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Book Review - Working with Children and Teenagers Using Solution Focused Approaches: Enabling Children to Overcome Challenges and Achieve their Potential

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Working with Children and Teenagers Using Solution Focused Approaches: Enabling Children to Overcome Challenges and Achieve their Potential

Judith Milner and Jackie Bateman
(2011). Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Book review by Bronwen Elliott

Independent Social Work consultant

When I read a book for therapists the first test is whether the book helps me think more clearly and hopefully about my work. Milner and Bateman's succinct presentation of the key elements of Solution-Focused work and their numerous examples effectively reminded me of the importance of rigour and persistence in taking a solution focus, and of the impact of Solution-Focused conversations where the usual talk is about what is going wrong.

Milner and Bateman explore goal setting, with an emphasis on the 'best hope' exception finding, exploring children's strengths, and using scaling.

Their approach to a solution focus also embraces narrative therapy, drawing elements such as externalising and therapeutic letter writing, with particular reference to Freeman, Epston and Lobovits' (1997) book, *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems*. Milner and Bateman are confident to describe Solution-Focused approaches to situations that often provoke pessimism, such as children who have sexually abused other children or children with eating disorders. They include practical reflection tasks that would be useful for supervisors and team discussion, and many example of Solution-Focused questions for work with children across a range of ages. A particular strength of the book is the practical tips they provide about working directly with children, such as different approaches to scaling for different age groups, swapping roles between children and parents and ways to identify goals with children who don't like talking, or find it hard to express ideas. Their depth of experience was evident in situations such as the teenager whose post miracle day involved an endless free supply of drugs and drink and the involvement of the family dog in work with a family where everyone had different ideas about the problem.

Milner and Bateman are based in the UK, and seek to locate their work within UK government strategies. This discussion will be of little relevance to practitioners outside the UK, and some of the terminology used may not be familiar, but this does not detract too much from the experience of the reader. Milner and Bateman borrow case examples both from Milner's own previous publications and from Freeman *et al* (1997). I can't recall examples of similar recycling elsewhere, and given the quality of the original material in this book, this seemed unnecessary.

Milner and Bateman are writing in a context where even government policy documents refer to the importance of acknowledging children's strengths. While there is much greater familiarity within the workforce of the 'talk' of solutions, this may not mean children actually experience the 'walk' in their work with practitioners. Milner and Bateman's patient explanations about why children and young people find advice giving unhelpful say quite a lot about the gap between rhetoric and reality in this respect. They emphasise that talking about solutions and giving compliments is very different to exploring a child's best hopes and finding out how they have managed to take steps towards those hopes in spite of challenges in the way.

The other significant contextual issue that Milner and Bateman seek to address is the intersection of their hopeful work with children and young people and concerns about safety. They include short sections on exception finding and scaling in child protection (or to use the UK term 'safeguarding') situations, and provide case illustrations including court involvement. They also

refer briefly to Turnell and Edwards (1999) 'Signs of Safety' approach, and note somewhat bluntly that 'where there are no exceptions, there is increased danger and children will need to be removed from their families.' Few of the case scenarios have a definitive outcome, so that Milner and Bateman avoid implying that if practitioners just focus on solutions all will be well. On the other hand because detailed outcomes are not explored the reality of solution focused work in the face of uncertainty about an individual or family's capacity to demonstrate safety is not addressed. To my mind however this is the reality practitioners will need to face in order to persist with Solution-Focused approaches while maintaining clarity about safety and progress. While this book has much to offer practitioners, I would suggest it be used alongside careful discussion of safety, both in relation to the scenarios within the book, and families where strategies gleaned from the book might be applied.

References

- Freeman, J., Epston, D. & Lobovits, D. (1997). *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Turnell, A. & Edwards, S. (1999). *Signs of Safety: A Solution and Safety Oriented Approach to Child Protection Casework*. New York: W. W. Norton.

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The reviewer

Bronwen Elliott is an independent social worker based in Sydney and consults to a range of government and non-government agencies working with children and families. She is especially interested in the use of solution focused approaches in child protection work and supervision.

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