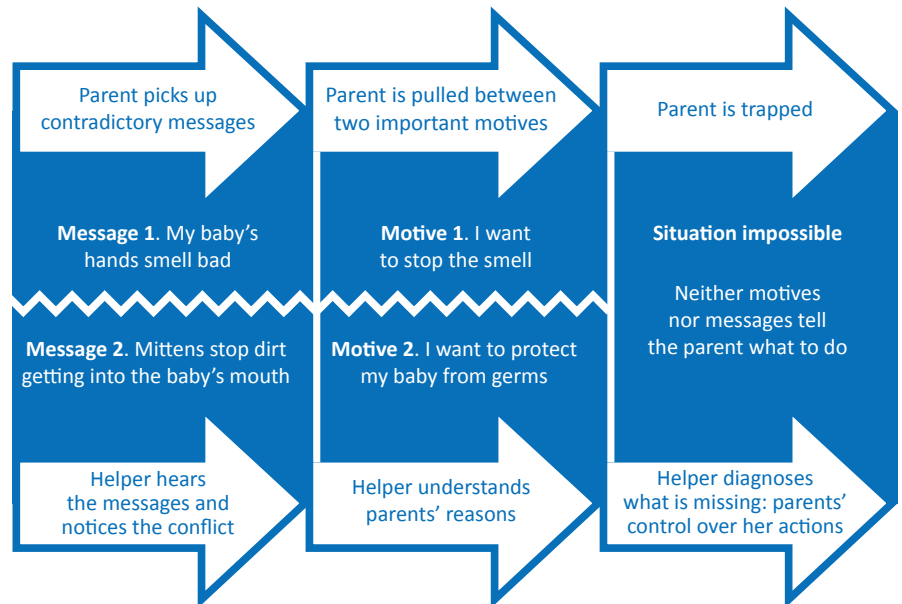


KEY CONCEPT

Double stimulation

The idea of double stimulation comes from Vygotsky¹⁻³. It explains how people escape from situations where they are trapped between two equally balanced ways of acting. This dilemma is called the first stimulus: a problem that grabs our attention. The solution rests in finding and using an appropriate second stimulus. A second stimulus can be an object, an bodily action, or even an idea. What gives something special status as a second stimulus is that it changes the situation: what was an impossible decision becomes possible. The person has taken back control. We might do this by counting out loud to three when we have to take a medicine that we know tastes unpleasant. Parenting involves many dilemmas where it isn't easy to decide what to do, because love for a child and a desire to protect them often suggest contrary ways of acting. In such situations, helpers can make an impact by finding appropriate second stimuli – what we call 'external signposts and action tools'.



This technique can be understood as an example of what Vygotsky called *double stimulation*¹ (see key concept box). The version of it presented here is based on a recently developed conceptual model². Double stimulation is another way in which helper expertise becomes productively entangled with what parents know and with their immediate situation (see Pages 8–9). The way to resolve the impossible situation is an example of a small thing that has a big effect: the solutions are typically everyday objects, or simple ideas, but they have a significant effect in creating a way out of impossible situations for parents.

This technique works its magic by diagnosing and addressing the true cause of the problem. This has nothing to do with parents lacking love for their children, or not wanting what is best for them. It is about needing additional tools to resolve to enable parents to feel in control rather than trapped between a rock and a hard place.

These tools can be ideas, actions, or household objects. They play a special function in providing a means to escape dilemmas. This is a mind-expanding process (see Pages 8–9) because the meaning of everyday tools and ideas changes (expanding interpretations) and is linked to a changing basis for parents' responses to difficult situations (expanding actions).

1 For more details of how this works in child and family services, see Hopwood, N., & Gottschalk, B. (2017). Double stimulation "in the wild": Services for families with children at risk. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 13, 23–37. doi:10.1016/j.lcsi.2017.01.003

What do impossible situations look like?

Impossible situations are more common than we might think. We found many examples in our study. Some can be quite serious, others less so. Regardless, if they aren't addressed, problems can develop or get worse.

Examples of impossible situations

Wanting to cuddle a misbehaving toddler but also wanting to take a firm stance and not reward aggression with attention

Wanting to be with a child struggling to fall asleep but finding it stressful when she cries

Wanting to try out new strategies but finding it easier to go back to normal

Wanting to protect the child from viruses but also wanting to build her immunity and socialise.

What is common to all these situations is that both options reflect positive desires. It is not a choice between good and bad, but an impossible choice between two versions of doing the right thing.

Parents find themselves pulled in opposite directions. When this happens, they can be at the mercy of the situation, rather than feeling they are in control of their decisions and actions.

The solution requires a particular kind of intervention. Seeing how this works shows that special kinds of expertise are needed.

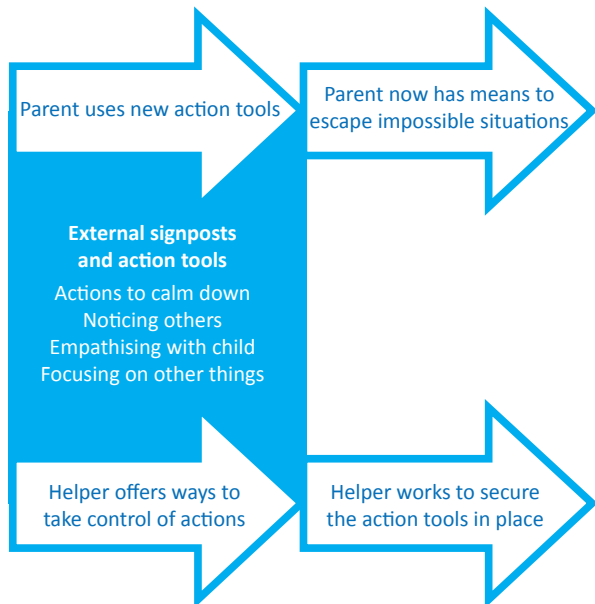
Escaping impossible situations

Summary

Parents often find themselves torn between two different courses of action. They get stuck because there is no clear way to decide what to do. We found that some helpers used a very special technique to help parents in these impossible situations. This technique was a crucial component of the evolving art of impactful partnership (see Pages 8–9): while the principle underpinning it is consistent, the details are different every time and require helpers to attune their intervention to the specifics of a particular problem and its context.

“I repeat myself, then scream. He hits me. I don't want him to think I'm always shouting.”

(Parent, before toddler clinic)



The diagram above shows an example involving a mother who found it hard to remove mittens from her child's hands, but who was disturbed by their smell.

First, recognise conflicting messages

The process begins by recognising the difficulty parents are in as an impossible situation.

Those involved have to understand that there are conflicting messages. These messages are stimuli – something that parents notice and want to respond to.

Helpers have to recognise conflicting messages as an indicator of impossible situations.

Such messages can come directly from children, as when they rub their eyes showing tiredness, or lash out in anger. They can also come from parents, as when they feel their heart racing when they feel anxious, or from their ideas about parenting.

These messages can also be indirect, as when nappies tell us something about a child's nutrition, or smells tell us about bacteria on a child's mittens.

The key point is recognising that the messages convey opposing needs: do this versus do that.

In the diagram, the messages are the smell from the mittens (take them off!), and the idea that mittens keep children safe by stopping them putting their hands in their mouth (keep them on!).

Then, recognise conflicting motives

What makes the situation impossible is that these messages are each tied to deeper motives. These motives are also in conflict, pulling the parent in opposite directions.

In order to find an escape, the helper has to discover these conflicting motives and recognise that they are both legitimate.

Sometimes these motives are relatively obvious. Sometimes the helper needs to ask why something matters to a parent. Making the connection from messages to motives is important – not only because it is needed to address the true cause of the problematic situation, but because it is also a way for the helper to show they are working on parents' terms – with what matters to them (see Pages 50–53 [next section]).

Once these motives are uncovered, the true cause of the impossible situation can be discovered: we understand why it is so difficult for the parent to decide what to do, that there are good reasons why she is stuck.

In the diagram, the motives are to stop the smell and protect the child from germs. Both are legitimate, but they don't help the parent decide what to do.



Escape through use of external signposts and action tools

What the helper does next is crucial. The escape relies on suggesting one or more action tools that can be used to feel back in control. These shift attention from the problem to the nature of the solution, and as such they act as signposts.

Such action tools were found to be most secure and effective when they were 'external' in some way. This means the escape to the impossible situation was not a question of asking parents to dig deep or change something about their core values and motives. Rather the action tool was a cue or prompt from the external environment, or something they could do physically, acting outwards from their body onto the world (like talking aloud, particular gestures, movements etc.).

This externality is important because it shifts the burden of the decision, away from an impossible dilemma, to a way of acting via something else.

These action tools can be things like deep breathing, helping parents calm down and go back to their distressed child. They can be based on rules or patterns in practices, like those in Parent-Child Interaction Therapy around giving commands.

“I'm just not the shouty mum any more.”

(Parent, after toddler clinic)

We found that action tools were not always easy for parents to use, or were not immediately acceptable. So, the most effective helpers realised this and worked to secure parents' commitment to using the action tools.

In the diagram, the action tools included empathising with the child (to realise constant mitten-wearing could be frustrating), observing other children's (bare) hands, and asking her partner for help.

² For a full explanation of the theoretical model of double stimulation see Sannino, A. (2015). The principle of double stimulation: a path to volitional action. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 6, 1–15. doi:10.1016/j.lcsi.2015.01.001

³ For a widely available translation of a relevant part of Vygotsky's original work see Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

Diverse impacts
Small things with big effects
Mind-expanding
Intimate outsiders
Evolving art

Revision

Impossible situations come up all the time in parenting. An impossible situation is when a parent is torn between two different ways of acting because there is no easy way to decide which to do. They often arise when trying to implement changes (do what is familiar and easy vs do something strange and difficult). The key for helpers is to recognise when these situations arise, and to address what is missing: the means to take back control and change how the decision gets made.

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/>

**CREATING
BETTER
FUTURES**

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1. Key concepts – check your understanding

In your own words, explain what each aspect of double stimulation (see key concept box) involves, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

Conflict of messages:

Conflict of motives:

External signposts and action tools:

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
Conflict of messages	
Conflict of motives	
External signposts and action tools	

3. Understanding the diagram

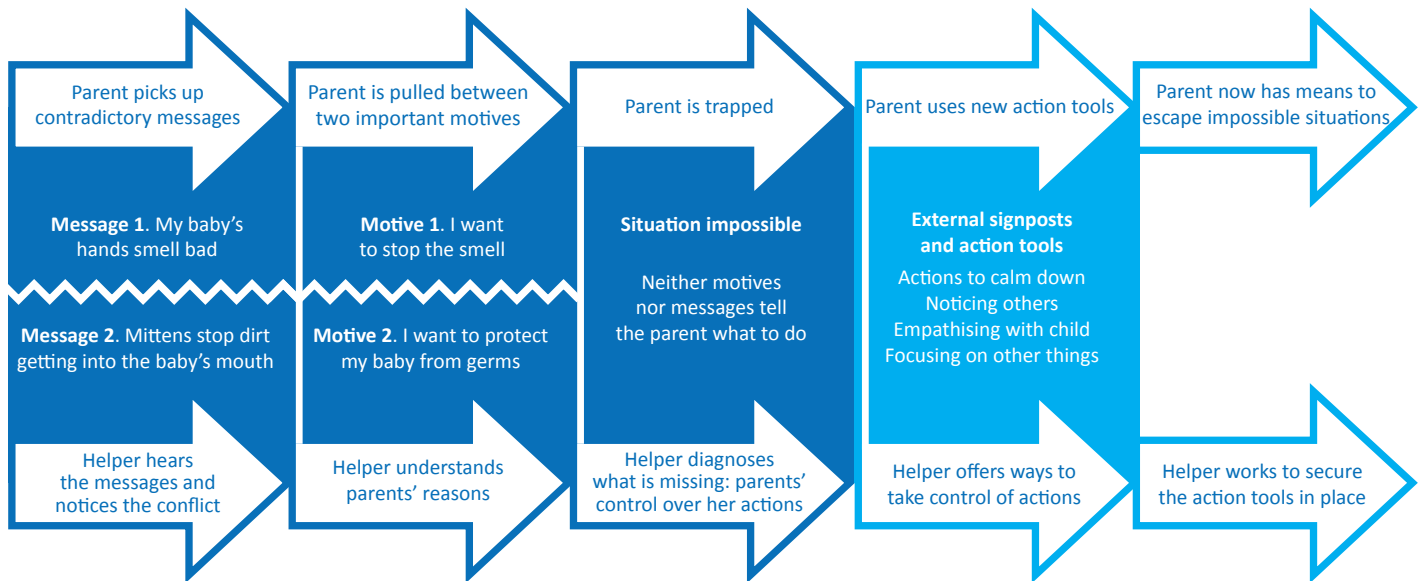
The diagram below represents the technique and tools helpers use to diagnose the cause of parents getting stuck and provide a means for them to escape dilemmas in impactful partnership. The technique involves recognising conflicting messages and motives, and then using tools such as ideas, actions or household objects.

If this diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures the ways in which impactful partnership helps families escape impossible situations on a separate sheet.

Key concept: double stimulation

Double stimulation explains how people escape from situations where they are trapped between two equally balanced ways of acting. In such situations, helpers can make an impact by finding appropriate second stimuli – what we call ‘external signposts and action tools’.

See (1) Sannino, A. (2015). The principle of double stimulation: a path to volitional action. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 6, 1–15. doi:10.1016/j.lcsi.2015.01.001;
(2) Hopwood, N., & Gottschalk, B. (2017). Double stimulation “in the wild”: Services for families with children at risk. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 13, 23–37. doi:10.1016/j.lcsi.2017.01.003



4. Working with the diagram

Think of the last time you worked with a parent who described a situation where they didn't know what to do, or struggled to act in a particular way. This could be when they found it hard to implement changes even when they wanted to.

1. What messages was the parent attending to?
2. What motives were linked to those messages?
3. What external signposts and action tools did you suggest?
4. What did you need to do to make the use of these new tools acceptable and secure?

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 conflicting messages and motives have I noticed that create impossible situations in this family?
	What worked well as action tools to resolve similar situations in the past?
	How can I identify other impossible situations with this family in the future?
QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS	What are the tricky moments for you when it's hardest to know what to do?
	How have you made the decision what to do in the past?
	What tricky moments would you like us to work on together.

Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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CREATING BETTER FUTURES

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Department of Education

