



BRIEF COACHING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

A SOLUTION FOCUSED APPROACH

Harvey Ratner
and Denise Yusuf



Brief Coaching with Children and Young People

Brief Coaching with Children and Young People: A Solution Focused Approach is the first book of its type to describe the thinking and practice of Solution Focused coaching with these age groups.

The approach empowers young people to find their own solutions in the shortest possible time, focusing on where they want to get to rather than the details of the problem they are concerned about. The authors' emphasis on practical and straightforward techniques and materials will equip all those interested in working with and supporting young people and their families to help them achieve their hopes for the future. The book is illustrated with numerous examples from the coaching practice of the authors in different settings, with a particular emphasis on challenging cases. As a whole, it serves as a key resource for working with children and young people, and each chapter can be read as a separate topic. Downloadable resources are available online which enhance the practicality of the text.

Ratner and Yusuf have created a practical, jargon-free resource for all those who work with and support children, young people and their families. It will be invaluable for coaches, therapists and counsellors as well as anyone who interacts with children and young people, including social workers, teachers and mentors and foster parents.

Harvey Ratner is a co-founder of BRIEF, established in 1989 as a London-based independent training, coaching and therapy agency for the development of Solution Focused practice. He and his colleagues Evan George and Chris Iveson have taught the approach to over 70,000 people around the world. They are the authors of *Solution Focused Brief Therapy: 100 Key Points and Techniques* and *Brief Coaching: A Solution Focused Approach* (Routledge). He works with young people and families in schools and at BRIEF.

Denise Yusuf, with a background in social work and management, is a freelance coach and supervisor who has spent most of her career working with children, young people and families. She works in a number of schools running coaching programmes for primary and secondary school pupils, as well as coaching children and young people from youth organisations and charities across London, and in her private practice.

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A Solution Focused Approach

Harvey Ratner and
Denise Yusuf

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Preface

Denise has a background in social work and management and gained the Diploma in Solution Focused Practice from BRIEF and a Diploma with Distinction in Life Coaching from the Life Coaching Institute. She is a Certified Coach with the Life Coaching Institute and an Accredited Coach with the Association for Coaching. She currently works as a freelance coach in schools, the voluntary sector and in private practice. Harvey is also from a social work background and after working in an NHS family therapy clinic he established BRIEF with Evan George and Chris Iveson, an agency that specialises in the practice and teaching of the Solution Focused (SF) model (details of courses and further information about the SF approach can be found at its website www.brief.org.uk). In 2012 BRIEF published two books, both with Routledge: *Brief Coaching: A Solution Focused Approach* and *Solution Focused Brief therapy: 100 Key Points and Techniques*.

Our intention is that this book will be as practical as possible and to this end we have been extremely liberal with examples of actual client work taken from our own experience (and where possible from recordings made – with the permission of clients – of sessions), as we believe that seeing or at least reading about real work is one of the most effective ways of learning a new approach. We have altered the case reports where appropriate in order to safeguard the confidentiality of the clients concerned.

Given the way we have drawn on our own practice, we have divided up the case work in the chapters so that we could use the word ‘I’ rather than having to define who the coach was in every case, as follows:

Solution Focused Brief Coaching: Harvey

Children: Denise

Adolescents: Harvey

Parents: Harvey

Groupwork: Harvey

In the school: Denise

In different settings: Denise

Materials: Denise

Coaching is a growing field and this book is the first to thoroughly explore Solution Focused Brief Coaching (SFBC) in relation to young people. However, we regard the potential audience for this book as being anybody who works with young people, in whatever capacity. The chapters are distinct, in the sense that the reader can choose to read the book through from beginning to end or could go straight to the particular headings that most interest them. However, we strongly recommend that you start with the [first chapter](#), in which we look at the theory and skills involved, although we take certain generic coaching skills for granted, such as empathy.

A basic point to bear in mind from the beginning is that SFBC is a stand-alone model. Using this approach is not the same as a general focus on solutions which could be said to be true of all coaching approaches (after all, what coach would say they are *not* looking for solutions?). SFBC is a methodology for enabling clients to explore the lives they want to lead and their resources in achieving them.

This book not only draws on our own work but also that of our colleagues at BRIEF, Evan George and Chris Iveson.

Solution Focused Brief Coaching

Solution Focused Brief Coaching (SFBC) is a change-oriented approach that enables clients to find their own solutions in the shortest possible time. It is based on eliciting their preferred futures, their strengths and skills for achieving them, and building on what they are already doing that is working.

The story behind the Solution Focused (SF) approach begins in Milwaukee, at the Brief Family Therapy Center which was established in 1977 by the husband and wife team of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. They put together a creative team of therapists and researchers to try out different techniques and understandings of brief therapy, and by the mid-1980s they had established the foundation for a whole new approach which they called Solution Focused Brief Therapy.

Three discoveries made by the Milwaukee team stand out. Firstly, they found that asking clients to describe *in detail* a future when the problem will be solved is itself empowering of clients to make their own advances. The technique that they developed to enable clients to picture the future has become known as the Miracle Question:

- Suppose that one night, while you are asleep, there was a miracle and this problem was solved. How would you know? What would be different? How will your husband know without your saying a word to him about it?
(de Shazer 1988: 5)

de Shazer goes on to say that ‘we have found this way of quickly looking into the future to be a most effective frame for helping clients set goals’ (de Shazer op. cit.: 5), and in the earlier phase of the development of SF interviewing the notion of *goals* was a dominant theme.

de Shazer remarked that ‘the phrasing of the question includes a radical distinction between problem and solution, which is a result of our noticing that the development of a solution is not necessarily related to the problems and complaints in any way’ (de Shazer 1994: 95). Elsewhere, he commented on how this discovery had led them to switch their approach from one of ‘problem solving’ to that of ‘solution development’ (de Shazer 1988: 1).

They also made a second discovery, seemingly obvious to us today but revolutionary then, that for almost every problem there is an *exception*, a time that the client's problem is either less or non-existent. One team member's account of how this came about describes how 'one day someone said "Let's ask them what they *don't* want to change" . . . subsequently we found that by asking clients to focus on exceptions rather than the problem, improvement tended to occur' (Lipchik 2009: 51–2). They were able to show how successful this intervention was in promoting solution behaviour which was from the client's *own* repertoire of skills and resources; there was therefore no need to try to stop anything the client was doing or get them to do something new.

The focus on the future and on successes in the past linked logically with the third discovery, namely, the value of a progress rating scale (de Shazer 1994), where clients are asked to rate their progress towards their goals on a scale. Some practitioners use scales from 0 to 10, and others from 1 to 10; one of the authors of this text uses the one, while the other author uses the other.

- On a scale where 10 stands for 'this whole package, the day after the miracle, and 0 for when things were at their worst' (de Shazer 1994: 231), where would you say you are now? How come?

The client's answer opens up two possibilities, namely, an exploration of what the client has done to reach their number (the exceptions) and then a discussion of *steps* that they could take to move closer to their goals.

This simple and economical model – of exploring a future without the problem and looking for exceptions and achievements – remains the foundation block on which all the subsequent developments in the SF approach have been built.

Developments in Solution Focused practice: the contribution from BRIEF, London

In 1990 the members of BRIEF (then known as the Brief Therapy Practice) published the first UK text on the approach (George et al 1990). It was closely connected to the model that had been constructed in Milwaukee, but when the authors issued a second edition, nearly 10 years later, they were able to describe significant adaptations they had made (George et al 1999). The key shift concerned the opening of sessions. Instead of asking 'what brings you in today?' (de Shazer 1991: 133), which invites a statement of concerns and problems (which then leads logically to the Miracle Question in which the 'miracle' is said to have solved those problems), clients are asked the Best Hopes Question (George et al op. cit.: 13):

- What are your best hopes from coming here?

or alternatively

- How will you know coming here has been useful?

These questions can be seen as generating a *contract* between the coach and the client. The client is directed away from problems towards their hopes – which then leads directly into a focus on their ‘preferred future’ (Iveson 1994) for when they have achieved those hopes. The contract is kept vague and general to guard against limiting the range of possibilities for the client in future, a point that de Shazer made in a prescient observation at the end of the last book of which he was the sole author, that to contract for specific goals ‘would constrain and limit the possibilities for change and limit the possibilities for the clients to invent or discover something that satisfies them as much as, or more, than what they imagined or wished for when they described their ideas about the morning after the miracle’ (de Shazer 1994: 273). From our perspective, the coach maintains a live connection between the contract established in brief, general terms – such as ‘getting back on track with my life’ – and the preferred future explored in concrete, detailed terms such as ‘when that’s happening, what will you be doing tomorrow?’.

Over the ensuing years, members of BRIEF have continued to explore the ramifications of this change of direction, and have published two books that describe in detail their current approach, including a general introduction to SFBC (Iveson et al 2012; Ratner et al 2012).

The idea of ‘achieving your preferred future’ is significantly different from ‘solving your problem’. ‘Strictly speaking, it is a mistake to see the client’s description of a preferred future as a ‘solution’. More accurately, it is an alternative way of living in which the presenting issues have no significant part’ (Ratner et al 2012: 93). In enabling the client to develop this way of living, the solution to their problem occurs as an outcome to the work; it is solved by the client without any direct intervention by the coach. The strict attention paid to the contract ensures that the conversation doesn’t veer off into irrelevant ‘positive’ thinking disconnected to the reality of clients’ lives.

Thus the client is asked a different form of the Miracle Question, in which the miracle enables the client’s hopes to be achieved overnight, or use is made of what has come to be called simply the Tomorrow Question (Ratner et al op. cit.: 93–4):

- Suppose you achieved your best hopes overnight, what would you be doing tomorrow?

This shift also leads to some changes in the language used to describe SF techniques. The idea of ‘exceptions’, for example, is closely connected to the notion of problems, and this has led to the application of a new term, that of ‘instances’, to indicate those times when the client is seeing signs of their preferred future already happening:

- From this description of what you want to see yourself doing in future, what would you say you are already doing, even in very small ways?

Another development has been an emphasis on what *signs* clients will notice when moving forward in their lives. For example, the client is asked what would be the signs of having reached a point up on the progress scale as opposed to what *steps* they have to take to reach the next point. What the client actually does to move up their scale is left to them to discover; the important thing is that they have a notion of what will be different *when* they have moved up.

- What would be the signs that you had moved up one point on the scale? What would you be doing differently then?
- Where on this scale would you be happy to get to? Where would be ‘good enough’?

Further techniques that have been found to be useful will be discussed during the course of the book. Here we will mention one in particular, namely, the technique of ‘identity questions’ (Ratner et al 2012: 155). Here the client is asked, usually after they have described a step they have taken (however small):

- What did it take for you to do that?
- What does that say about you as a person?
- What does it tell others about your skills and qualities?

Young people are in a state of almost continuous change and so are often re-evaluating themselves; these questions about ‘the person you are and the person you want to be’ can be enormously revealing to them.

Ending sessions

The earlier Milwaukee model attached considerable importance to the way that sessions were ended. After taking a short break to consider what feedback to give clients, they would start by complimenting clients on anything they had reported that seemed useful in enabling them to move forward in their lives. They would then make a suggestion of a homework task for the client to work on before the next session. Milwaukee publications give numerous examples of different tasks, ranging from the simplest, such as inviting the client to look out for signs of progress (including moving up their scale), to more complex ones involving asking the client ‘to pretend and act as if the miracle had happened’ (de Shazer 1991: 114) or to predict at night whether the next day would be a good or bad day (to see what could be learned from their prediction, not whether it was right or wrong).

It is our practice to make the feedback to the client as brief as possible. The important work is in the interview itself, and there are times when we finish

sessions without any further comment other than to enquire as to whether the client would like to return for a further meeting, and if so, when. On some occasions we end with a brief summary of what we have learned from the client, with a few compliments about their hard work and their achievements, and the only ‘task’ we are likely to give is to suggest that they look out for signs of improvement.

The stages of a first session

Opening. Resource Talk (that is, problem-free talk) as a way of ‘getting to know the client’ as a person rather than a walking problem. This step can come after contracting, and in any case can be regarded as optional.

Contracting. What are the client’s best hopes from the work?

Describing the preferred future. Using the Miracle Question or the Tomorrow Question to explore the client’s preferred future for when their best hopes have been achieved.

Identifying instances of success that are already occurring. Direct enquiry about what the client is already managing to do, even in small ways, and/or using a scale to measure progress – where 10 = their preferred future, and 0 = the worst it’s been – and exploring how progress has already been made: how they reached their number on the scale.

Exploration of small signs of further progress. For example, how the client will know they have moved one point up on their scale. We regard this stage as optional; in many situations it will be enough for the client to know what they have already achieved to enable them to work out, on their own, what to do next.

Ending. The coach offers a short summary of the client’s hopes and achievements. Again, this is optional.

Follow-up sessions

If sufficient work has been done in the first session regarding the clients’ preferred outcomes to the work, then the main job of the brief coach becomes that of following up on whatever progress has been made. It is important for the coach to remember to enquire about *all* possible changes that may have happened, not only those that were specified as important markers in the first session. Indeed, it may not even be useful to mention the outcomes that were previously described (unless the clients themselves talk about having made progress on something they had wanted at the outset, as often happens). To do that risks the coach engaging in a checking-up process – ‘did you do X, Y or Z?’ – and it also means that other changes, that can turn out to be invaluable developments, may go unnoticed.

We cannot know what developments in clients' lives will be most valuable to them: it is as if 'solutions' can come from any part of their day-to-day life.

The structure of follow-up sessions then becomes, in effect, the opposite of the first session, in the sense that instead of beginning with future-focused questions, the follow-up begins with the coach focusing on the past, asking 'what's been better?' and then exploring who has done what to move things forward since the last meeting. Later in the meeting the coach will return to a future focus by asking what would be signs of further progress.

- What's been better since we last met?
- What are you pleased to have noticed yourself doing?
- What are others pleased to have seen you do?
- What have been the effects of that progress on others?
- Where are you on the scale now? How come?
- What would be signs of moving a point further up the scale?

The work is completed when the client feels they have achieved what they wanted from the outset. In most cases, the client is able to accept reaching their 'good-enough' point on the scale rather than having to get all the way to 10.

In cases where there have been setbacks, the client is asked questions about how they have managed to keep going:

- Given how difficult things have been, how have you managed to cope? What have you done that's impressed others?
- How will you know you're back on track?

There is no need to re-contract with the client or go back over their preferred future. However, if something drastic has happened since the last meeting (such as a bereavement or permanent exclusion from school or accommodation in local authority care), then it may well be necessary to revisit the Best Hopes Question to clarify what the client is now hoping for, given their radically changed circumstances in life.

Clarifying the contract: the client's best hopes from the coaching

The reader will notice that, throughout this book, great emphasis is laid upon the importance of clarifying the client's 'best hopes' from the coaching. If the coach is able to get this 'right', then the work subsequently is more straightforward (although not necessarily easy!). The many case examples in the book will enable the reader to gauge the wide range of 'contracts' that can be achieved with clients, and the context of the work will also influence the choice of outcome or goal that is reasonable for the work. For example, a young person may say that they wish to find ways to control their temper. From the coach's point of view, this is fine

as a *basis* for establishing a contract for the work; it is not the contract itself, as it is problem-focused – controlling temper is a means towards something else, and the coach needs to know what that something else is. So the coach will ask an extra question – ‘What difference will that make to you, to be able to control your temper?’ – and once the young person has given an outcome-oriented answer, *that* becomes the contract: for example, that they will be happy and will have better relationships with people. On the basis of this contract, the coach will then move on to work out with the young person what in detail their preferred future might be once they are happier. The SF work is therefore about exploring the *difference* having control will make to their life and relationships, and later exploring ways they already have of doing those things. It isn’t about examining ways of controlling temper, as would typify a more problem-solving approach. It is as if useful methods of control will emerge as a by-product of achieving the other aims.

But what if the young person were to answer the Best Hopes Question with a wish for something that is very hard to achieve or is downright unrealistic? What if they said, for example, they wanted rehousing, and this was something that the coach felt powerless to help with? The coach could feel justified in explaining that this wasn’t part of the remit for their job and to ‘signpost’ the young person on to another service. In other words, the coach would be thinking that they don’t have a ‘common project’ (Korman 2004) with the client. But an opportunity may have been lost here. The young person might feel discarded and not follow through with a new referral.

Another way forward would be, as before, to treat the goal of rehousing as a means to an end and to ask the young person what difference it would make to their life if they *were* rehoused. The coach might worry that such a question invites unrealistic thinking on the part of a client who might have an uphill struggle to get rehoused. However, we would recommend that the coach set that fear to one side and persevere with briefly exploring what the outcome might be in their life from getting rehoused. Let’s suppose that out of that discussion it emerged that the young person hoped that they would be happier, free from the difficulties they were encountering in their current accommodation, and able then to go to college (or work) and able to thrive in their studies (or work). Then the coach could invite them to consider that being happier and thriving would be signs of a good outcome to the work, rather than, or in addition to, getting rehoused. Of course, the coach may feel they should mention that they are themselves not in a position to do anything about housing, if their worry is that the child or young person would be misled into believing that.

This approach enables the young person to explore what they, in a sense, *really* want in their lives and doesn’t prematurely close down the coaching process. A good example of this is provided by John Sharry, who distinguishes between possible responses a coach can make to a child who says they want their parents to get back together. The coach could say ‘That may not be possible. You know your mum and dad are separated’ and ask the child to come up with an alternative