



SMART Planning

(adapted from guidance issued by
Halton Safeguarding Children Board)



SMART Plans are:

Specific
Measurable
Attainable
Relevant
Timely

One of the clearest benefits of using SMART principles in social care planning is that it has the potential to make expectations much clearer for all concerned. In situations of child protection, it can help parents, carers and other family members to understand what they need to do, by when and what happens if they do not do it. In situations of multi-agency working, it can help professionals from all agencies to understand their own and other agencies' responsibilities.

Meyer (2003) describes each of these characteristics as follows:

Specific - focus on specific objectives rather than more general ones. In order to be specific, the objective must spell out exactly what is expected, why, who is involved, where it will happen and what might be the requirements and constraints. An example of a general objective might be '*the child's parents to fully meet their responsibilities with regards the child's education*'. A more specific goal would be '*the child's parents to take the child to school every day, arriving by 8.55am, wearing clean school uniform, with clean meaning 'washed, dried and ironed' at least once per week – if the child is unable to attend school, the child's parents to contact the school by 8.55am on the day of the absence and inform school staff of the reason for the absence*'. Setting out the objectives in this more specific way makes the expectation much clearer for the child's parents but also makes it more likely that additional criteria for SMART planning will also be satisfied.

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Measurable - this second criterion stresses the need for objectives to be measurable, with set criteria so that progress can be evaluated as clearly as possible. Without measurable objectives it is impossible to assess – or if not impossible, then at least much more difficult – as to whether any progress has been achieved and, if so, how much. A measurable objective must answer questions such as ‘how much’, ‘how many’ and ‘how will we know if it has been achieved’? Continuing with the example given above, the objective is measurable because we can count:

- How many times the child arrives at school on time (by 8.55am)
- How many times the child arrives late
- The number of times they do not attend
- The number of times the school is notified of the child’s absence (by 8.55am)
- When the child does attend, how many times their uniform is clean (this is the most subjective part of the measure)

Attainable - this third criterion stresses the need for objectives that are realistic. It involves asking the question ‘how can this be achieved’? Continuing with the same example, if the child’s current school attendance were around 25 per cent, it would be unhelpful to set the target at 100 per cent attendance, at least not without specifying interim objectives en route to achieving 100 per cent. However, if the child’s attendance was currently around 80 per cent, then setting an immediate target of 100 per cent may well be considered attainable.

Relevant - this fourth criterion stresses the importance of choosing objectives that matter. Questions to address include ‘does this seem worthwhile’, ‘is it the right time to do this’ and ‘does this match our other efforts’? Continuing with the same example, if the concerns about the child related to neglect and to the impact of neglect on the child’s attendance and presentation when at school, the example objective would seem relevant. If the concerns were related to physical abuse, then whilst it would be important for the child to attend school regularly and on time, achieving this aim would seem unlikely to help prevent future instances of physical abuse.

Timely - this fifth criterion stresses the importance of setting time constraints on the completion of the objective. For example, the objective used as an example would benefit from a deadline, by which time the child’s attendance would be expected to be consistently at or near 100 per cent.

In the examples below, five objectives will be assessed against the SMART criteria and suggestions made for how they might be made SMARTer.

Example 1: Sarah to improve her school attendance this year

Specific: Yes, the objective is specifically related to Sarah and her school attendance this year

Measurable: Yes but not in the most effective way. If Sarah attended school for 1 day more than she did last year, this objective would technically be met

Attainable: Yes, easily so based on the above

Relevant: Possibly but not clear from the way the objective is stated by itself

Timely: Yes but could be improved from being more specific

How might this objective be improved?

Sarah to attend school for a minimum of 4 days per week between the May half term and the summer holidays.

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Example 2: Sarah's parents to improve their engagement with Sarah's social worker by increasing their attendance at meetings

Specific: Yes to some extent but is also somewhat confusing – is the goal for Sarah's parents to improve their engagement with Sarah's social worker or to attend more meetings?

Measurable: No. There is no reference to specific numbers in the objective.

Attainable: Not clear since no measures are provided

Relevant: Quite possibly if the overall goal is a better working relationship between Sarah's parents and Sarah's social worker

Timely: No. Should the target be achieved over 10 days, 10 weeks, 10 months or 10 years?

How might this objective be improved?

It might be better to separate out the overall goal from the specific objective.

Goal: For Sarah's parents and Sarah's social worker to form a professional and productive working relationship

Objective: Sarah's parents to attend 4 meetings with Sarah's social worker within the next 10 weeks from today's date (If these meetings were already arranged, the dates and times would need to be included in the objective).

Example 3: Sarah's mother to attend alcohol support groups

Specific: Yes, the objective is specifically related to Sarah's mother and her attendance at alcohol support groups

Measurable: No. How many groups should Sarah's mother attend? If she misses 1 group, is the target missed? Two? Three?

Attainable: Yes in the sense that if Sarah's mother attended 2 groups, then technically the objective would be achieved but this would presumably not be the intention

Relevant: Possibly but not clear from the way the objective is stated by itself

Timely: No. By when should Sarah's mother attend these groups?

How might this objective be improved?

Sarah's mother to attend weekly alcohol support groups for the next 12 weeks. If Sarah's mother cannot attend, to inform Sarah's social worker on the day of the missed group.

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Example 4: If this plan is not felt to be working, Sarah's social worker to convene a Legal Planning Meeting

Specific: No. It is not clear what might be meant by the plan 'not felt to be working' or by when a Legal planning Meeting should be arranged once this decision is made.

Measurable: No. How would one measure if the plan were not working?

Attainable: Yes in the sense that a Legal Planning Meeting could be arranged once Sarah's social worker 'felt' the plan was not working

Relevant: Possibly but not clear from the way the objective is stated by itself

Timely: No. By when should a Legal Planning Meeting be convened? Are there any specific points at which an assessment of the plan's overall success or otherwise should be made?

How might this objective be improved?

It might be better if this objective were separated into two distinct objectives, one related to regular assessments of the overall success or otherwise of the plan, and one related to the action to be taken if such an assessment were made and the plan deemed to be failing.

Objective 1: At a maximum of every 8 weeks, Sarah's social worker to make an assessment of whether the overall plan is working. Indicators that the plan is not working would include:

- Sarah's school attendance dropping below 4 days per week for 3 weeks in a row
- Sarah's parents missing 2 of the 4 meetings with Sarah's social worker over the next 10 weeks from today's date
- Sarah's mother missing 2 alcohol support groups in a row or missing 3 in total over the next 12 weeks

The benefit of setting out the criteria by which the plan might be deemed to be failing is that this makes the decision making process clearer for the child, the child's family and other professionals.

Objective 2: Once a decision is made that the plan is not working, Sarah's social worker to convene a Legal Planning Meeting within 10 working days.

SMART plans in relation to neglect may be easier to develop than plans in relation to domestic violence and a specific example is given below:

Example: Ensure there are no further instances of domestic violence

Specific: No. Although the objective is clear that there should be no further instances of domestic violence, it does not specify who is responsible for this.

Measurable: To some extent although it is not specified what is meant by a domestic violence incident.

Attainable: Potentially very difficult depending on the situation. It would ultimately depend on whether the perpetrator was signed-up to the plan or not. To ask the victim to ensure there are no further instances of domestic violence would seem to assign the responsibility for this to the wrong person.

Relevant: Possibly but not clear from the way the objective is stated by itself.

Timely: There is no time element included; the implication would be that there are no further instances of domestic violence ever.

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How might this objective be improved?

As with some of the examples given above, it may be more helpful to separate out the overall goal from the relevant objectives. For ease of reading, this example will assume that the mother is the victim and the father is the perpetrator.

Goal: for the mother and child to be safe and to not experience any further domestic violence because of the father.

This is the goal of the plan but is not an objective in itself. It also makes clear who is responsible for the violence and who needs to be protected from it.

Objectives: For the mother to report any further instances of domestic abuse to the police within 24 hours of any such occurrence and as a 999 emergency if the mother or the child feel immediately threatened. Domestic violence is defined as any violent or verbally abusive or controlling behaviour that frightens the mother or the child.

Objectives: For the father to attend domestic violence perpetrator groups for the next 12 weeks. If the father cannot attend, to inform his child's social worker on the day of the missed group.

There may well be other objectives as well, depending on the situation. However, as with any plans in relation to domestic or any other form of abuse, it is important to avoid developing a plan that essentially requires mothers (or whoever the victim might be) to hide information from agencies. It may be necessary to specify in such a plan the kind of situation that might lead to legal action be taken to protect the children to ensure that everyone in the family and in the family's professional network can be clear on when that line has been crossed.

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