

# Prevention of Child-Family Separation through Community-Based Social Work

## VIDEO SUMMARY

There are numerous factors that can result in a child being at risk of experiencing family separation. Issues can be complex, multifaceted and involve child protection, family functioning, service access and poverty related concerns. In many cases, the outcome for a child, in particular whether separation is successfully prevented or not, is as contingent upon the approach employed by social workers as it is the underlying factors at play.

In this video, Grace Mwangi, shares key lessons from her experience working in community-based social work with children and families at risk of separation. Grace notes that social workers must first invest time in developing relationships with families and the wider community in order to surface and accurately identify the root causes


of vulnerability and potential solutions. When responding or considering interventions, Grace notes the importance of taking a holistic approach, thinking about what is in the long-term best interests of the child and engaging the family in every step, process and decision in order to foster ownership over both risks and solutions. She furthermore discusses the efficacy of modelling positive practices and behaviours to families, in contrast to simply telling families what they should do or how they should behave. She encourages practitioners to identify relevant role models in the community, highlighting that effective role models are those who have experienced adversity yet been able to tap into their own strengths and the strengths of the community around them to overcome issues and build resilience.

## DISCUSSION TOPIC


In the video, Grace talks about the importance of ownership and how cultivating ownership within families is central to the work of preventing separation. She notes that ownership has to be fostered over two aspects: the issues/risks and the proposed solutions. That includes encouraging families to tap into their own strengths to achieve desired change. To realise this, Grace says that families must be involved in every step, process, conversation and decision. She warns against social workers extracting information from families in order to make decisions without their involvement. Doing so will undermine ownership and can ultimately weaken a family's commitment to social development, and potentially, to providing care.

Grace's insights raise very interesting questions about the role of social workers with respect to problem identification and problem solving in family strengthening and prevention of separation cases.


## In your context:

-  Discuss how social workers engage with families, and what approach/processes are used. How does this affect the role families do or don't play in problem identification and the development of solutions/interventions? How does it impact on ownership?


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-  Discuss to what extent in your existing practice you intentionally work with families to identify their strengths and assets and how they can be used to affect change. What impact does this asset-based or strengths-based approach have on ownership of their issues?

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-  Discuss the correlation between ownership and outcomes for children and families in your work, taking into account the nature of your cases and the situations in which you work.

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-  Brainstorm ideas around potential approaches or changes you could make to your practice to enhance ownership amongst families. Discuss the pros and cons of different approaches and what might be required to adapt practice in light of Grace's insights.



## DISCUSSION TOPIC

In the video, Grace notes that working with families with the goal of preventing unnecessary separation is not just about directly addressing issues or risks to children. It is equally, if not more so, about strengthening relational bonds, perceptions of value, families' sense of ownership, tapping into their strengths and subsequently their commitment to continuing to provide care, even in situations of adversity.

To achieve this, Grace strongly advocates for an approach to working with families that incorporates role modelling. She notes that modelling positive behaviours to families is much more likely to result in behaviour change than verbal instruction alone. She raises two examples:

1. **modelling commitment** through consistent and positive social worker interaction with the child and family.
2. **modelling overcoming adversity** without resorting to separation by identifying people from the community with relevant and relatable experiences that can act as positive examples for others.

## In your context:

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- ① Typically, in the course of your work supporting clients/families, what are the range of issues you may encounter and seek to address? Which of these could be classed as more direct and obvious risks to children? Which are underlying factors, such as the ones Grace identifies (perceptions, ownership, value, disempowerment, commitment)?
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- ② To what extent does your current practice and approach allow you to step back and take a 'wider view', to identify and respond to the underlying issues rather than just the direct risks which may in fact be more symptomatic issues than root cause? Are there ways this could be enhanced or further encouraged? What would it take in terms of changes to processes, approaches etc?
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- ③ What are some of the personal attributes or behaviours you seek to encourage clients or families to adopt in the course of providing support and strengthening families? How do you currently approach this and to what extent does your approach rely on verbal instruction versus role modelling? How could you incorporate more opportunities for learning through positive role modelling in your work with clients/families?