



Working at the frontier

KEY CONCEPT

The frontier

The idea of the frontier is used as a metaphor to understand key aspects of impactful partnership. The frontier is a realm of possibility, a space where new things open up in front of you. It is associated with looking forward, but also with unfamiliar, uncharted territory. The suggestion is that impactful partnership involves work at or *just beyond* the frontier, where the boundary is marked by routine practice, what is already known or experienced, or existing policy and procedure. Stepping beyond has to be done consciously and skillfully, when it is judged to be safe and in a family's best interests. Recognising the importance of frontier work means accepting that impactful partnership cannot be fully captured in a fixed formula or set of protocols.

Summary

The examples of positive change we studied all involved working at the frontier (see key concept box). Frontier work involves creativity, innovation, trailblazing, improvisation, being at the leading edge, and going beyond standard approaches.

The idea of working at the frontier came from one participant's descriptions of their work context (see quote below). However, we found the idea usefully captures many aspects of impactful partnership across all the services we studied.

“Our services are ground breaking in the sense that it's frontier work. There's so many policies, but not all of them fit this space.”

(Helper)

The quote conveys how frontier work is part of what makes impactful partnership an evolving art. Working at the frontier is also often crucial to the creation of new meanings and possibilities in action that are fundamental to partnership as a mind-expanding process (see Pages 8–9 for a summary of these key framing ideas).

Successful outcomes relied on helpers working at the frontier of the partnership itself – always just ahead of the helper-parent relationship (see Pages 22–25 [building]). This is what ensured the relationship kept developing, and new forms of help, challenge and possibility could be developed.

Frontier work makes partnership a leading-edge practice that can't be found wholly in familiar, routine, procedural work. Each instance of crossing into frontier territory is another example of a 'small' thing with a big effect. The distance travelled across the frontier may be small, but the act of doing so has significant benefits for families.

Encountering difference

If nothing unusual or different has been encountered in work between a helper and a family, it is unlikely that impactful partnership is in place. No two families are the same, and the work that needs to be done to secure the change they need will often involve something unfamiliar.

NOTES

Impactful partnership can't be found wholly in familiar, routine, procedural work.

Two issues arise here: being open to difference, and how we respond. Helpers have to work in a way that allows different and unusual aspects to come up. We found this happened when they didn't follow a script, worked at a pace set by parents, followed parents' lead (even if down side tracks). Impressions matter a lot: if parents think help is being offered off-the-shelf they are more likely to try to fit what they think the boundaries are. The frontier becomes a wall.

How helpers respond to the unfamiliar in their practice is also crucial. Such territory can feel insecure or risky and there can be a temptation to recover by quickly getting back on track. There is a fine balance between maintaining purpose and avoiding issues that might later prove relevant.

Innovating and improvising

By innovating we mean trying new things out, trying establishing things in new situations, trying new ways of doing something familiar, or finding new ways of working when established practices aren't having the desired effect.

Innovations can be at service level, as with the early parenting group we studied in NSW, which was distinctive in its parent-led approach. They can also be in the way multiple services interface, as with the CFCs in Tasmania and the Strong Start program in South Australia.

CFCs in Tasmania have a small core team, but a large and flexible working team. Professionals are seconded from other services, or work out of the centres. Rather than formal team structures, co-location enables fluid collaboration.

Strong Start brings social workers, family support workers, allied health and CFH nurses together to flexibly support and link first time families with complex needs to services. The professional team team begins working with families antenatally, to engage families in services within a network of care. Family support workers with strong links to community transition families to secure, ongoing relationships beyond the program.

Innovations can also arise in-the-moment in the intimacy of interactions with parents. These might be ephemeral, but they can have big effects for the family, and they can eventually reshape wider practices. This happened with the ‘bad day plan’ that was developed by parents in one NSW service, and is now being used in day stays and various outreach and home visiting contexts.

“It was a pilot project – the idea came up that we should really be intervening for families at risk in the antenatal period, and try and help parents to really get themselves a bit sorted for when the babies came.”

(Helper)

Improvising means responding to the contingencies and constraints in a particular situation, being inventive and making do with what is available. This was often talked about as ‘going with the flow’. Practitioners in the toddler clinic often had to improvise when parents brought more than one child along, and those in home visiting services often had to change plans because babies were asleep, awake, feeding, unsettled or several of these!

Creating and responding to opportunities

The most impactful helpers were not only able to respond to opportunities in an agile way, but were also able to create them. This capacity proved especially important in situations where it seemed that momentum was being lost. Looking for opportunities to take the partnership into frontier territory helps to enhance outcomes.

Opportunities can be in-the-moment with one family, as when toddler aggression creates a chance to work on behaviour management skills. They can also arise at a service level. One CFC in particular was notable for seizing on opportunities that foster parent wellbeing and children’s nutrition arising through a ‘love on a plate’ initiative with the nearby neighbourhood centre.

Being just ahead of policy or procedure

Many of the services we studied were designed as cutting-edge in some way (see Section 5). However, a frontier design was rarely enough to give helpers the scope they needed to act in families’ best interests.

Achieving maximum positive impact often means working in ways that aren’t quite those specified in policies or procedures. All the examples we found when this arose involved helpers making careful, context-specific judgements about what they deemed to be the best interests of the family involved. What is important is that helpers have space to do this without punitive consequences, and feel comfortable talking about this with supervisors and managers, so that services as a whole can evolve and procedures and policies can catch up with the realities and contingencies of practice where appropriate.

Working at the frontier of policy means making careful context-specific judgements in the best interests of the family.

Frontier work does not mean blatant disregard for clear rules, such as mandatory reporting. However it might mean that things are done in a different order, as when a nurse decided not to ask a mother to complete a depression scale in the first visit, because it seemed inappropriate given the mother’s state and the child suddenly needing attention.

Flexible logistics, offering scope to work at adaptive pace and frequency, and in alternative places, often make a crucial difference to outcomes.

Frontier work might also involve breaking protocols as when a normally clinic-based nurse visited a mother who was stranded in her home. All the examples we found were deviations that fulfilled a specific and/or urgent need.

Policies and procedures for frontier work: comply, explain, learn

That this kind of frontier work was found to be prevalent is a sign of success that an environment was created in which people could explore ways to work that were in some ways ahead of policy. In fact, if policy-makers are open to and tolerant of these practices, this kind of frontier work presents a bottom-up way for policies to evolve.

Frontier work that goes just ahead of policy and procedure can be supported and made safer, or the opposite, depending on the culture of compliance in a particular service or organisation. Given that frontier work is so crucial to impactful partnership as an expansive, evolving art, a rigid and overly strict compliance regime may cause helpers to stop before the frontier (and thus jeopardise impacts for families), or render these practices invisible to managers and supervisors, and thus lose the benefits and safeguards of shared reflection and practice wisdom.

An approach based on ‘comply, explain, learn’ could foster openness around this kind of frontier work. The norm is that practice fits within policies and procedures. Helpers’

judgements in going beyond this would need to be explained and justified in relation to the interests of the family, and with clear assessment of any risks to helpers or others involved. Both the service and the helper stand to learn from open discussions, which may conclude the stepping into the frontier was indeed appropriate, or if not, help to establish clearer understandings. This would work only if the culture is explicitly open to explanations for going one step ahead of policy in certain circumstances.

This idea adapts the ‘comply or explain’ approach described by Keay (2014). The Creating Better Futures Study did not investigate or gather evidence on policy and procedure, or wider cultures of compliance. ‘Comply, explain, learn’ is suggested as a possible way to support and foster the kinds of frontier work that we found to be crucial, while recognising the importance of policy and procedure in governing practices.

1 Keay, A. (2014). Comply or explain in corporate governance codes: In need of greater regulatory oversight? *Legal Studies*, 34(2), 279-304. doi:10.1111/lest.12014

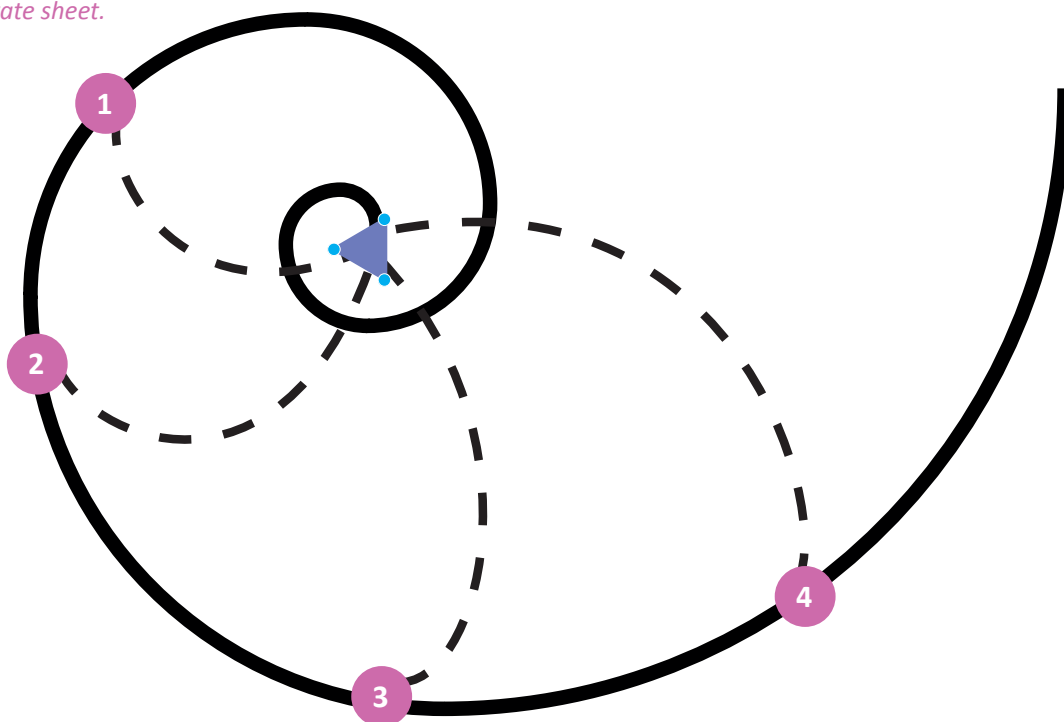
3. Understanding the diagram

The spiral represents partnership-building as an expansive, evolving process. At the centre is the essence of partnership – help, challenge and possibility (see Essential ingredients of partnership). The outward movement of the spiral links to the idea of partnership as mind-expanding (see Living partnership practices). The spiral loops round, showing that the helper and parent never visit the same issue twice from the same position in relation to a frontier.

If this diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures working at the frontier in impactful partnership is built on a separate sheet.

4. Working with the diagram

Think of a family you have worked with recently and map the issues you addressed with dots along the spiral to represent the occasions you saw yourself working at the frontier in partnership. Explain how each dot connects back to the essence.



5. Enhancing your practice

On a separate sheet:

1. Choose two of the *Questions for reflective practice* (see right) and write your answer on a separate piece of paper. If they don't quite work you can adapt them.
2. Look at the *Questions to adapt and ask with parents* (see right). Think of a family you are working with or have recently finished working with. Choose two questions you think you could use or adapt to ask the parents, and explain why these might be important, and what you think they might say in response.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

- What has been unusual about working with this family?
- What have I done that went with the flow, going ahead of standard procedure, innovating or improvising?
- What were the most valuable opportunities that I responded to?
- What ideas or workarounds from the past could be useful to me with this family?
- What turned out to be valuable opportunities or openings in working on similar problems with other families?
- What would take my work with this family further into frontier territory?
- How can I make sure my work isn't constrained by what I'm familiar with or what feels comfortable to me?
- If I could wave a magic wand to do something really special with this family, what would it be?

QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS

- Has anything unusual or different been happening?
- How on track are we in terms of spending our time and energy on the things that matter to you?
- Have there been any things going on recently that you'd like us to work on?
- Tell me something good that has happened in your family since last time we spoke
- What have been the most beneficial things we've done together?
- What do you think it was that made those things work so well?
- How close to the edge of your comfort zone have we been?
- If we could throw away the rule book for how we work together, what would you want us to try doing?

FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

Diverse impacts

Small things with big effects

Mind-expanding

Intimate outsiders

Evolving art

Revision

Working at the frontier means not being tied to what is known, familiar, routine, or pre-specified. It is one way in which impactful partnership is an evolving art, and it contributes to mind-expanding qualities of partnership as a joint learning process. Frontier work has to be done consciously and with families' best interests in mind.

For more information on the key concepts and findings relating to this worksheet see: [creating-better-futures.org/](https://www.creating-better-futures.org/)

To claim a certificate on completed worksheets see: <https://www.creating-better-futures.org/claim-your-certificate/>

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1. Key concepts – check your understanding

In your own words, explain what each of the ways of working at the frontier means, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

Encountering difference:

Innovating and improvising:

Creating and responding to opportunities:

Being just ahead of policy or procedure:

2. Linking ideas to practice

Now you have the concepts in mind, the next step is to connect them to your practice:

Concept	How it relates to my practice
Encountering difference	
Innovating and improvising	
Creating and responding to opportunities	
Being just ahead of policy or procedure	

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