

Family Support Provider services are still seen as relatively new concepts in formal systems of mental health care. Subsequently, concern has been voiced about dual relationships, professional ethics and boundaries, and FSP's being viewed as "friends" rather than providers.

# **Session 13**

## **Clarifying and Establishing Boundaries**

This Session clarifies different types of boundaries, discusses how violations are harmful, how to recognize boundary violation patterns, and develop a framework for making better ethical decisions at work.

# Boundaries

*The following information was adapted from the South Carolina Department of Mental Health.*

**Dual Relationships:** A dual relationship is one in which roles are or could be mixed. For example:

- A Family Support Provider is providing services to a family with whom they also have a friendship.
- A Family Support Provider's supervisor and case manager is the same person.

**Boundaries:** Boundaries are more ambiguous. They are:

- The unseen lines that you won't cross
- Undefined physical and emotional distances
- Parameters that make you unique
- Self-imposed and self-defined
  - *Boundaries require the use of good judgment*

**Why all the concern?** All of the helping professions (medicine, nursing, psychology, etc.) have established codes of conduct.

This is because there exists an accepted inherent belief that not addressing these issues unacceptably increases the chance of harm and/or exploitation for a family seeking services.

In as much as Family Support Providers are employees, they should not be treated differently or have additional rules created to enhance or excuse them from standards of conduct that is expected of all employees or contracted affiliates.

When acting within one's role as a professional, a Family Support Provider must be able to recognize, maintain and balance boundaries that establish appropriate limits to relationships.

- If we lose our ability to be objective, we tend to become too involved in a person or situation.

Good, healthy, and appropriate boundaries require distance and emotional detachment that need to be maintained to ensure an effective perspective on a situation.

- Maintaining personal boundaries is indicative of a well-trained, experienced Family Support Provider.

### **Establishing Professional Boundaries**

#### **What are professional boundaries?**

Professional boundaries define effective and appropriate interactions between professionals and the public they serve.

- They are the space between the professional's power and the family's vulnerability.
- They exist to protect both the Family Support Provider and the families served.

When we talk about interpersonal or workplace boundaries it can sometimes be a difficult concept to grasp because it isn't something we can see.

But just because we can't see a boundary doesn't mean that it isn't there or that it isn't important. The definition of a boundary is the ability to know where you end and where another person begins.

**Boundaries are an Important Issue:**

The amount and type of boundary responsibility you will have with a person differs according to the type of relationship:

- Friendship
- Colleague
- Family you are serving

**Friendship Boundaries:**

This is a person that you know, like, trust and with whom you have a close personal connection. It can be a person with whom you are allied in a struggle or cause. The difference between this person and a family you work with is the equitability of the relationship.

*No one has power or authority over the other.*

**Colleague Boundaries:**

A colleague is a fellow member of a profession. That person may have power and authority over you, be equal in power and authority to you or have less power and authority than you.

Like the relationship with clients, professional or business relationships can become sticky because of the types of power and authority and who has the ability to enforce them.

*Power and authority are not always equal*

## Family Support Provider (FSP) Boundaries

Definition of a Family Support Provider: A Family Support Provider uses their lived experience and specialized training to assist and empower families raising children and youth who experience emotional, developmental, behavioral, substance use, or mental health concerns. FSP's partner with child and family serving systems to improve family outcomes and strive to eliminate stigma and discrimination.

Definition of a Parent - Parent is a person who is parenting or has parented a child experiencing mental, emotional, developmental, substance use, or behavioral health disorders and can articulate the understanding of their experience with another parent or family member. This person may be a birth parent, adoptive parent, family member standing in for an absent parent or a person chosen by the family or youth to have the role of parent.

For our purposes, a Family Support Provider will be called "Provider" and a parent will be called "consumer".

*Power and authority vary*

*The following information was adapted from the Minnesota Board of Nursing (January 2000).*

### **What are Boundary Violations?**

They are any behavior or interaction which damages a consumer, a provider, and/or the provider interaction.

The victimization and/or exploitation of a consumer by a provider.

A betrayal of the sacred covenant of trust.

## **How do Violations Occur?**

A boundary violation occurs when a provider, consciously or unconsciously, uses the provider-consumer relationship to meet personal needs rather than consumer needs.

## **Who Can Be Harmed?**

Boundary violations can harm both the provider and the consumer. The ramifications can be widespread. Damage can extend to marriages, families, other customers in the community, clinics, institutions, and the profession in general.

## **How Do Boundaries Help?**

Preservation of boundaries needs not be seen as a barrier to the professional relationship, but rather as a way to facilitate it.

Maintaining boundaries protects the safe space in the relationship thereby enhancing the building of the trust which is essential to enable customers to reveal their needs.

## **Boundary Violations: Four Common Elements:**

Four elements characteristically appear in boundary violations:

- Secrecy
- Role reversal
- Indulgence of Professional Privilege
- Double Bind

## Secrecy

Secrecy involves the professional keeping critical knowledge or behavior from the parent and/or others or selectively sharing information.

- Example: An FSP takes a parent into their own home and tells the parent that if the FSP's employer finds out, the FSP will be fired.

## Role Reversal

Role reversal occurs when the parent takes care of the FSP. They look to the parent for satisfaction and gratification, rather than placing the parent's needs first. They may not be consciously aware of this role reversal or may attempt to justify it by contending his or her actions are for the parent's benefit.

Example: A consumer becomes an FSP's A.A. or N.A. sponsor.

## Indulgence of Professional Privilege

Indulgence of a professional privilege involves using information obtained in the relationship with a consumer for the benefit of the FSP. Because FSP's can have or exert authority over a customer's situation, they can be at risk to extending that authority to intrude on the consumer. Having access to information does not constitute a right to it. Access is a professional privilege; it's not an FSP's right to use the information for one's own benefit.

Example: An FSP has been helping a consumer with severe financial problems develop a budget. The FSP uses that information to try to purchase the customer's car below market value.

## **Double-Bind**

A double-bind consists of messages that contradict each other while discouraging the receiver of the messages from noticing the differences. The consumer is left feeling caught in a conflict of interest and any attempt at resolution places the consumer at risk of loss. The consumer is torn between the desire to end the relationship with the FSP and the realization that this may also end any form of help from the FSP. The double-bind contains an implied threat. A sense of guilt and fear of possible abandonment by the FSP blocks the consumer from acting. The double-bind constricts the family from using all available options and thus limits growth.

Examples: 1) An FSP makes negative comments about other FSP's caring for a consumer who has development of trust as a goal. 2) An FSP tells a parent that they may begin a personal relationship when the parent is no longer receiving services.

## **Boundaries: Are You Helping or Are You Hurting?**

There are more gray areas than black and white ones when thinking about boundaries. FSP's can make more considerate decisions if they will take time to think about some of the basics of boundaries.

## **Some Warning Signs of Boundary Violations:**

Although not an exhaustive list, the following are helpful "cues" when setting professional boundaries:

- ✓ Choosing sides
- ✓ Making exceptions
- ✓ Keeping secrets
- ✓ Giving or receiving gifts
- ✓ Borrowing or lending money
- ✓ Feeling as if no one but you has interest in the customer
- ✓ Feeling no one but you will be able to assist this consumer
- ✓ Feeling responsible for a parent's progress or failure
- ✓ "Owning" a parent's successes or failures
- ✓ Confiding personal or professional issues or troubles



Think about what boundary issues you might have in your work situation and relationships.

**Developing a Framework:****How Do You Make Better Ethical Decisions at Work The “yes’s” and the “no’s”**

If you are unsure about your interactions try asking yourself the following questions:

1. Is the relationship in the family’s best interest?
2. Is this something that other FSP’s would do?
3. Can this affect my objectivity in providing support?
4. Will this cause confusion in my role?

**Still Unsure?**

If you are still unsure, try asking:

1. How would this appear to others (peers, family, colleagues and/or supervisor?)
2. How does this appear to the family?
3. Is this decision making me uncomfortable?

**Trouble Shooting Problem Spots: Time**

When, where and how often you meet with a family can be a troublesome issue. If it feels wrong, it probably is wrong, but ask yourself the following questions to help clarify a situation:

1. How much time am I spending with a family?
2. Does it vary from that spent with other families?
3. Am I spending “off duty” time with the family?

### **Trouble Shooting Problem Spots: Location**

If a family wants to talk or meet somewhere other than a center approved location you're beginning to slide toward a questionable boundary as well as possible policy violation. Try asking:

1. Is the location of the interaction appropriate to the relationship?
2. Would you provide support services to other families at this location?
3. Is there a legitimate need to meet?
4. Have I made the meeting known to others and documented it?

### **Trouble Shooting Problem Spots: Gifts**

Accepting or giving a gift can get tricky. If you are unsure ask:

1. Does the gift giving create a sense of obligation on the part of you or the recipient?
2. Do you do this routinely as part of your job, regardless of the age or gender of the parent?
3. Is the gift of a personal nature that would only be to or from a specific person?
4. Is there a department or center policy regarding gifts?

### **Asking for Help**

At all times, if you are unsure about a situation or confused about whether an interaction could be interpreted as a boundary violation you always should:

1. Consult your supervisor
2. Refer to the Code of Ethics
3. Consult other colleagues

## **Session 13 – Review Questions – Clarifying and Establishing Boundaries**

1. What are 4 common elements of boundary violations?