such a framework with children can often help them make sense of their complex experiences and understand the influence of others on their behaviour. Formulation should explain the patterns which intervention should then target. Working through this method should help to prevent overemphasising individual interventions with the child and assist in identifying wider systemic interventions that predispose and precipitate the behaviour. If we do not address these, then the problems are likely to return later, or display themselves in another form.

The next stage is to write the formulation in a narrative format. It can be helpful to explain that you would like to write a few paragraphs describing what you both agree about the behaviour of concern and what could be done by everyone to manage it in the future, as well as what you both disagree on. If doing it jointly in the session then the practitioner would generally do the writing which can then be typed up and edited at the next meeting. Alternatively, it might be agreed that the practitioner prepares a draft for the next meeting to go through together. The formulation should use simple language, be succinct and avoid repetition of information. It should be the most meaningful part of the report and keeping it to a few paragraphs helps to ensure that it is read. As it is likely to be on record for a long time, it is also essential to be careful with the language used, avoid labelling and provide some context for the presenting behaviour. For instance, 'fire-raising', 'assault', 'indecent images' can all vary on a continuum in terms of severity, for example from lighting the spray from an aerosol can, to deliberately dousing a property in petrol with an intention to cause injury. How these behaviours are referred to is important for the child's future.

The formulation is then used to communicate and engage with others. It is the basis for monitoring change and any changes are used to determine whether the original formulation was accurate, or whether it needs to be amended based on further knowledge or understanding. It should therefore be a document that drives action plans based on an evolving understanding of the child and their behaviour. Whilst this approach may take slightly longer than simply providing a summary, it means that underlying issues can be identified and addressed, which should result in increased engagement and improved long-term outcomes.

w www.cycj.org.uk
e cycj@strath.ac.uk
t [@CYCJScotland](https://twitter.com/CYCJScotland)