

Using the 'Three Houses' Tool

Involving Children and Young People in
Child Protection Assessment and Planning



by Nicki Weld and Sonja Parker



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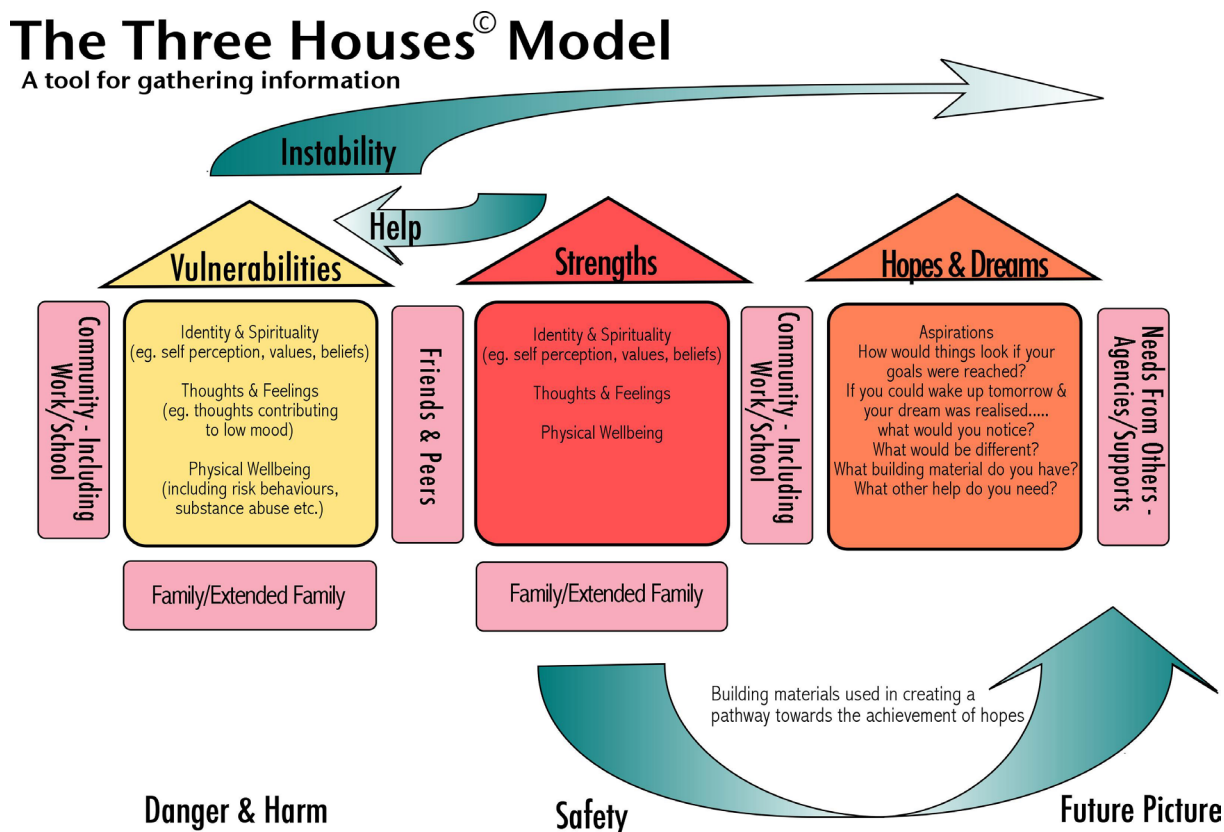
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Introduction

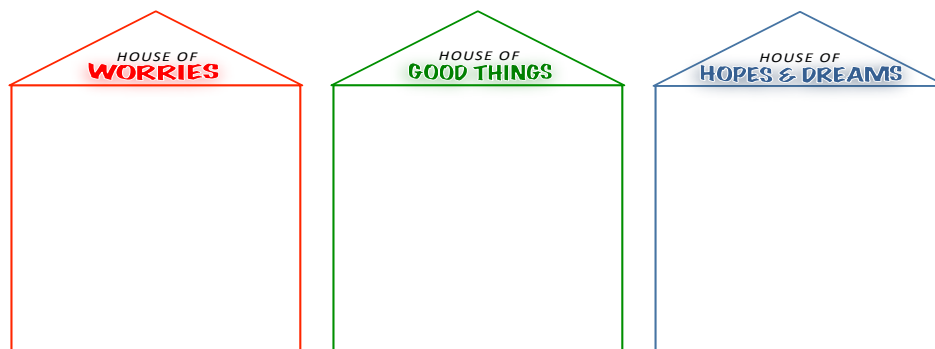
The Three Houses tool is intended to help bring the voice of children, adults, young people, and families more fully into information gathering processes, assessments, and plans. It contains a simple graphic of three houses which are used to help individuals and families externalise and explore what is happening in their lives, particularly in relation to danger and harm, safety factors, and their hopes and dreams. The tool involves both drawing and words and was developed in 2003 in Aotearoa New Zealand within the national statutory child protection agency, Child Youth and Family. Its development was influenced by feedback from family court judges that child and youth plans were too generic, and also by the introduction of strengths based practice which required a more conscious relational approach to child protection work.

The tool provides a visual way to help parents and families identify their strengths, hopes, dreams, and vulnerabilities, along with identifying a future picture of possibility to help build greater safety. The tool was designed to be used by social workers and social service practitioners in everyday work situations with families. It is not designed for forensic or evidential interviewing as these are specialised fields that require specific training. Once I completed an initial design of the tool, my colleague Maggie Greening helped me develop this into this first version of the Three Houses tool:



The tool was trialled by Child Youth and Family in Tauranga, New Zealand, and first used on an investigation with a mother where there were care and protection concerns. The worker found it opened up the conversation with the mother who talked a lot more freely through the use of the tool because it explored not only about the worries, but also the strengths of her and her family. The Tauranga staff continued to develop the tool and commented that the word vulnerabilities was quite hard for young people to understand so they simplified it down into 'worries' or 'bad things'.

It was then presented in its original version at a Signs of Safety Gathering in Gateshead, England, in 2005. With help from practitioners in a range of different countries, including Sweden, Japan, the Netherlands, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, along with the ongoing work of the Tauranga team and other staff in New Zealand, a simplified children and young person's version emerged as can be seen below:



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Although much of the development of the tool has occurred with statutory child protection settings, the two versions of the tool can be applied in range of contexts including both government and non-government work.

A number of theories and concepts support the Three Houses tool including Te Whare Tapa Wha – a Maori model of health (Sir Mason Durie, 1988), Narrative theory (Michael White and David Epston), Strengths Based Practice and Solution focused thinking (Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg) and the book Signs of Safety (Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards, 1999). Sir Mason's Durie's work in particular helped influence the design of the first version of the tool as his model for exploring Maori mental health uses the concept of a house or 'whare'. He uses this as a metaphor to explore the areas of family (whanau), spiritual health (wairua), physical health (tinana), and mental or psychological health (hinengaro) in a person's world. This supports a holistic approach to a person and also a systems perspective that recognises the interdependent nature of all aspects of our internal and external self and what is both strong and perhaps vulnerable within these.

It is essential to bring a principled approach whenever using a tool, model, framework, or strategy, and the strengths based practice principles provide a way to do this. Strengths based practice emphasises the building of partnership and relationship in or work, where we still mindful of the inherent power imbalance that is always present. Social service work at all levels is relationally based, and without a working relationship with people we cannot support the work of change that may need to occur. The primary skill in using the Three Houses tool is less about direct questioning, and more about listening and building understanding. It is best to regard the tool as a way of supporting a conversation where we take the time to create the space where people can tell us about their world and their views rather than see it as an 'interviewing' tool. The information can then support our assessments and planning, which is also informed by a range of sources.

Understanding the Houses

The House of Vulnerabilities or Worries

Vulnerabilities include past and present hurts and issues that can make a person more vulnerable to danger and harm such as addictions, anger, sadness, past and current experiences of violence, or being involved in or exposed to criminal activities. Worries might include these types of vulnerabilities and also anything that may make a child, young person, or adult feel sad, angry, scared, and ashamed, and therefore worried about. Vulnerabilities and worries can be

both internal and external, and might include behaviours both within people and from others that increase the likelihood of harm or distress for them.

The House of Strengths or Good Things

Exploring 'Strengths' or 'Good things' helps identify internal and external factors that are working well to support safety and wellbeing, and the things people feel good and ok about. The strengths and good things in a person's world often become the resources and ways to help manage the vulnerabilities and worries, and also to support people to reach their hopes and dreams. Strengths and good things might include humour, supportive family members or friends, positive values and beliefs, faith, positive self-identity, good engagement in work or school, and skills or talents. If people do not have a great deal in this house this is likely to indicate we need to look at bringing in additional resources to help them build more safety and greater well-being in their lives.

The House of Hopes and Dreams

The house of 'Hopes and Dreams' explores what people would like to see happening in their world, especially in relation to their vulnerabilities or worries. This house helps us build understanding of what someone may like to be different in their world and their goals and aspirations around this. It is here that solutions and goals can start to be formed to build a future picture of increased safety and well-being. Without a future picture people can become stuck, unable to see where they could be or what might be, and less motivated. This is especially true for children, young people, and adults who have experienced trauma and may have difficulty thinking longer term or having goals and aspirations.

When we are helping someone to explore their house of hopes and dreams we need to link this back to their worries so it isn't just an unrelated wish list that may not be related to increasing safety and building protective factors. We can ask what they would like to see happening instead of a named vulnerability or worry, and therefore we directly use the house of vulnerabilities or worries to help inform the house of hopes and dreams. We can look at their house of strengths and see if there are any current internal or external resources they might like to grow or develop and put these in their house of hopes and dreams. The house of hopes and dreams helps people to see past the presenting problems into a possibility of what could and might be, and helps us to gain an understanding of what people would like to be different in their world.

The three houses within the tool interconnect and are informed by and from each other. In the first version there is a pathway that connects the house of strengths to the house of hopes and dreams to indicate that strengths and good things are all resources that can help build the goals. We need to use existing resources first before we bring in other resources as this helps value a person's existing capabilities and supports. The house of strengths or good things also can help with the vulnerabilities and worries, by helping to address these. The house of vulnerabilities or worries can cause instability to people's strengths and hopes and dreams so this needs to be consciously attended to in subsequent planning by ensuring the hopes and dreams and strengths are directly linked to addressing the vulnerabilities and worries.

People often ask which house you should start with and as long as the interconnectedness is understood, it doesn't matter where you start. As will be seen in the next chapters, part of the process of applying the tool is about inviting a person to choose where to start. A key role of the worker is to help people see and make the connections between the houses and how they link and support each other, and to help the development of the person's three houses in a respectful and supportive way.

Case Examples

Dutch Example

Margreet Timmer, a child protection worker from Bureau Jeugdzorg in Drenthe, The Netherlands, was responsible for a case involving a mother, her boyfriend and two children who we will call Ramon (10 years) and Stephanie (7 years). The school that Ramon and Stephanie were attending had contacted Bureau Jeugdzorg, concerned that the children's behaviour had deteriorated over the past six months. Ramon had become very aggressive to students and teachers and Stephanie was constantly having arguments with the teacher and not accepting their rules. Both children's schoolwork had deteriorated. There were concerns that the children's home life was difficult and that their mother was in a violent relationship, but the information Margreet had was very vague. Margreet had interviewed the mother and gained little information and had also made two attempts to interview the children with little success. The school continued to raise concerns about the children and knowing she needed to do something different, Margreet decided to interview Stephanie and Ramon using the 'Three Houses' tool.

Margreet conducted the interview with both children together, using one piece of paper per house and asking the children to draw pictures in the houses to represent their experiences.

Ramon and Stephanie's 'House of Worries'

Margreet began by asking Stephanie and Ramon to draw an outline of a house. Margreet wrote the word 'Zorgen', Dutch for worries, at the top of the page. The children then drew the stables outside their house at the top of the page and began to tell the story of how their mother's boyfriend often locked them in the stables all evening as punishment for misbehaviour. They described how they were cold in the drafty stables, and scared because there were lots of mice and because the boyfriend would also lock a big black aggressive dog (drawn at the left above the stables) in the stables with them. Ramon described how he would try to comfort and protect Stephanie during the evening.



Next the children drew the following in the 'House of Worries':

- On the roof they drew their mother crying in distress.
- Ramon drew a picture (in the middle to the right) of him kicking and yelling at the boyfriend – this had never actually happened but it was obvious to Margreet that it was important to let Ramon draw this picture.
- In the roof space they drew Ramon's bedroom (which he said he hated) including a broken window that made the room cold. Stephanie described that she didn't have a bedroom since the boyfriend came to live with them but had her bed in a corridor.
- A picture of the boyfriend yelling at them for not finishing a meal and the fork which he used to stab them with as punishment (One of the children had healing scars on their hand which were consistent with being stabbed with a fork).

By the time the children had completed this drawing, Margreet was both distressed by what the children were describing but also pleased that she had been able to find a way in which the children could tell her what was happening to them.

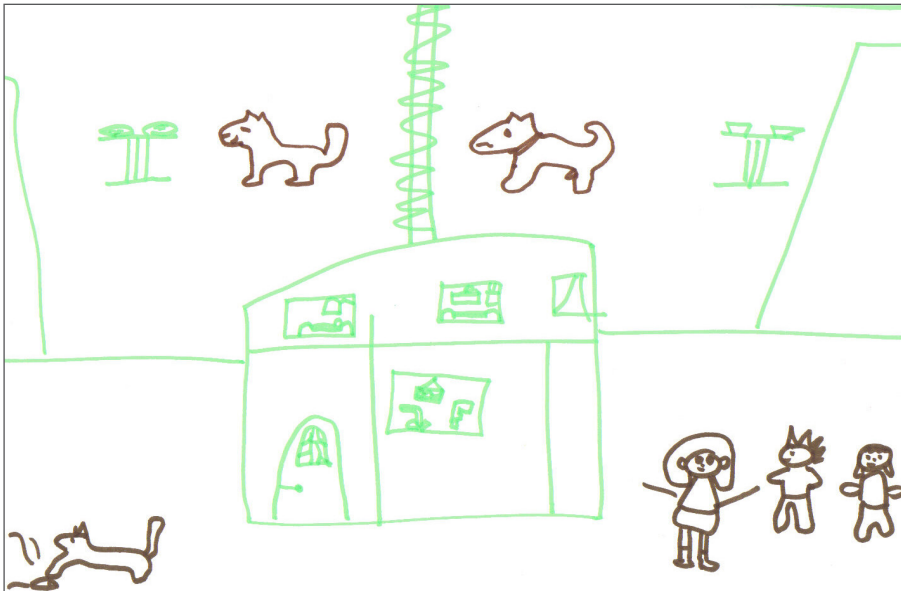
Ramon and Stephanie's 'House of Good Things'

In their 'House of Good Things', Stephanie and Ramon made drawings of spending time with their biological father, who they visited every second weekend. The drawing shows the father and Ramon kicking a soccer ball and Stephanie holding up a yellow card. Inside the house they have a bedroom in the attic, complete with a disco ball, which they share and both like. They told Margreet that there are good things to do at their father's house. Interestingly, Stephanie and Ramon also added mice to this drawing and to both of their 'House of Dreams' drawings.



Stephanie and Ramon's 'Houses of Dreams'

Stephanie and Ramon drew separate 'Houses of Dreams'; Ramon's drawing is on the left, Stephanie's on the right. Both drawings involved the children living together with their mother on their own, with each having their own bedrooms and lots of activities to do and toys to play with (this is more evident in Stephanie's drawing). In Ramon's drawing, he wanted to have two big aggressive dogs and he decided they were so aggressive that they had to be kept apart by a large fence in the back yard. Stephanie drew her house with two very strong front doors, lots of animals to play with, and lots of clothes, toys and activities.



What Happened Next

After completing the 'Three Houses' drawings with Stephanie and Ramon, Margreet met with their mother (the boyfriend was invited but chose not to attend). Seeing the visual representation of her children's experiences created a context for the mother where she admitted that her boyfriend was violent and that she knew she needed to leave him. In the discussions that followed, the mother

said she would try to leave her boyfriend within a month and that prior to this time, she would make sure the children were no longer forced to stay in the stables and that she would protect the children from the boyfriend, particularly at meal times. Unfortunately the mother was not able to leave the boyfriend within this time frame and Stephanie and Ramon were taken into care based on the information that Margreet had gathered in the 'Three Houses' assessment. However, nine months later the mother was able to leave the boyfriend and she immediately came back to Margreet asking for her children to be returned to her. It took some time for the mother to get herself established in a house and then the children were returned to her care. For Margreet, the 'Three Houses' process with the children provided the turning point in this case.

Australian Example

Sonja Parker from Perth, Western Australia, used the 'Three Houses' tool to undertake an assessment with an eight year-old girl, who we will call Tia. Tia was brought to the hospital where Sonja worked by her maternal grandparents, who were caring for Tia and her three year-old brother, Michael, while their mother was in hospital following a psychotic episode. Tia and Michael's grandparents brought Tia to the hospital because they were concerned that during the few days they had been caring for the children, Tia and Michael were crying frequently, were experiencing difficulty falling asleep and were having nightmares. When the grandparents asked Tia what was upsetting her, Tia told them that she was feeling frightened about having to go home and live with her mum. Not knowing what else to do, Tia's grandparents brought her to the hospital child protection unit.

After Sonja had talked to Tia and her grandparents about why they had brought Tia to the hospital, Sonja described the 'Three Houses' tool to them and explained that she would like to use the 'Three Houses' to understand how Tia was feeling. Tia agreed with the idea and when offered the choice by Sonja of talking with her grandparents present or on her own, Tia said that she wanted to talk to Sonja on her own. Before the grandparents left the room, Sonja explained that after she and Tia had completed the 'Three Houses', they would invite Tia's grandparents back into the room so that they could talk together.

Sonja then got three A4 pieces of paper and some coloured pencils and together she and Tia sat at a desk to work together. Sonja asked Tia to draw three big houses, one on each sheet of paper, with the name of the house on the top of each page. As Tia did this, Sonja explained again what each of the houses represented. Sonja offered Tia the choice of which 'house' she would like to start with and Tia chose the 'House of Worries'. Sonja then asked Tia whether she wanted to draw or write to explain her worries. Tia chose to use words and asked that Sonja do the writing for her.

Tia's 'House of Worries'

When Sonja asked Tia what she was worried about, Tia immediately began talking rapidly, saying "Mum's health. She has been sick. She sometimes goes to hospital". Sonja had to write quickly and was careful to use Tia's exact words, and then read back to Tia what she had said. As soon as Sonja had finished writing and reading back the first statement, Tia began talking about her next worry, saying "She talks to herself and the walls and looks at herself in the mirror". Again, Sonja wrote the statement down and read back what Tia has said. This enabled Sonja to check that she had captured Tia's words accurately and also had the advantage of slowing Tia down a little so Sonja could keep up with her. This process continued until Tia paused, at which time Sonja asked "What else are you worried about?" and then wrote down Tia's next worry, until Tia said that that was all of her worries.

HOUSE OF WORRIES

- Mum's health. (She has been sick. She sometimes goes to hospital).
- She talks to herself and the walls and looks at herself in the mirror.
- She sometimes yells at night.
- She wakes us up and Michael starts crying – I get scared.
- Michael – he is sometimes alone with mum.
- Sometimes mum wakes us up and drives us at night – she goes to all sorts of places.
- Sometimes people break into the house and steal our clothes, like on her birthday night.
- One man got drunk and came to the house when we were there and smashed the window.
- Sometimes I worry that the windows are going to get smashed again.
- Sometimes mum gets really mad and hits Michael and me on the arms and legs and bottom.
- Sometimes when mum drives us late at night and she doesn't get up and I have to do my hair and make my uniform look okay and get breakfast.
- Sometimes other people come around and our things get stolen like my PSP and then I get a smack.
- Sometimes when my mum comes to my Nana's house and she demands that I go with her and I feel scared – I'm sometimes scared to go with her.
- One night Mum held some tablets to her mouth and she told Michael and I that she was going to take them.
- Sometimes I have to lie to my Nana when my Mum is around.
- Sometimes my Mum swears and spits in my uncle's face at my Nana's house. I have to lock myself in my room.
- Sometimes Mum and her friends hit each other. Once Melissa punched Mum on the nose and Mum had a blood nose.
- Sometimes Mum goes out and leaves me and Michael alone at night. Our phone is broken.
- Takeaway 3-4 times a week (I miss the yummy food).

Tia's 'House of Good Things'

With Tia saying she had finished her 'House of Worries', Sonja put that to the side and brought the 'House of Good Things' in front of Tia. Tia's last statement in the 'House of Worries' included her words, "I miss the yummy food Mummy used to make". This offered a very natural transition for Sonja to ask "What are the good things that are happening in your life?" and not surprisingly, Tia talked about the food mum used to cook. Following the same process as before, Sonja continued to ask "What else is good in your life" and wrote down all the things that Tia said were going well in her life.

When Tia had finished, Sonja and Tia looked over the list together and Sonja asked Tia if there was anything else that needed to be on the list. Tia said that there wasn't, so Sonja put that 'house' to the side and brought the 'House of Dreams' in front of Tia.

HOUSE OF GOOD THINGS

- *Mum used to cook me food and she sometimes still does now.*
- *She takes us to the park sometimes or out to Fremantle or to AQUA (last term).*
- *She sometimes goes to my Nana's and stays with her.*
- *Sometimes she used to go into town with my Nana & us.*
- *Staying with my Nana and having fun there with my Auntie and Uncle. Michael likes going to my Uncle's.*
- *We get to do lots of good fun with my Uncle and Auntie at Hilary's beach.*
- *When we go to dinners like tonight, I get excited.*
- *School is good.*
- *I like being with my Nana, Pa, my Auntie and my Uncle and with my mum when she's good.*

Tia's 'House of Hopes and Dreams'

Moving from the 'Houses of Worries' and "House of Good Things' to the 'House of Hopes and Dreams' is a shift from the past to thinking about the future. To mark this shift, Sonja explained that this was the house where Tia could write down all the things that she wanted to have happen in her life. Sonja asked Tia, "If you could have your life the way you wanted it to be, what would you like to happen?"

Tia, like most children in her situation, was very clear and specific about what she wanted. All the things Tia said she wanted are presented below in Tia's 'House of Dreams'. In describing what she wanted to have happen in her life, Tia repeated or rephrased a number of things, such as "For Michael and me to be happy" and "Me and Michael to be happy". Sonja made sure she recorded each of Tia's statements, including those that were repeated, as a way of accurately recording what was important to Tia.

HOUSE OF DREAMS

- *I want to go live with my Nana, Auntie, Uncle, me and my brother.*
- *I want a happy family.*
- *For Michael and me to be happy.*
- *For my mum to be better and well.*
- *For my mum to have fun with us.*
- *To be with my mum more when she's better.*
- *For Mum to not get sick anymore.*
- *For Mum not to drive us around late at night.*
- *For us to move out of that house because it's scary now with all the windows being smashed.*
- *For people not to come in and out and steal our things.*
- *Me & Michael to be happy.*
- *For my Mum to stop hating my Nana, my Auntie and my Pa.*
- *For my dad not to go to jail anymore.*
- *To go and visit my dad sometimes.*

What Happened Next

The whole process of creating Tia's 'Three Houses' took about 30 minutes. After they had finished, Sonja thanked Tia and complimented her for her courage in talking so honestly about what was happening in her life. Sonja then asked whether she would like to show her 'Three Houses' to her Nana and Pa. Tia said she wanted them to see the 'Three Houses' but she didn't want to read it to them and asked Sonja to do that for her. Sonja and Tia invited Tia's grandparents back into the room and Sonja began to read through the 'Three Houses' as Tia had asked. Both grandparents were very affected by Tia's 'House of Worries' and Tia's grandmother began to cry. Tia's grandparents told Tia that they were very proud of her for being able to talk to Sonja about what had been happening. Tia explained that she had been too scared to tell her grandmother in case she got into more trouble with her mum and then wouldn't be allowed to see her grandparents.

After listening to Tia's 'House of Dreams', Tia's grandparents told her that they would do everything they could to make sure that Tia and Michael could stay with them until their mother was well again and able to take care of them properly. Sonja explained to Tia and her grandparents that there were other people (within the statutory child protection agency and the Family Court) who may

need to be involved in making the decision that Tia and Michael could stay with their grandparents until their mum was well enough to look after them properly. Sonja briefly described the process for seeking support from the statutory child protection agency and the Family Court and asked Tia if she was willing for Sonja to show Tia's 'Three Houses' to people from both these agencies. Tia said that she didn't mind if other people saw her 'Three Houses' but that she didn't want her mother to see them because she would get angry with Tia for telling people what had been happening at home. Sonja talked through this issue with Tia and her grandparents, explaining to Tia that a lot of children in her position were worried that people might get angry with them. Tia's grandparents told Tia that she had been very brave in talking about the things she was worried about because now people could help her mum to make things better, and reassured her again that they were going to do everything they could to make sure that Tia and Michael weren't left alone with their mum until she was better and able to look after them properly. This seemed to answer Tia's worry.

With Sonja's help, Tia's grandparents put in an application to the Family Court and Sonja made a referral to the statutory child protection agency. Both the court application and the referral were based around the information in Tia's 'Three Houses' and a copy of the 'Three Houses' was sent to both. Based on Tia's 'Three Houses', the statutory agency supported the grandparents' application to the Family Court and the grandparents were awarded custody of Tia and Michael until such time as the children's mother could show the court that she was no longer using drugs and was able to safely care for the children.

Process for Using the 'Three Houses' Tool

This section contains a suggested process for using the Three Houses tool with children, primarily in child protection casework. This process has been developed by drawing on the experiences of child protection workers, from around the world, who have used the Three Houses tool with children and young people.

As described in the introduction, the Three Houses tool has been developed with the aim of ensuring that children's voices are more present in our child protection assessments and intervention plans. While listening to the voice of the child is critical in our child protection work, meaningful participation for children doesn't just mean eliciting the child's voice about what is happening in their family and their world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (specifically Article 12) establishes children's rights to be heard and to participate in planning and decision-making about issues that affect them.

Under the UN Convention, participation is defined as an ongoing process that requires that children (taking into account their age and maturity) be:

- Given full information about what is happening.
- Given full opportunity to have his or her voice heard.
- Provided with clear information about the possible consequences of speaking up.
- Empowered to share decision-making with adults.

The process outlined below for using the Three Houses tool therefore focuses not only on eliciting the child's voice, but also on working with the child and their family in ways that enable the child to:

- Understand why child protection services are involved with their family.
- Understand the child protection processes that their family will be involved with.
- Be given the opportunity for their voice to be heard.
- Be provided with clear and developmentally appropriate information about the possible consequences of them speaking up.

- Be given the opportunity to participate in planning and decision-making in safe and developmentally appropriate ways.
- Be supported and helped to understand what is happening at each stage of the child protection process.

It should be noted that the Three Houses tool is not generally used with children under the age of four and being aware of possible differences between a children's biological and developmental age is also important; an example being that a six year old child with significant developmental delay may find the process too difficult or a very bright three year old may be able to meaningfully participate in the Three Houses process.

1. Preparing to use the Three Houses tool with children

1.1 Getting ready

Before using the Three Houses tool with a child, you will need to be familiar with the process. This doesn't mean that you have to be an expert, because everyone is a beginner at some point, but the more familiar you are with the process, the more relaxed you will be able to be within it. It is possible a child may be anxious about talking with you so it helps if you are as relaxed as possible. Some people have found it helpful to practice using the Three Houses tool, with a colleague for example, before they first use it with a child. It can also be helpful to have these notes beside you when you are first using the Three Houses tool (and don't hesitate to be open about the fact that you are new to this process).

1.2 Getting clear about your views

The first step in using the Three Houses tool is to take some time to analyse and reflect on the information you have about what is happening within the family, so that you are clear about your own views. The more that you have worked through your own initial assessment and your views on future safety (based on the information that you currently have), the more prepared you will be to:

- Listen to the child's views.
- Ask open-ended questions that cover all of the relevant areas of the child's life.
- Stay open to new information and possibilities.

Supervision is a good place to explore your initial views, thoughts, feelings, and possible assumptions about the situation. It is important to remember that the Three Houses tool is about creating an opportunity for the child's views to be heard, not for our information gathering needs to be met. This means it is important we do not lead or overly direct the conversation to fulfill our own need for information. You need to be prepared that the child may or may not share information that is relevant to informing your assessment, or they may not share anything with you, so it essential that the Three Houses tool is seen as a one way to support information gathered, not the only source of this, and that its primary purpose is to provide a way for a child to express their views about what is happening in their world.

1.3 Background information about the child

As well as getting clear on your initial assessment (based on the information you have received), it can be helpful to find out as much other background information as you can about the particular child or children and their unique circumstances. Learning a little more about the child before you meet with them can help in the process of building rapport and trust, and can also help to focus your questions if the child is finding it difficult to talk with you. Understanding their developmental

level, and what may have happened is essential to be able to focus and manage the conversation in a sensitive and responsive way.

Gathering this background information might include finding out who the significant people are in the child's life, who they live with, where they go to school, what sort of things they enjoy doing, how often they have contact visits with their family (if they are in care) and where these visits take place. Sources for this information could include speaking to the referrer, previous case files, the referral report, previous caseworkers, other professionals involved with the family, and family members.

1.4. Materials you will need to take with you

The other important preparation for using the Three Houses tool is organising the materials that you will need to take with you. At a minimum, you will need blank sheets of paper (preferably one for each house, as well as some spares) and some coloured pencils and felt pens. Some workers like to use paper and artists' crayons, coloured pencils or felt pens so that children feel valued and that this is a special process that they are involved in. There are many different materials that have been used to create a Three Houses picture with a child, and what you use is really only limited by your imagination and the child's imagination. Some workers have used lego, plasticine, drawings in the sand, or felt boards – whatever works to help you have these important conversations with the child. You can develop your own way of using the Three Houses tool to suit your working style and the particular needs and circumstances for each child. If you are working on paper, you may also need some way of taking a photograph of the child's Three Houses. Some children will want to keep a copy of their pictures and if that is the case, you can take a photograph (with a camera, mobile phone or tablet) that can then become your copy and be stored on file and printed as required. See point 10 for more information about what to consider if you are leaving a copy of the pictures with the child.

2. Inform parents and whenever possible, obtain permission to talk with the child

One of the primary purposes in using the Three Houses tool is to ensure that the voice of the child is included in the information we gather to develop our assessment and if there are concerns, the child's Three Houses can be provided to help engage the parents (and the family's network) in the process of creating future safety for the child. So it is important in using the Three Houses tool that we are as open and transparent as possible, to minimize the risk of alienating the parents/ caregivers in the process.

There are times, because of the nature of the concerns, when child protection workers have to talk with children without advising or without the permission of the parents or primary caregivers. An example of this might be a situation where the child is living with a parent who it is alleged has caused harm to the child and where the child may be the first person to speak of the alleged harm, or someone else has reported the alleged harm but the issues are not out in the open with the parent or the parent is denying the allegations. But there are also many times that it is possible to introduce the Three Houses tool to parents/caregivers and ask for their permission before you use the tool with their child or children, for example as part of a reunification process or a family preservation process where the concerns are already known and the parents/caregivers are already engaged in open and transparent conversations with professionals about these.

There are two approaches that you can use in introducing the Three Houses tool to parents/ caregivers. The first way involves using the tool directly with the parents to elicit their own views

and to share the agency's views (as an assessment tool with the parents). The advantage of using the same assessment tool with all parties is that this can make it easier for everyone to understand and participate in the assessment process and then hopefully be more able to understand and participate in the process of creating future safety.

If however you decide to use a different assessment framework with the parents/caregivers, then at a minimum it is important to show the Three Houses tool to parents beforehand and explain that you would like to use this tool to talk with their child. Explain that your purpose is to help everyone understand the child's perspective and to include the child's views and ideas in the safety planning process. When parents learn that a child protection worker wants to interview their child this often raises the parents' anxiety, so it can be helpful to show them a blank template of the Three Houses tool beforehand and explain the questions that the child will be asked. Seeing the Three Houses tool and understanding the process can also help parents to understand that the worker will not just ask the child about problems, but will also focus on good things and hopes for the future.

As mentioned above, talking this through with the parents beforehand begins to build a transparent working relationship that will make it easier for the worker to come back to the parents afterwards to talk about the information provided by the child (following discussion with the child, as described in point 12 below). If because of the nature of the concerns, the decision was made to talk with the child without first advising or seeking the permission of the parents/caregivers, then at a minimum it is important to talk this through with the parents afterwards and be prepared to explain the rationale for talking with the child without the parents' consent.

If the child is in foster care or is in the care of extended family, it is important to explain the Three Houses process to the carers so that they can support the process. As with the parents, this creates the context for bringing the child's Three Houses back to the carer (with the permission of the child and the parents) and will usually significantly help the carer to understand and participate in the safety planning process and/or the anticipated reunification process.

Knowing that their parents/caregivers know about and understand the Three Houses tool and related process and have given permission for workers to talk with the child using the Three Houses, can help children who are anxious to be more comfortable with participating in the Three Houses process.

3. Deciding where to meet with the child

Being asked to talk with a child protection worker about what is happening in their lives will often cause children to feel anxious, so choosing a location where the child is likely to feel most comfortable is important, particularly for your first meeting. This can be at home, at another family member's house, at school, in the hospital ward, outside under a tree, or wherever the child will feel most relaxed. Wherever you meet, try to ensure there is space to spread out the materials, that there is privacy for the child (and family), and that interruptions will be at a minimum.

The other important consideration in choosing the location is the question of who will be there and the degree to which the child will feel able to speak freely. Meeting with their child in their home might work well if the issues are already out in the open with the parents or primary caregivers, but could lead to increased anxiety for the child and potentially less safety if any possible concerns are not yet on the table with the parents. This is discussed in detail in the next point.

4. Making the decision to work with the child with/without the parents being present

The decision about whether or not to agree to the parent/caregiver being present when you talk to the child is an important decision. As discussed a number of times, the Three Houses process is part of a broader collaborative assessment and planning process, so we want decisions such as whether or not the parent can be present when you are working with the child to be made collaboratively with the family whenever possible.

However, there will be circumstances when child protection workers will be understandably concerned that the child may not feel able to express how they are feeling if their parent/caregiver is present and will need to insist that they speak with children on their own. Ofsted's evaluation of serious case reviews highlighted one case where children were only able to talk about the serious neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse they had suffered when they were talked with away from their home environment. A lesson from the review was that priority needed to be given to providing a safe and trusting environment, away from the carers, for the children to speak about their concerns¹.

If the decision is made by the child protection agency to speak with the children on their own, then all efforts should be made to provide an honest explanation to the parents/caregivers about why the worker feels this is necessary. And as discussed in point 3 above, this conversation is happening in a context where you are also explaining the Three Houses process to the parents.

If workers are confident that the child will be able to speak freely with their parent/caregiver being present, then the decision about whether or not they are present during the interview can be made collaboratively with the child and the parents. The child may prefer to have their parent/caregiver in the room, or may prefer to meet with you on their own, either in the home or in another location. If you are talking with the child in a location such as a school or within their foster home, the child may want to have their teacher or foster carer present. If another adult is going to be present with you and the child, it is important to establish clearly beforehand that the support person needs to remain quiet and preferably sit off to one side of the room so that the worker can engage as much as possible directly with the child.

5. Talking with children separately or together

If there is more than one child in the family, a decision needs to be made about whether to meet with the children separately or together. Each child usually creates their own Three Houses pictures, but some children may prefer to talk to you without their siblings present, while for others, having a brother or sister with them can help them to feel more comfortable and talk more easily. Often it can be helpful for younger children to have an older brother or sister to help them as long as this is managed so the younger child's view remains the focus.

Depending on the number of children in the family and their particular circumstances, it might work better to work with all the children during the same visit (either with one or multiple workers) or if there is no urgency, to create the children's Three Houses pictures over a number of visits.

1 Ofsted (2010), *The voice of the child: learning lessons from Serious Case Reviews*. A thematic report of Ofsted's evaluation of Serious Case Reviews from 1 April to 30 September 2010.

6. Introducing your role and the Three Houses to the child

Even if the child was present with the parents/caregivers when the worker explained their role and the Three Houses tool and process, it is important to explain both these things to the child again. This is a context where children will usually be anxious and they may not have heard or understood what was said earlier. Use language that is simple and brief so that the child doesn't become confused by a long explanation. When introducing the Three Houses to children, Sonja usually says something like:

“Hi, my name is Sonja and I am a social worker and I work for (name of agency). I don't know if you know what social workers do but I have a great job that involves talking to lots of children. It's my job to talk with children and their families when there may be some things that people are worried about, and then to help everybody to sort those worries out. I've talked with X (whoever the person is who raised concerns) and they've told me that there are some things that they are worried about, and now I'd like to talk with you to hear your ideas about how things are going? Is that okay?”

“I'd like to do something called the Three Houses with you, which is something I do with a lot of children. We draw Three Houses together and in those houses you can draw or we can write down the things that you are worried about, the things that are going well or good in your life, and the things that you would like to have happen in the future.”

In the process of introducing the Three Houses tool to the child, start to draw up the outlines of the houses (or show the child the ipad/tablet app) so that the child has a clearer understanding of what you are talking about. Encourage the child to get involved in drawing or choosing the outlines as quickly as possible, as this active process of working together will help the child to relax a little more and start to engage in the process. The worker can then explain to the child something like: 'In the first house we will write or draw your worries, so that's the 'House of Worries'. In the second house, we'll put all things that you like in your life; that's the 'House of Good Things'. The third house is the 'House of Hopes and dreams, where we can write and draw how you'd like things to be in your life if all your worries were solved.' The worker and child can then write 'worries', 'good things' and 'hopes and dreams' on each respective house or as some workers do, the child can be offered the choice of suggesting their own name for each house or drawing a picture that symbolises this.

If you are using the Three Houses tool to gain a child view as part of developing a reunification plan or as part of a safety planning process, then it is important to explain to them how the tool fits in with the overall assessment and planning process. Hearing from a worker that their views are both valued and will be included in the planning process can be very powerful for a child particularly if they have previously felt as if no-one is interested in talking with them about what is happening.

7. Explaining how the Three Houses information will be used

One of the most important steps in using the Three Houses tool is talking with the child about how the information that they have put in their pictures will be used. Many workers are worried that if they tell the child beforehand that their Three Houses will be shown to other people (such as their parents), that this will stop the child from talking openly about what is happening in their family. This may well be the case in the short term, but being open with the child, and building a relationship of trust and honesty with the child, is vitally important and is one of the essential foundations for being able to work with this child and family to build long-term safety and wellbeing.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner in the United Kingdom has conducted extensive research with children and young people about their experiences of child protection processes . The young people expressed how confusing they found the child protection system and said that in their experience, the processes were far from transparent. The children and young people said that they wanted to be provided with better and more honest information about what was happening and to be given more emotional support through the process².

'Tell us straight, don't fob us off. Don't put it off or change the subject, tell us how it is.'

'With emotional problems, be there, be more calm but also be straight.'

Not surprisingly, the research also revealed that many children felt anxious about talking to child protection workers. Children said that their fears about the possible consequences of telling, such as the break-up of their family or the risk of further violence in their family, was an obstacle to them talking openly. One of the key messages from children and young people is that the development of a trusting relationship helped them feel more able to talk openly.

We 'need to get social workers that respect us and aren't going to be false to young people. If they trust us we'll trust them'.

In addition to the importance of honesty and transparency highlighted by research with children and young people, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that children be provided with information about how their views and the views of others will be taken into account and will impact on decisions that are made. The Committee states that "The realization of the right of the child to express her or his views requires that the child be informed about the matters, options and possible decisions to be taken and their consequences by those who are responsible for hearing the child, and by the child's parents or guardian. The child must also be informed about the conditions under which she or he will be asked to express her or his views. This right to information is essential, because it is the precondition of the child's clarified decisions" .

So what this means in practice is that workers need to talk with the child about how the information they share will be used, including who the information will be shared with, what the possible consequences of sharing this information will be, and how the child's views and the views of others will be considered as part of the agency's assessment and planning processes. This discussion needs to happen in ways that are developmentally appropriate, using language that the child can easily understand, and needs to include both listening to the child's views on these matters and sharing the views/information from the worker.

For children who are feeling particularly anxious and/or frightened about speaking, it is important to have this conversation before you ask them to express their views within their drawings. For other children, it will be enough to have a brief discussion beforehand that lets them know that the information in their Three Houses pictures will be shared with others and then to have the detailed discussion after they have created their Three Houses. At a minimum, you need to make sure beforehand that the child understands that the information from their Three Houses will be shared, as you don't want to risk the child feeling that their trust and confidentiality has been betrayed. This could make it more difficult for the child to speak up and ask for help in the future.

2 Submission by the Office of the Children's Commissioner to the Munro Review of Child Protection (2011)

8. *Creating the child's Three Houses*

This next section will describe the process of creating the child's Three Houses, with suggested questioning that can be used within each part of the process.

8.1 Deciding which house to start with.

Once you have introduced and briefly explained each of the Three Houses to the child, you can then offer them the choice of which house they would like to start with. Some children choose to start with the house of worries as their worries are what is most on their mind and what they know you are there to talk to them about, whereas other children who are feeling anxious or uncertain may find it easier to start with the house of good things. If you are concerned that the child may have been told not to speak openly, then focusing on what is going well is a good place to start as it would be unusual for a child to be told not to talk about things they are happy within their family.

It is usually more meaningful to create the child's house of hopes and dreams after they have created their house of worries and house of good things, as this will help the child's visioning about the future to be grounded in real life. However, some children will want to start with the house of hopes and dreams, particularly if thinking about how they want things to be in the future is foremost in their mind. If this is the house that the child wants to start with, make sure that you use solution-focused questions (see below for suggested questioning) that will help the child to focus on how they would like things to be in the future if all of the past/current worries and problems have been addressed. Careful questioning will help focus the house of hopes and dreams on real life and stop it going off into fantasy thinking, such as wanting to live in a lego castle or go on a spaceship to the moon! If a child does put these sorts of things in this house, don't worry too much as you can still bring them back to linking to their house of worries (see more in section 8.3).

Whichever house the child decides to start with, bring that house in front of the child and put the other two houses to the background to be worked on later. In saying this, it's important to remember that the Three Houses process doesn't need to be a linear process and that it is possible to follow the child's lead by moving backwards and forwards between the houses. If, for example, the child talks about some things that they are worried about and then what they wish was happening instead, you can first help them to record their worries in the house of worries and then bring their house of hopes and dreams forward and help them to record what they want in the future. Similarly, if the child talks about something that they like, the worker can help them to move between the house of hopes and dreams and the house of good things.

You can also move backwards and forwards between the houses to help the child manage the intensity of the conversation. If, for example, talking about worries becomes too difficult or distressing for the child, you can move to the house of hopes and dreams and ask them about how they would like things to be instead, or you could move to the house of good things and ask them to describe times when things are going well or about things in their life that make them happy.

8.2 Deciding whether to draw or write.

Another choice you can offer the child is whether they would like to draw or write within the houses. If the child is drawing, the worker can ask open-ended questions to invite the child to talk about the drawings, for example, "Tell me about this part of the drawing? Can you explain that part of the drawing to me?" The worker can then check with the child if it is okay to write the child's words or short sentences alongside the drawings. If choosing to write, younger children will usually want the worker to write down their words, whereas older children sometimes prefer to do the writing themselves and then show it to the worker afterwards.

In using the Three Houses tool with children, always make sure to use the child's exact words and ideas. If the worker is writing the information, they should read this back to the child at the end of each statement. This gives the worker an opportunity to ensure that they are accurately reflecting the child's views, and it also provides an opportunity to gain further information about an issue the child may have raised, for example by asking "Tell me more about that?"

8.3 Working with each house

This section will work through the houses in a linear manner, but as described in point 8.1 above, you can start with any house and you can move forwards and backwards between the houses.

8.3.1 House of Good Things

After drawing up the 'House of Good Things' with the child (or after the child has chosen the template they want to use), it is good to start by reminding the child of what this house represents. For example:

So this is your 'House of Good Things', which is where you can draw or write down the things that are going well in your life and the things that make you feel happy and okay.

Some children may find it a little difficult to get started, so it can be helpful to provide the child with some simple information about the process, such as:

Take as much time as you need and you have all these pencils, felt pens and crayons here that you can use to put all the good things that are happening in your life into your 'House of Good Things'. And if you want any help to draw or write anything, I will be right here beside you and you can just let me know.

Once the child is ready to start drawing or writing, or if you are writing for the child, it can be helpful to ask an initial eliciting question, such as:

- What are the good things that are happening in your life?
- What are the things in your life that make you feel happy?
- What is going well in your life at the moment?

After this initial eliciting question, you can continue to ask the same broad question as many times as is needed, asking "What else is going well in your life?" or varying the question slightly, such as "What's another thing that is going well in your life?", until you think that the child has covered everything that they want to include.

In working through each of the Three Houses with a child, we start with open-ended and broad questions such as the examples above so that we are not limiting or constraining the child's views. Some children will be able to respond to the initial questions with a lot of detail, whereas other children will need more scaffolded questions to help them talk with us in more detail about what is happening in their life.

In situations where a child may be finding it difficult to think about things that they want to draw or say, or where they are not covering areas of their life that you are interested in exploring with them, then you can use more scaffolded, open-ended questions to elicit further information. It is essential though that we keep our questions open-ended and not ask leading questions that introduce a thought or assumption of ours. Some examples of these questions include:

- What things make you happy or feel good?
- What is good about living with Mum (or Mum and Dad)?
- What is good about where you are living at the moment?
- What are your favourite things to do with Mum/Dad?
- What is good about your visits with Mum?
- Who are the people in your family that you like spending time with? What's good about spending time with them?
- What is good about the friends you have?
- What are some things you like about school?
- What are your favourite things to do at home?
- Who do you most like doing those things with?
- What would other people say you are good at?
- What do you think is good about having me come to meet with you?

If you are writing down what the child is saying, always make sure to use the child's exact words and ideas. One good way of checking that you have got the information correct is to read what you have written back to the child, at the end of each statement. This also reinforces with the child that you are serious about listening to their views.

If you need more information about a particular drawing or statement, use open-ended questions with the child to elicit more detail. The acronym TED is a helpful reminder to keep the questions in an open-ended format, so that there is no risk of you leading the child's responses. TED stands for Tell, Explain, Describe and prompts you to ask open-ended follow up questions, such as:

- Could you tell me more a little bit more about that?
- Could you explain what's happening in this picture?
- Could you describe this picture a little more for me?
- Could you explain a little bit more about what you mean by that?

Once the child seems to have completed their 'House of Good Things' (either because they tell you that they have finished or because they seem to have run out of ideas), then take a moment to look over their 'House of Good Things' with them and acknowledge everything that they have recorded there. If you need more information about a particular drawing or statement, check for more detail as described above.

Then once the 'House of Good Things' is finished, put it to one side. Some children will need to have a break at this point (and maybe go outside and run around or play for a little while) and for some children, one house will be as much as they can do in this session. If you are finishing the session at this point, make sure you take some time to explain what will happen next to the child (see point 9) and to make a clear plan with the child about when you will meet again to create the rest of their Three Houses.

8.3.2 House of Worries

Bring the 'House of Worries' that the child has drawn (or the template that the child has chosen) in front of the child, and start by reminding them of what this house represents. For example:

So this is your 'House of Worries', which is where you can draw or write down all of the things that are worrying you at the moment, or the things that are going on in your life that don't feel so good.

If the 'House of Worries' is the house that the child is starting with, then you will need to provide the process information as suggested in the 'House of Good Things' section at the beginning of the process of creating this house. For example:

Take as much time as you need and you have all these pencils, felt pens and crayons here that you can use to put all things that you are worried about into your 'House of Worries'. And if you want any help to draw or write anything, I will be right here beside you and you can just let me know.

Again, start to elicit the child's views by using a broad eliciting question, such as one of the suggested questions below:

- Lots of kids I talk to often have worries. Worries might be things that make us feel sad, a bit scared, angry, or a maybe a bit bad. Are there any worries that you have at the moment?
- Can we put those in your house of worries?
- What are you feeling worried about at the moment?
- So what is happening that is worrying you at the moment?

After this initial eliciting question, you can continue to ask the same broad question as many times as is needed, asking "What else are you feeling worried about?" or varying the question slightly, such as "What else is happening that is worrying you?", until you think that the child has covered everything that they want to include. If you are writing into the child's Three Houses, make sure that you use the child's exact words and ideas as discussed in the previous section.

For some children, talking about the things that they are worried about may be a very scary experience, so it is important to pay close attention to how the child is feeling and to go at the child's pace. If they need to have a break, then have a break. If they need to go outside and run around, let them do that. If they start to cry or get angry as they are describing their worries, then it's important to be present with the child and to acknowledge their strong feelings and to let the child know that you understand how difficult this is for them. Even if the child appears to be fairly calm during the process, they may still be feeling quite anxious underneath their seemingly calm exterior, so it is important to give the child positive feedback during the process, letting them know that you understand that it might be difficult for them to talk about these worrying things and acknowledging their courage in being willing to talk with you.

In situations where a child may be finding it difficult to draw or describe what they are worried about, again use scaffolded, open-ended questions to elicit further information. For example:

- Are there anythings that make you feel sad, bad, scared or worried at home?
- What is worrying you about living with Mum (or Mum and Dad)?
- What is worrying you about where you are living at the moment?
- Is there anything or anyone who makes you feel sad, bad, scared or worried at school?"
- What is worrying you about your visits with Dad?
- What is worrying you about the friends you have?
- Is there anything that is worrying you about having me come to meet with you?
- Is there anything else you think needs to be in your house of worries?

If any of the child's drawings or statements are unclear or need further explanation, use open-ended questions with the child to elicit more detail (using the TED acronym as described in the 'House of Good' things section). For example:

- Could you tell me more a little bit more about that?

- Could you explain what's happening in this picture?
- Could you describe this picture a little more for me?
- Could you explain a little bit more about what you mean by that?

As discussed in the 'house of good things section, some children will need to have a break after finishing their house of worries (and may need to go outside and run around or play for a little while) or this might be as much as they are able to do in this session. If you are finishing the session at this point, make sure you take some time to explain what will happen next to the child (see point 9) and to make a clear plan with the child about when you will meet again to create the rest of their Three Houses.

8.3.3 House of Hopes and Dreams

Moving from the 'House of Worries' and 'House of Good Things' to the 'House of Hopes and Dreams' is a shift from talking about the past and present to visioning the future. It's important to help the child make this shift by reminding them of the focus of the 'House of Hopes and Dreams', saying something like:

This is your 'House of Hopes and Dreams', and this is the house where you get to draw or write down how you would like things to be in the future and all the things that you want to happen in your life, particularly if all the worries were gone.

As described for the previous two 'houses', start to elicit the child's views by using a broad eliciting question, such as:

- What are the important things that you want to have happening in your life that we need to put into your 'house of hopes and dreams'?
- What would you like to have happening in your life?
- How would you like things to be in your life?

As described for the other two 'houses', we start with open and broad questions and then if necessary, focus the conversation with more scaffolded questions. In the case of the 'House of Hopes and Dreams', we use scaffolded questions that link to the child's 'house of worries' and 'house of good things', such as:

- If all the worries were gone, what would you want your life to look like?
- What would be different in your life if all the worries were gone?
- If all the worries at home were gone, what would you want to see taking their place?
- What else would you like to have in your 'house of hopes and dreams' that would help with the worries?
- Are there things in your 'house of good things' that you think could help with the worries?
- What are the important things from your 'house of good things' that you want to make sure are happening in the future?
- Is there anything else you'd like to put in your 'house of hopes and dreams'?

8.3.4 Any final information

When the child has finished all three 'houses' (whether in one session or over a number of sessions), it is important to look at each house again and to ask the child if there is anything else they would like to add to any of their 'houses'. Sometimes it is at the end of the conversation that the child will feel able to talk about the issue that is most important to them.

One way to do this is to put each of the 'houses' in front of the child and together look over what the child has written or drawn. This gives the worker the opportunity to honour the child's openness and courage in talking about what is happening in their life, as well as asking the child if there is anything else that they want to add to each of the houses. If a particular 'house' is full, you can suggest creative ways of adding anything extra, such as drawing an attic in the house or a shed on the side of the house or another room on the house. If the child says that they have finished and that there is nothing else that they want to add to any of their Three Houses, explain to the child that they can always add more to any of their 'houses' in the future.

9. Explain what will happen next and obtain the child's permission to show their Three Houses to others.

Once the child has finished creating their Three Houses, it is important to explain how the Three Houses tool fits into the overall assessment and planning processes, and to obtain their permission to show the Three Houses to others. Explain that you will be asking all the important people in their family the same three questions (what are they worried about, what is going well and what do they think needs to happen) and that you will be asking everyone to share their ideas with each other, where possible, so that everyone can work together to sort out the problems. Hearing from a worker that their views are both valued and will be included in the planning process can be very powerful for a child or young person, particularly if they have previously felt as if no-one is interested in talking with them about what is going on.

Some children are happy to be the one who shows their Three Houses to their parents/caregivers; others choose for the worker to read/present the Three Houses with the child sitting alongside, and some children choose not to be present when the worker presents the Three Houses. Whatever process is agreed upon with the child, it is important to talk this through carefully so that the child knows what will happen next.

Some children will be anxious about showing their Three Houses to their parents or caregivers, for example in situations where the primary parent is the person whose behaviour the child is worried about. In this situation, it is important to go at the child's pace as much as possible.

You can also help children to manage this anxiety by offering them choices about how the Three Houses are presented to their parents or caregivers. For example, they could start by just showing the 'house of good things' or 'house of hopes and dreams' to their parents/caregivers, or to a family member or another safe person in their world who they are not feeling anxious about sharing the information with.

For some children, the information in their Three Houses will be so concerning that you will need to take immediate action to ensure their safety. For other children, there will be safety issues as a consequence of showing their Three Houses to others. In these situations, it is important to talk to the child or young person about their concerns or your concerns and to develop a plan together about how to ensure they will be safe. Sometimes this will mean placing the child in someone else's care, at least while the issues are explored with their parents and an immediate safety plan can be developed. Involving the children in this process will sometimes slow down the pace at which professionals act, but whenever possible, it is important to go at a pace that the child is comfortable with and to involve the child in the planning (such as who they could safely stay with). If the worker feels compelled to make decisions or take actions that go faster than the child's pace or beyond what the child is comfortable with, these decisions need to be explained to the child before any action is taken. Not doing so could make it less likely that the child will trust you or other professionals in the future and less likely that they will speak up and ask for help.

10. Drawing the session with the child to a close

As you draw your session with the child to a close, make sure:

1. You acknowledge the importance of the information that the child has shared in their Three Houses and the importance of everyone understanding the child's views. Remind the child that your role is to listen to everyone's views and then to help everyone work together to solve any problems.
2. You check whether the child would like to have a copy of their Three Houses. If the child wants to keep the originals, you can take a photograph of their Three Houses and then save them and print for the file/for others. If there are safety concerns that could arise by someone seeing the child's Three Houses, make a plan with the child about taking care of their copy for them and when they will receive their copy.
3. The child understands what is happening next, including who else you will be talking with and who else will see their Three Houses.

11. Put a copy of the child's Three Houses on the file

Some workers question whether the child's Three Houses is too child-like to put on the case file or include in something like a court report. The child's own assessment is very often far more powerful and revealing than a professional assessment of that child and very often has far greater impact on adults involved with the child than professional assessment. Magistrates receiving court reports and authorities who review the files are consistently impressed to read a Three Houses assessment since it directly communicates the child or young person's perspective and demonstrates that the worker has engaged the child in the casework. It is critical therefore that a child's Three Houses— with the child's permission - is placed on the file and included as a central document toward the development of case plans, safety plans, reunification plans, etc.

12. Presenting the child's Three Houses to parents and others

Workers all over the world report that taking the child's or young person's Three Houses back to the parents/caregivers is often the catalyst that helps the parents talk about the situation differently and be more willing to work in partnership with professionals to address the problems. As explored above, you and the child may be showing the child's Three Houses to their parents/caregivers together, or you may be sharing the child's Three Houses without the child being present.

Before bringing the child's Three Houses to the parents/caregivers and other significant adults, you need to have carefully assessed whether there might be any safety concerns for the child as a result of sharing the child's Three Houses with the parents/caregivers (or others). If the child's safety could be compromised as a result of showing their Three Houses to others, then you will need to take action to ensure the child's safety BEFORE sharing their Three Houses. And as explored in point 9 above, it is important to create a plan to ensure the child's immediate safety together with the child or at a minimum, with the child's understanding. If there are no safety concerns about sharing the Three Houses with some of the adults in the child's life, then this safety plan can also be developed in collaboration with these 'safe' adults.

When bringing the child's Three Houses to the parents/caregivers, it is often useful to begin with the 'House of Good Things', as this conveys that you are willing to acknowledge the positives and to gather information in a balanced way. A good strategy in bringing the information to the

parents is to first ask what they think the child would have included in each of their 'houses', before showing that 'house' to the parents. This process helps to open up a conversation with the parents/caregivers about how they understand the situation and also provides a sense of the parent's insight into their child's perspectives.

Presenting the child's Three Houses to other people (for example, members of the extended family network or other professionals) needs to be done, whenever possible, in consultation with the parents and the child. It's possible that the parents or the child may feel anxious about others seeing the child's assessment of the situation, and as with other steps in the safety planning process, it is important that this information is shared with the full knowledge of the family and at the pace that they are comfortable with.

An exception to this might be in circumstances such as those described above where there are safety concerns about sharing the child's Three Houses with the parents, but the child has identified a particular person in their family or network (Grandma for example) as a safe person and as someone who can support them through this next period. In this instance, the child's Three Houses can be shared with Grandma (with the child's consent) and Grandma can be involved in helping to plan both for the child's safety and for the process of discussing the safety concerns with the parents.

13. Sharing other people's Three Houses with the child

Hearing the child's views is one part of the process of involving the child. Helping the child to understand other people's views is equally important. This needs to be done with the full understanding and permission of the parents and people whose views are being shared.

The Three Houses tool can be used to record your own views and the views of others (such as the parents, extended family members and other professionals) and then to share that information with the child. Having other people's views recorded within a framework that the child is familiar with can help the child to more easily understand other people's views and be more able to make sense of the assessment and planning process. Using the 'Three Houses' tool in this way helps the child to understand what professionals and family members are worried about, what they regard as the strengths and resources of the family, and what family members and professionals will be doing to try to make sure the child will be safe in the future.

14. Involving the child in the ongoing assessment and planning

As the assessment and planning process with the family continues, make sure you regularly come back to the child (with the parents' consent) to help the child understand what is happening and to find out their views on how things are progressing. The child's Three Houses can be added to or updated over time, or they can do a new Three Houses if things have significantly changed. It can be very powerful for the parents/caregivers and for others involved in working with the family to see the child crossing out worries from their 'house of worries', adding things to their 'house of good things', and moving further along the pathway toward their 'house of hopes and dreams'.

And working with the child over time will also make it more possible to develop a relationship of trust with the child, which may mean that over time they feel more confident in sharing information that they may not have been ready to talk about in earlier conversations.

Young People

This section focuses on using the Three Houses tool with young people and teenagers. The step-by-step process of working with children as described in the previous section is still relevant to young people or teenagers, but there are some important variations or practice considerations in using the Three Houses tool with this older age group. Please ensure that you have read the section on using the Three Houses tool with children, as this section won't repeat the detailed step-by-step process, but will focus on how to modify the suggested process with young people.

The preparation steps that are described for working with children are also applicable to young people, although you might like to think about the use of technology, given that young people are very comfortable in this medium. As described in the children's section, a Three Houses app is available for both an iPad and Android tablet. You might also want to consider bringing some blank templates of the Three Houses, as some young people prefer to take the Three Houses template away and fill this in on their own.

The issues that are discussed in the children's section about informing parents and seeking permission are also important when working with young people and teenagers, however the question of permission may not be as relevant for older teenagers or for young people who are in long term care or living independently. Even with this older age group however, it may still be important to let parents or significant caregivers know that you are having this conversation with their young person as part of the process of continuing to try to strengthen and involve a supportive community of people around the young person. Then with the young person's permission, their Three Houses can be shared with these people.

When working with young people and teenagers, it is vital that you take whatever time is needed to introduce your role and the Three Houses process and to explain why you want to undertake the Three Houses with them. Letting young people know that their views are important and, in fact, that they are one of the most important people to be thinking about and contributing to plans for their future safety and wellbeing, communicates a clear message to young people that their views and ideas will be taken seriously. This can be a very powerful message, particularly to a young person who may feel as if they have had little control or decision-making power in their life.

Young people frequently have a strong sense of fairness and justice. When talking with teenagers and young people about how the information within their Three Houses will be used, it is important that you are as open and transparent as possible about who will see this information and about any circumstances under which their information will be shared without their consent. Young people will read your body language in a moment and your willingness to be honest and transparent in the beginning of this process can make all the difference in a young person deciding whether or not they will talk with you.

In drawing up the Three Houses with the young person, you can offer them the choice of which house to start with and whether they would like to draw or write within each of the houses. Some workers feel uncomfortable suggesting to young people that they might like to draw, thinking that young people might see this as patronizing, but it's possible to offer the choice of either drawing or writing in a matter of fact manner, that equally values either medium or a combination of both. Young people often still do enjoy drawing and given the benefits of drawing (see detailed exploration with section on using the Three Houses with parents/caregivers), it is important that this is offered as a meaningful choice for young people. Drawing is also helpful for young people who struggle with direct one to one talking and who may have trouble articulating their thoughts

and feelings into words. For these young people, drawing is often a more comfortable medium of communication. I usually say something like:

Within each of the houses, you can record your thoughts and ideas using either words or through drawing, or a combination of both. Some people prefer to describe their thoughts using words or writing and others find it easier to express their thoughts and ideas through drawing, so you are welcome to use whatever you are most comfortable with.

Another choice you can offer the young person is whether they would like to work with you to create their Three Houses or whether they would like some time to create it on their own. While the Three Houses tool creates an 'alongside' approach that is often less intimidating or threatening than a face to face interview, some young people will still prefer to work on their Three Houses on their own. If this is the case, you can meet with the young person afterwards and then have a conversation with them (as suggested in the step-by-step process outlined in the previous section) to explore in more detail what the young person has drawn or described in each of their houses.

In working through each of the houses with the young person, the suggested process and questioning approach is still applicable, but you might want to use a more conversational style and to vary the questions to be more appropriate for their age or developmental level. Teenagers and young people are also more engaged with the outer world, so it is important to include more questions about life outside their family or foster home, such as their peer group, school and work life if that is relevant for them. It is important our questions help explore all the aspects of a young person's world including their health, education, activities, friendships, sexuality, and if there are any worries about low mood and suicide risk.

For teenagers or young people where the concerns for their safety and wellbeing are about their own behaviour (rather than about their parent's or caregiver's behaviour), then the conversation about how the information from their Three Houses will be used is still very relevant but may have a different orientation. Rather than the young person's views informing a safety or intervention plan that is being developed to support the parents in making changes, sharing the information within their Three Houses may be more about helping others to understand the young person's world and then be better able to support them in making safe and positive choices for themselves. For example, the information may help their family or caregivers to understand more about what is happening in their world and be better able to support them in dealing with their challenges and creating the life they want for themselves, or the information may assist professionals to work more effectively with the young person. But whatever the context, teenagers and young people need to be given a choice about how and when their Three Houses are shared. If a decision is made that their information needs to be shared without the young person's consent, then the reason for this needs to be carefully explained to the young person and they need to be involved in decision-making about how this happens to the greatest possible extent.

In New Zealand, the Statutory child protection service Child Youth and Family Services has developed a version of the Three Houses tool for use with young people in the youth justice system. In this version the houses are called 'Good', 'Not so good' and 'Hopes and dreams for the future.' They have examples of topics such 'your usual day', 'people in your life', 'where you live', 'your health', 'beliefs and behaviour' and 'offending behaviour'. When working with young people who are involved in harm toward themselves or others it is important that the conversation is directed to not only exploring their world but also about the behaviours we are worried about. Below are some examples of questions that can help with doing the Three Houses with a young person, especially if involved in unsafe behaviour.

House of Good/Okay Things/Strengths

- Who is someone that matters to you? What do you think they'd say you are good at?
- What does a good day look like for you?
- What do you feel best about in your world right now?
- Who in your world helps keep you safe from the trouble you've been in?
- What sort of things do you think you are you good at?
- What sort of thoughts and feelings do you have that help you feel okay and keep you safe?

House of Bad Stuff/Not So Good Things/Worries

- What are your biggest three worries?
- What's something you don't feel so good about?
- What thoughts and feelings are you aware of that makes you get in trouble and do unsafe things?
- Who's around when you get in trouble? What sort of things happen?
- What makes things worse?

House of Hopes and Dreams

- When you were a kid what did you want to be when you were grown up?
- What would the person who most matters to you say you would be doing in the future that would make them proud?
- If you woke up tomorrow and all the trouble had gone, how would you know the trouble had gone, what would be happening instead?
- What sort of dad/ mum do you want to be for your son/daughter? What do want them to say about you when they're older?
- What's one thing that would help out with the bad stuff?

Pathway

- What's one thing you can start today that'll help keep you safe/feeling ok? Who can help you with that? What other help do you need?

The Three Houses tool can also be very helpful when talking with young people who are leaving care or transitioning to independent or semi-independent living. You can include questions that focus on the future that they want for themselves, what worries they have for themselves as they thinking about leaving care/living independently and what strengths or resources they have that will help them get there to where they want to be. You can also focus on the young person's perception of other people's views and the Three Houses tool can help you to have conversations about other people's views. Here are some suggested questions you can use:

House of Hopes and Dreams

- When you think about the life you want for yourself in the future, what does that look like? What would you be doing?
- Imagine we could jump 6 months (or 12 months) forward in time and you are living the life you want to be living. What would that look like? What would be happening?
- Who are the people who are important to you, who you want to be part of your life in the future?
- What could the child protection agency do to support you in creating the kind of life you want for yourself in the future?
- What do you think _____ (Mum, Dad, Grandma, best friend, mentor) would say they want for you in the future?

House of Good Things/Strengths and Resources

- What is going well in your life right now? What else? Anything else?
- Who are the people in your life who know you well? What would they say is going well for you?
- Which of these things do you want to make sure continue in the future?
- Who are the people who support you and help you when things are not going so well? What do they do that is most helpful?

House of Worries

- What are the three top challenges when you look ahead to leaving care?
- What are some of the things you feel unsure about?
- Are there any barriers (in you and around you) you can see that might stop you getting to where you want to be?
- What else is happening right now that is a worry for you?
- What stops you getting what you and where you want?

The Three Houses tool has proved successful when working with young people to help workers understand their world and to help keep young people safe and well within this. Young people may or may not wish to use the tool, but having it available to them can provide a different way of engaging with them as opposed to direct talking and questioning. We need to think about the important aspects of a young person's world when using the tool such as their health, education, activities, friendships, school, work, home, sexuality, and if there are any worries about low mood and suicide risk. The tool gives us a safe way to talk about the various aspects of their world, and to help look at further ways to protect and support them. For a number of young people this may be the first time they have had anyone really try and understand their world, and that in itself, can be an important step in their journey of wellness, safety, and recovery, especially if they come from a history of abuse or neglect.

Conclusion

The Three Houses tool helps bring the voice of children, young people, and their parents and families more strongly into our work, especially within child protection settings. An absence of their voice leads to a risk of developing assessments and plans that do not have their views in them and are therefore more likely to be prescriptive and directive. This often results in plans not being effective in bringing about increased safety and protection for a child or young person due to the family feeling unwilling to participate in them.

When applied in especially the engagement and information gathering phase of our work, the Three Houses tool helps contribute a message of working in partnership and collaboration with children, young people, and families, where we recognise them as essential to building sustainable change in terms of increasing safety. Change most often occurs within the context of strong and positive relational work, and we must always strive to develop a working relationship like this where possible with the families we are working with.

For children and young people who have experienced abuse and neglect, an essential part of their recovery is how people respond to them when they share or disclose what is happening in their lives. It takes a great deal of courage for children in particular to tell us what is happening in their worlds, and it is always an honour and privilege to be the recipients of this information and it is essential we treat them and their information with kindness, care and respect.

Adults who are feeling judged, criticised, and ashamed or angry at the arrival of our services in their lives are more likely to respond to us if they feel we are interested in their views and open to working with them. Fundamental to this is realising that often the adults we are engaging with were also once children who did not get adequate support within their own experiences of abuse and neglect. This type of understanding helps move us from a place of possible blame to instead a place of understanding, along with still being clear about what safety and adequate care and protection must look like.

As the tool has been used around the world for some time now, there are a number of different ways it has been applied, with workers often being creative and imaginative, and adapting the tool to best suit the context and culture of those they are working with. Some people have made three houses out of boxes and had young people decorate them, others have drawn football fields or classrooms, the possibilities are endless when workers take time to consider what will best work for the person they are engaging with. However the key premises of the tool remain the same: to explore and learn about the good things or strengths, worries or vulnerabilities, and hopes and dreams of the person.

Ultimately in social work and child protection work, it is through the use of self to build relationships with those we work for that we will bring about change, and in order to do that, we too must also look after ourselves and understand our worries and vulnerabilities, our good things and strengths, and continue to have strong hopes and dreams for our work. That is how we will continue to make a positive difference in the lives of children, young people, and their families. Thank you for doing this important and valuable work.

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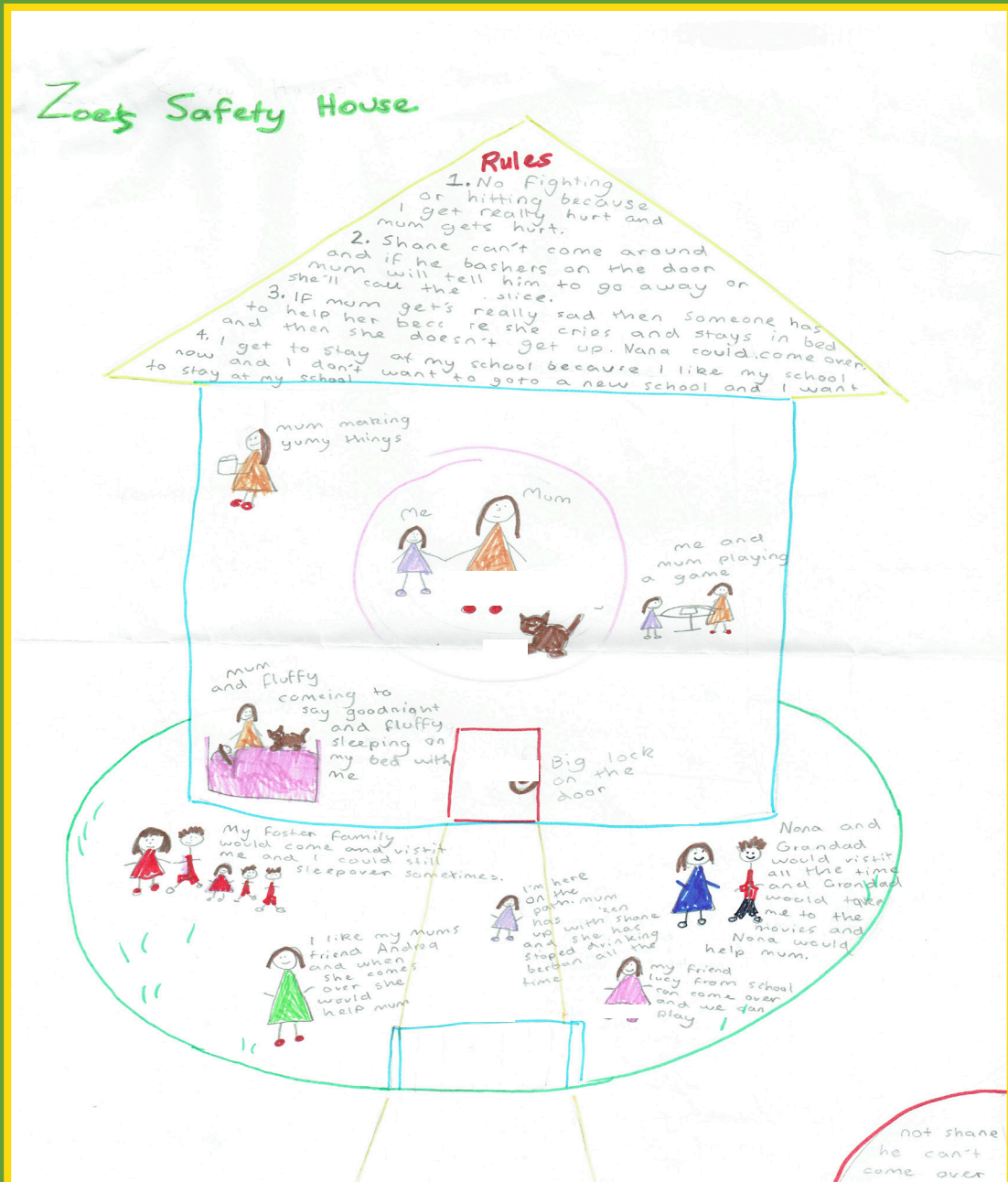
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The 'Safety House'

A child protection tool for involving
Children in Safety Planning



by Sonja Parker



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Involving Children in Safety Planning

Working with families and their networks to develop comprehensive and rigorous safety plans that lead to ongoing, demonstrated day-to-day safety for children, is one of the most challenging tasks facing child protection workers. Developing a collaborative and detailed plan that will address the child protection concerns requires workers to undertake an extensive planning process, which needs to involve all of the key stakeholders (family members, their safety and support network and professionals) working together to determine the specific day-to-day care arrangements within the family that will satisfy everyone that there is enough safety for the children to return home or remain in the home.

Given the complexity of the collaborative planning process itself, it is not surprising that most child protection systems have not developed ways of meaningfully involving children in the process of defining and creating future safety. Many of the children and young people involved in child protection systems don't understand how decisions about their safety are made and do not feel they are given opportunities to meaningfully participate in these decision-making processes. The Safety House is a practical, visual tool, that has been designed to address this issue. The Safety House creates a context for talking with children and young people about the collaborative planning process and elicits their views on what would need to happen within their family to ensure they are safe, in situations where they may have previously been hurt or were at risk of being hurt.

In using the Safety House, the outline of the house is first drawn by the child and the worker and then the worker uses the structure of the Safety House (described in detail below) to talk with the child about the specific safety arrangements that would need to be in place to make sure that these worries do not happen in the future. The child's views are recorded in the Safety House in both pictures and words. The child is then invited to create a 'safety path' leading to their Safety House and to locate themselves on the safety path as a way of representing their assessment (or scaling) of current safety within their family.

By helping the child to create their personal Safety House, child protection workers are able to:

- Create a context to talk with the child about what the professionals mean by "safety" and "danger" and understand what those concepts mean to the child.
- Gain an understanding of the relationships that are significant to the child and identify who might be important to participate in enhancing safety, belonging and wellbeing for the child.
- Understand the child's views on what needs to happen for them to be safe, well and connected in the care of their family.
- Help the child to understand more about the collaborative planning process.
- Assist children who are feeling particularly anxious about reunification to imagine what they would need to see to feel safe in the future with their family.
- Record the child's 'safety plan' in a form that the worker can bring to the family/their safety and support network to inform the development of the overall detailed plan.

While the Safety House tool is designed to bring the voice of the child into the middle of the collaborative planning process, some professionals may well be concerned that this places too much pressure or undue responsibility on the child. It is vital that the Safety House tool and process is undertaken within a broader collaborative planning process that involves all the key adults and is enacted with a clear understanding that it is always the adults' (not the child's) responsibility to ensure that the child's safety, belonging and wellbeing is secured.

This booklet will cover:

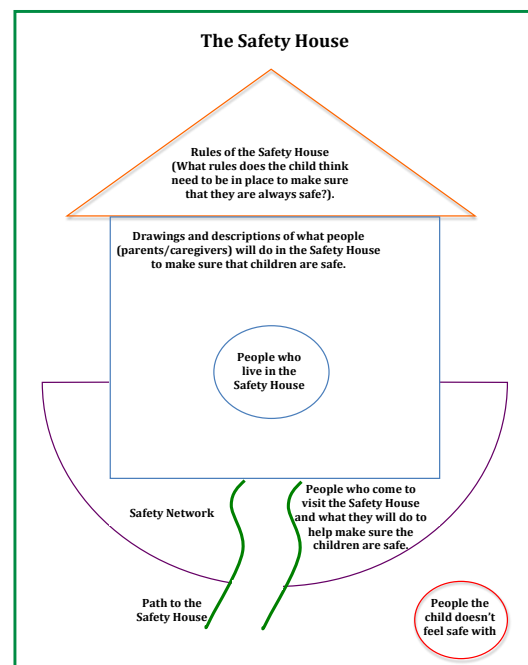
- A description of the Safety House tool
- Two brief practice examples including the child's Safety House drawings
- How the use of the Safety House fits into the collaborative planning process
- The steps in undertaking the Safety House process
- A practitioners' prompt sheet for using the Safety House tool
- A Safety House template

Elements of the Safety House

The Safety House is designed to capture a visual representation of everything the child thinks needs to be happening for them to be safe in the care of their family. The Safety House contains five key elements:

- Inside the Safety House
- Visiting the Safety House: The outer semi-circle
- The Red Circle: Unsafe people
- The Roof: Rules of the Safety House
- The Safety Path: Scaling the Progress to Safety

Each of the five elements of the Safety House is designed to explore a particular aspect of the child's views about safety, belonging and wellbeing.



1. Inside the Safety House: The inner circle and inside the four walls

The child first draws her or himself within the inner circle of the Safety House. Starting by drawing themselves in the house will help the child to engage with the process, and the act of placing themselves right in the centre of the house has the added benefit of reinforcing that it is the child who is at the heart of this process. The child then adds to this inner circle the other people who will be living with them in their Safety House.

Inside the four walls is also where the child records the things that people would be doing inside his or her Safety House. These might be details of the day-to-day activities that the child enjoys such as “Mummy cooking dinner and reading me a story at bedtime” or may directly relate to safety, belonging and wellbeing such as “Mummy will always stay with me when Grandpa comes to visit”.

2. Visiting the Safety House: The outer semi-circle

This section contains the people whom the child wants to visit their Safety House to help keep them safe (their safety and support network; people who are aware of the concerns and are actively involved in ensuring the children are safe). These people are drawn between the house and the outer semi-circle (the garden fence) and details of what these people would do to help support the child’s safety, belonging and wellbeing can be drawn or described in words next to each person.

3. The Red Circle

The people the child identifies as being people they do not want to have in their Safety House (either living there or visiting) can be placed in the red circle, which is outside and totally separate to the Safety House.

4. The Roof

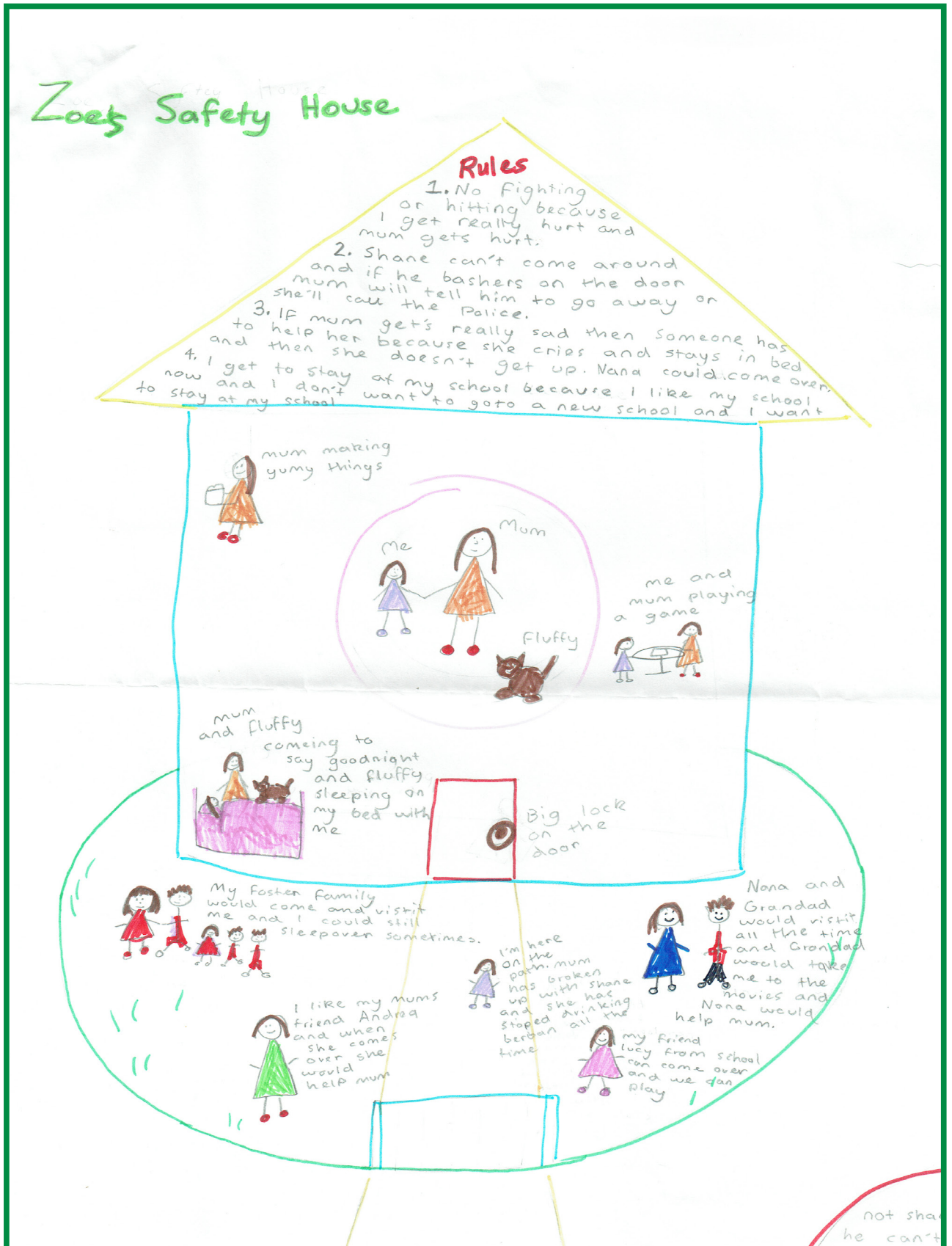
The roof of the Safety House, the top part of the house, is used to record the child’s ‘rules’ for their safety house. These rules describe how the child wants everyone to behave in their “safety house” to ensure that they are always safe and cared for. The emphasis here is on rules that ensure everyone is safe, rather than rules about the children needing to be ‘good’ (which is how some children will interpret the idea of rules).

5. The Safety Path

The path that leads to the Safety House represents the connection from the past and the worries that led to Child Safety being involved with their family, to a future represented by the Safety House, where the child is safe in the care of their family. This safety path enables the child to rate their present safety, belonging and wellbeing from the beginning of the path where they feel very worried about the concerns that led to them being in care/involved with Child Safety (which the child might want to write at the beginning of the path), all the way to the door of the Safety House when the child is able to go inside their Safety House because all the worries have been addressed. Using the path as a scaling device, the child is asked to rate their sense of safety by locating themselves on the safety path, either by drawing themselves on the path, or by colouring the path up to the point where they are, or any other way that makes sense to the child.

Safety House Case Examples

Zoe's Safety House



The Safety House example presented opposite was created with a 10 year old girl, who will be called Zoe. Zoe was taken into statutory care following an incident where her mother's boyfriend punched Zoe in the face. Zoe had also frequently witnessed her mother being hit by Shane, over a period of 12 months. The Safety House was created with Zoe about six months after she was taken into care. Tanya had ended her relationship with Shane three months after Zoe was taken into care and for the past four months, Tanya had been meeting regularly with Child Safety to address the child protection concerns.

As part of the initial stages of the reunification process, Sonja used the Safety House with Zoe as a means of explaining the collaborative planning process and to identify Zoe's ideas about what needed to happen for her to feel safe living back home with her mother.

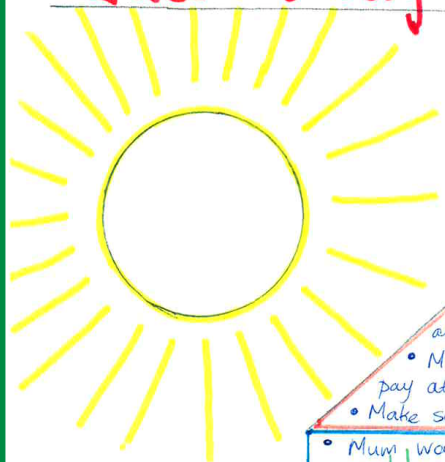
Prior to the Safety House session, Zoe told professionals that she wanted to live back home with her mother but she was reluctant to start overnight stays and wasn't able to explain her worries about overnight stays. In Zoe's Safety House, she identified that she wanted locks on the windows and doors and a process for Tanya to call the police if Shane should try to break in. After Zoe and Sonja presented Zoe's Safety House to her mother, Tanya told Zoe that she thought these ideas were brilliant and that they should start them straight away. Child Safety assisted Tanya to have locks installed on the windows, Zoe and her mum drew up signs to put beside the front and back door that reminded Tanya not to let Shane inside the house and to call the police if he came to the house (in breach of the protection order) and Zoe had her first overnight stay the following week.

Zac's Safety House

The second example involves using the Safety House with a nine year-old boy, who we will call 'Zac'. Zac and his two younger brothers were taken into care when Zac was four years old, as a result of severe ongoing neglect due to their parents' drug use. At the time that Zac created his safety house, Zac's mother, 'Megan', had shown clean results on urine tests for the previous six months and Megan's new partner, 'Bob', had been assessed by Child Safety as not posing any risks to the children. The family had been referred to a reunification agency to facilitate the return of the children to their mother's care.

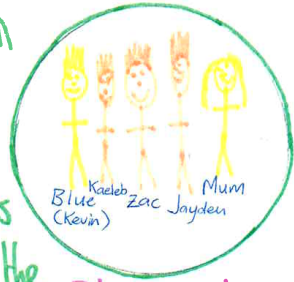
The Safety House process was undertaken with Zac about six weeks into the reunification process, when Zac and his brothers had begun having overnight stays with Megan and Bob. The reunification agency had begun working with Megan and Bob to develop a safety and support network and a long term plan that would ensure that the children were safe and well cared for over time. Both Megan and Bob were keen to have the boys' input into this collaborative planning process and were willing for the children to participate in the Safety House process.

Zacs Safety house



- 2, J + K are not allowed to wander off and stay where Mum can see us & hear us.
- To listen to instructions.
- Mum & Blue have to look after ~~you~~ us and teach us stuff that we don't know.
- Mum and Blue have to follow the law and pay attention to the road.
- Make sure there are no arguments and everything is fair.
- Mum won't use drugs anymore.

Having fun and doing lots of stuff:
 of fun
 laughing telling jokes going to the football.
 Spending time with me.
 Blue and me doing spelling words together.



Bridget playing uno
 Charlie playing uno
 Nana Dianne and Poppy to take me to their house.
 Aunty Janelle Nana Dianne
 Poppy
 Joe playing uno

To check on us
 To join in with the fun.
 To talk and ask about how are things going.

Seeing Mum even
 Mum's stopped being on drugs
 Mum and Blue solving the other problems.

Jayden
 Zac used to be here about a year or two
 Kaeleb.

Go to the Royal show with Aunty & Janelle.

Fitting the Safety House into the overall collaborative planning process

The Safety House tool is designed to be undertaken with a child or young person as part of a collaborative planning process, which involves working with the parents, the children, a network of people supporting the family and all the key professionals to develop a detailed long term plan. The detailed plan created through this process describes the day-to-day arrangements that a family will need to put in place to ensure that everyone, including the child, is confident that the child will be protected over time in situations where they may have previously been hurt or were at risk of being maltreated. As discussed above, the Safety House is a tool that enables children to make sense of and participate in this collaborative planning process.

For long term planning to be effective, it needs to be built on a foundation where the worries (what professionals are worried will happen to the children if nothing changes in the family) have been identified in clear, straightforward language that everyone, including the children, can understand. Only when these worries have been expressed in language that the child can understand, is it possible to then use the Safety House tool with the child to explore their views of what would need to happen within their family to ensure that they are safe in relation to these worries.

If the child does not know what the child protection worries are, this should be addressed prior to undertaking the Safety House process. There are a number of tools that can help professionals and family members talk with children about why they are in care or why Child Safety are involved with their family. Two such tools are the Three Houses (Weld, 2008; Weld and Parker, 2014) and the Words and Pictures process (Turnell and Essex 2006). Both the Three Houses and the Words and Pictures processes are most effective when used with the involvement of parents and other significant family members and professionals.

The Safety House process is designed to bring the voice and opinions of the child into the broader collaborative planning process. Family members and professionals are often very moved when seeing the child's views expressed through the Safety House and this helps motivate and focus both the professionals, the parents and their network to create a more robust and detailed long term plan. Whatever perspectives the child's Safety House generates, these will need to be explored and addressed within the collaborative planning process alongside the views expressed by other family members and professionals. The child's perspectives will almost always deepen the adults' perspectives and deepen the collaborative planning process, but should never override or minimise the identified worries.

Process of using the Safety House tool

1. Preparation

Before meeting with a child or young person to undertake the Safety House process, the practitioner needs to ensure they have the necessary background information about this family and child, which includes:

- A clear straightforward description of the child protection concerns.
- The significant people in this child's life.
- Who the child is living with and what contact arrangements are in place.
- Any changes this family have made since Child Safety have been involved.
- A clear commitment from all key professionals that reunification or family preservation is being genuinely pursued with the parents.
- How the child understands the issues that led to them being in care or to Child Safety being involved with their family, including the language the child uses to explain why they are not living with their parents or why Child Safety is involved with their family.

The other important preparation is working out what materials the practitioner will use in creating the Safety House with the child. Since there is a lot of detail to cover, it is usually best to create the Safety House on a large sheet of blank paper (A3 paper, for example) and it is always good to have some spares. It is also useful to have a good range of coloured pencils and textas (some workers like to use special paper and artists' crayons, pencils or textas so that children feel as if this is something special they are creating). A template for the Safety House is included in the back of this booklet or the practitioner can design their own or draw up the basic outline of the safety house together with the child, which is a good way of both engaging the child over the initial drawing task and to explain the elements of the Safety House to them.

2. Informing parents, carers and professionals before working with the child

Before approaching the child to undertake the Safety House process, it is vital to secure the endorsement of all the key stakeholders involved in the case. Collaborative planning is most effective when undertaken with the full support of the professionals and significant others involved in working with a family, so before exploring the Safety House process with the parents and carers, it is important to inform and secure the support of these professionals for the idea of using the Safety House tool with the children.

Helping parents to understand the purpose of the Safety House tool and the process that their child will be engaged with is an important step in using this tool. One of the primary purposes in using the Safety Houses tool is to bring the child's views into the collaborative planning process, so it is vital to explain the process to the parents and wherever possible secure their support for the process. This advance work creates a transparent context for the practitioner to then bring the child's views back to the parents and the family's network.

If the child is in foster care or kinship care, it is important to explain the Safety House process to the carers so that they can support the process. As with the parents, this creates the context for bringing the child's Safety House back to the carers (with the permission of the child and the parents) and will usually significantly help the carers to understand and engage productively in the safety planning process and the anticipated reunification process.

Knowing that their parents' and caregivers understand and support the Safety House process will almost always make the child more comfortable with engaging in the process.

3. Introducing the Safety House to the child

When introducing the Safety House to children, Sonja usually says something like:

“Did you know that your mum and dad and nana and pop and _____ (other key stakeholders) are meeting together to work out what needs to happen in your family for it to be safe for you to go back and live with Mum and Dad? We want to make a special plan with your family to make sure that nothing like what happened in the past (use details as appropriate) is going to happen in the future.

All of us are talking together and listening to everyone's ideas and because this is about you, we want to make sure that we're listening to your ideas too. I'd like to do something with you called the Safety House, which is something I do with a lot of children and it will help me to understand your ideas about what needs to happen to make sure that you are always going to be safe. I've explained the Safety House to your Mummy and Daddy and to ____ (carers) and they all think this is a good idea. Is it okay if we do a Safety House together?

What we're going to do together is create a picture of what you want in your house when you go home to live with Mum and Dad so that you will always be safe and have everything you need to grow up strong and well, and so you know that nothing like what happened before can happen again. We're going to put all of that into your Safety House so we can show Mum and Dad what you want to have included in the plan. Are you ready to make your Safety House with me?

4. Working with the child to create the Safety House

Drawing the Safety House outline

In most instances, it is helpful to start with a blank piece of paper and draw the Safety House outline and the elements of the Safety House together with the child, as a way of both actively explaining the process to the child and engaging them with the worker and the idea. Drawing the outline in this way also helps to create a sense of ownership for the child. If you think that this won't work for the child or young person, then you can use a pre-drawn template of the Safety House, with the worker explaining the different elements to the child and perhaps even tracing over the outlines in different colours or adding features to the house (such as a sun) that make it more significant for the child. Using a pre-drawn template can be useful if time is limited. The shape and structure of the Safety House can be varied to fit the cultural context appropriate for that child. For younger children, workers can draw the house on paper or construct a house using felt/blocks etc and then use felt figures to depict significant people and felt images or pictures of various household objects to represent objects/activities within the house.

The worker then asks a range of questions to help the child create a detailed picture, usually using both words and drawings, of what would be happening within the child's Safety House. Suggested questions are provided below. The child can draw their answers to these questions within the Safety House and the worker can write words beside those drawings that need some explanation, or the child and worker can draw and write the child's answers together.

Putting themselves in their Safety House

After they have drawn or created the outside of the Safety House together, the worker then asks the child to draw a picture of her or himself in the inner circle of their Safety House (making sure they leave room for other people). Drawing themselves in the centre of the house also helps the child to feel a sense of ownership of their Safety House.

Other people who live in their Safety House

"Who else would live in your Safety House with you?"

The worker asks the child to then draw the other people who would live in their Safety House within the inner circle. In Zoe's case, she said that she wanted to live just with her mother and she then drew herself, her mother and her new kitten (that her mother had just bought for her) in the circle. Zac identified that he would have his mother, his mother's partner and his two brothers living in his Safety House.

If the collaborative planning process is considering the possibility of someone else living with the family for a period, then workers can seek the child's thoughts on this by asking:

"Has your family ever had anyone else living with them even for a short time? What was it like to have them living with you? What do you think about having someone else living with you and your family, even just for a little while, when you go back home?"

People the child does not want to live in/visit their Safety House

In the process of identifying the people who they want to live in their Safety House, some children will naturally start to talk about people who they do not feel safe with and who they do not want to have living in or visiting their Safety House. In Zoe's case, she volunteered that she did not want her mother's ex-boyfriend, Shane, to live in the house with them. Any person who the child identifies in this way is placed in the red circle outside the Safety House.

If the child does not volunteer information about who they might not feel completely safe to have living with them or visiting them, workers can ask:

"When you go home to live with _____ (eg. Mum and Dad), is there anyone who you don't want to have living in your safety house or coming to visit you?"

In Zac's case, he thought carefully about this question and then answered, "No, there isn't anyone that I don't feel safe with". This in itself provided significant information about how Zac was feeling about returning home, and was positive information that Sonja was able to feed back to his mother and mother's partner.

If the child identifies someone in response to this question, this will usually be a person, such as Shane was in Zoe's case, who professionals already have concerns about in relation to the safety and wellbeing of the child. However, it is possible that this question will elicit new information that raises safety concerns for the child. Together with the parents and network, the worker will need to do whatever is required to ensure the ongoing safety of this child in relation to this new information.

Placing a person in the red circle outside the child's Safety House does not automatically mean this person cannot live with or visit the child, but highlights that this is a person who the child may not feel safe with and this will need to be addressed in the collaborative planning process and will certainly need to be discussed by the professionals and the parents. This can be delicate territory to navigate since family members and professionals may be anxious that people placed in the red circle may be excluded from having any contact with the child. The critical point is that the child's opinions are listened to and taken seriously by all the adults and if decisions are made about who will have contact with the child that does not concur with what the child wants, this needs to be reconciled with the child. To further inform the adults about the child's perspective on a person they have placed in the red circle, the worker can ask the child to think about what arrangements would need to be in place for the child to feel safe if/when this person is present. The worker might ask a question such as:

"If _____ (Grandpa) was to visit when you are home living with Mummy, what rules do we need to have to make sure that you are always safe?"

The behaviours that the child describes (e.g., Mummy will always stay with me and not leave me alone with Grandpa) can be recorded in the Safety House using pictures or words and the rules that the child suggests are then written in the Safety House roof.

What do people do in your Safety House?

"What are the important things that _____ (eg Mummy and Daddy) would do in your Safety House to make sure that you are safe?"

This question may elicit information from the child about general activities they enjoy doing with their family as well as specific information about what people would be doing to make sure that the child was safe. The child can draw pictures or write words inside their Safety House to show these activities, or the worker can help the child to write words that describe these activities. Hearing specific details of what they do that their child values or that helps their child to feel safe can be very powerful for parents. In the first case example, Zoe drew a picture of her Mum making yummy food for her, after describing how her Mum now makes yummy food for her on contact visits and how she wants this to continue when she goes home to live with Mum. In the second case example, Zac wrote that he and his family would tell jokes and laugh together and that his Mum and Bob would "spend time with me". Zac said that in his Safety House, spending time with him was the most important thing Mum and Bob would be doing with him.

If the child hasn't focused on safety in the question above, then you can help them to record their ideas and then ask the question again with the focus very specifically on safety. In the first case example, Zoe told Sonja that her Mum would always check that all the doors and windows were locked every night so that Shane couldn't get into the house. Zoe also said that Mum would call the police as soon as Shane came around and that there would be a big sign on the wall next to the doors to remind her to do that.

The child may already have described what they want to have happen in relation to the specific concerns (when they were exploring who would or wouldn't be living in their Safety House) but if this was not the case, then workers can now ask for the child's ideas in relation to the specific worries. For example, if the concern has been about the mother hitting the children when she was angry, the worker might ask:

"In your Safety House, when Mummy gets angry with you, what does she need to do to make sure that you are feeling safe even when she is feeling angry?"

As discussed earlier in this booklet, talking with the child about specific concerns requires earlier exploration with the child about what they know about the worries, and is best done using the language that the child uses to describe the worries.

It is also important to ask the child if there are any objects need to be put in place. For example:

“Are there any important objects or things that need to be in your Safety House to make sure that you are always safe?”

This question can elicit the child’s ideas about what sort of practical things need to be in place to ensure their safety. In the first case example above, Zoe said that she wanted locks on the doors and the windows so that Shane could not get inside and hurt her or her Mum (there had been a history of Shane breaking into the house). Zoe also said that she wanted a big sign on the wall next to the front and back door that said ‘Ring the police if Shane comes’ and with the phone number for the police.

People who come to visit their Safety House

“Who would/will come to visit your Safety House to help make sure that you are safe?”

Here the child is identifying who they think are important people for the family’s safety and support network (those people who need to be aware of the concerns and are actively involved in supporting the family to secure the child’s safety, belonging and wellbeing). These people are drawn within the outer circle of the Safety House. As the child draws these people, the worker can ask how often the child thinks the people should visit and what these people would do when they visit, which can be written beside each person.

What do people do when they visit your Safety House?

“When _____ (each of the people identified above) come to visit you in your Safety House, what are the important things they need to do to help you be safe?”

Again, this question can be asked generally (ie. What would _____ do when they come to visit?) or can focus specifically on safety (by adding the additional “what do they do to help keep you safe?”). In the first case example, Zoe told me that she wanted a number of people to visit, with the focus for her Nana and her mother’s friend, Andrea, being on helping her Mum (particularly during the times when she was ‘sad’).

In the second case example, Zac listed a number of people who he wanted to come and visit. Zac described how his Nana and Pop would take him to their house and how all the other people would join in with playing Uno (a card game that Zac regularly played with his family and with his Child Safety caseworker when he came to visit). Asking what each of these people needed to do when they came to visit to ensure that he was safe did not appear to be a meaningful question to Zac, as he answered that he already felt safe. This led me to ask:

“If things were not going so well when you’re living back home with Mum and some of the problems from the past were starting to happen, who of all these people who are coming to visit would notice?”

Zac immediately identified that Charlie (his Child Safety caseworker) would be the first person to notice. Sonja was then able to ask:

“What would Charlie need to do when he comes to visit to make sure that he notices how things are going?”

Zac said that he wanted Charlie to “Check on us. Join in with the fun. Play ‘Uno’ (a card game). To talk and ask about how are things going”. This provides important information to the collaborative planning process about who Zac would feel most comfortable talking to if things were not going well at home, and also gives a clear message that Zac would like Charlie to ask “How are things going?”

Rules for the Safety House

The roof of the Safety House is where we record the child’s safety rules, written in the child’s language. These rules describe the child’s thoughts about how everyone must behave, on a day-to-day basis, to ensure that the child is always safe and well cared for. Questions that can be used to elicit the child’s ideas include:

- *“Remember we talked about how all those adults are talking together to make a special plan for when you go home? One of the things they are trying to decide is what the rules of the plan should be. What do you think? What would the rules of the house be so that you and everyone would know that nothing like _____ (use specific worries) would ever happen again?”*
- *“What else and what else?”*
- *“If your _____ (brother/Nana etc) was here, what would they say needs to be in the rules?”*

In Zoe’s case the rules she wanted to see were:

- No fighting or hitting because I get really scared and get hurt and Mum gets hurt.
- Shane can’t come around and if he bashes on the door Mum will tell him to go away or she’ll call the police.
- If Mum gets really sad then someone has to help her because she cries and stays in bed and then she doesn’t get up. Nana could come over.
- I get to stay at my school because I like my school now and I don’t want to go to a new school and I want to stay at my school.

Zac wanted the following rules written in the roof of his Safety House:

- Z, J & K (his two younger brothers) are not allowed to wander off and stay where Mum can see us and hear us.
- To listen to instructions.
- Mum and Bob have to look after us and teach us stuff that we don’t know.
- Mum and Bob have to follow the law and pay attention to the road.
- Make sure there are no arguments and everything is fair.
- Mum won’t use drugs anymore.

Zac’s first two rules appeared to be about how he thought he and his brothers needed to behave so Sonja asked Zac, *“What do Mum and Bob need to do to make sure that you and your brothers are always safe?”* This triggered Zac to come up with the next three rules. Given that Zac had not mentioned any rules that related to the primary concern about his Mum’s past drug use and the impact of this on himself and his brothers, Sonja asked:

“What rules do we need to have to make sure that the things that happened in the past that worried everyone don’t happen again?”

Zac offered the final rule.

In a similar manner to how Sonja worked with Zac, workers can ask specific questions to help children think about the rules that they would like to have in place in relation to specific worries, for example:

“Something you were worried about was _____. What rule do we need to have to make sure that doesn’t happen when you go home to live with Mum and Dad?”

Some children may not be able to come up with rules or safety guidelines, but even a simple statement from a child such as “No-one is allowed to hit anyone” can lead to a worker asking “What would people be doing instead?” The child’s answer, however simple, can be written down in the roof of the Safety House and can be a powerful message to a parent about how the child would like things to be in the future.

Developing a path to the Safety House

Once the child has described, in as much detail as possible, what would be happening in their Safety House, the worker can then elicit the child’s perspective on how safe they would feel at this point in time if they were living with their family.

The worker and the child first draw a path that leads from outside of the house to the front door. The worker then explains that this is the safety path, with the beginning of the path being where everyone was worried (eg. that Shane might hit Zoe or that Zoe might get hurt when Shane was hitting Mum) and the end of the path (at the front door) is where all the worries have been sorted out and the child is able to go inside their Safety House. Sonja usually explains the safety path by using a question such as:

“If the beginning of the path is where everyone was very worried and you weren’t able to live with Mum and Dad and you had to go and live with _____ and the end of the path at the front door is where all those worries have been sorted out and you are now completely safe living with Mum and Dad, where do you think things are right now?”

As suggested earlier, the Safety House tool can only effectively be used if and when the child understands what the professionals’ concerns are for his or her safety. This is particularly evident when using the safety path, which is only effective following clear and straightforward discussions about what the child’s specific worries have been and once the child is aware of what professionals are worried about. Once this is done, the questions can be asked in relation to those specific worries, for example:

“If the beginning of the path is that you feel very worried that if you go home to live with Mum (or have an overnight stay) that Mum will start using drugs again and then not be able to look after you properly and the end of the path at the door is that everything that you have said needs to be in your Safety House is already happening and you’re not worried at all that Mum will use drugs again, where are you right now?”

The child can identify their safety rating by either colouring the path or drawing themselves on the path or by using a number, counter, etc to place themselves on the safety path.

Workers can then talk to the child about where they have located themselves on their safety path, exploring what has happened that has helped the child get this far along the path and what needs to happen for the child to move a little bit closer to their Safety House. This information can be written beside the safety path.

In Zoe's case, the safety path immediately made sense to her and she drew herself about three quarters of the way along the path. Sonja then asked Zoe what had happened to help her move this far along the path and Zoe replied, "Mum has broken up with Shane and she has stopped drinking berban (bourbon) all the time". Zoe then wrote this next to the drawing of herself on the path.

Sonja then asked Zoe what would need to happen for her to move further along the path and be a little closer to her Safety House and Zoe stated "We need to get those locks on the windows and put those signs next to the doors so that Mum rings the police if Shane bashes on the door".

Zac drew himself almost all of the way along his safety path and when Sonja asked him "So you're all this way along the safety path?" he replied, "Yes I'm almost at the gate and I'm just about where the middle of my head is" and then he drew a dotted line on either side of his head to show his position. Zac explained that he was this far along the path because "Mum's stopped being on drugs" (which Sonja wrote beside the path). Zac then went on to explain that about a year or two ago he wasn't so far along the safety path and then he drew himself about half way along the path and used a different colour to show that this was an earlier time. Sonja wrote "Z was here about a year or two ago" to record this information. Sonja then asked Zac: "What else has happened to help you move from where you were a year or two ago to where you are now?" and Zac said "Seeing Mum more" (which he wrote beside the path). When Sonja asked Zac what needed to happen for him to move all the way to the end of the safety path and for him to feel completely safe living back home with Mum and Bob, and Zac said "Seeing Mum even more".

As was the case with Zac, the Safety House and safety path can be used (either in the first or in subsequent sessions) to identify where the child is now on the safety path and to explore what has happened for them to have moved on the path – either forwards or backwards – so that everyone (professionals and family members) can better understand the child's sense of safety as the collaborative planning or reunification process progresses.

The worker can also use the safety path to help the child understand how other people view the current level of safety, by asking where the child thinks other people might be on the path and why they would be located at that place. In Zac's case, Sonja asked him where he thought his two brothers would be on the safety path and he drew them just over half way along the path. When Sonja asked Zac what he thought needed to happen for his two brothers to move closer to the Safety House, he said, "I don't know". Sonja then asked, "If J and K were here and I asked them what needed to happen for them to move closer to the Safety House, what do you think they would say?" Zac thought about this for a long time and then said "Mum and Bob solving the other problems". Zac then added "But I don't know what those problems are". While this didn't make sense to me at the time, it was later explained to me by the reunification agency that during the past few days, the statutory agency had decided not to proceed with reunification for the two younger children at this stage as they were showing signs of anxiety. This issue was being explored further between the family, the statutory agency and the reunification agency and was obviously something Zac was aware of but did not fully understand.

5. Talking with the child about what happens next

Once the worker and the child have finished the Safety House, it is important to explain what will happen next to the child or young person, and to obtain their permission to show their Safety House to others, such as parents, carers, extended family, or professionals. Some children may want to present their Safety House or to be there while it is presented, whereas others may feel anxious about this and choose not to be present. Whatever the process that is agreed upon with the child, it is important to talk this through carefully so that the child knows what will happen next.

Zoe was happy for everyone to see her Safety House and wanted to be present when we showed this to her Mum and then later, to her Nana and Grandad. Zoe asked if she could have a copy of her Safety House to keep. Zac was also happy for everyone to see his Safety House but said that he didn't mind whether or not he was there when we showed it to his Mum and Bob because "they already know all of this stuff".

The Safety House tool, while primarily a collaborative planning tool, may also elicit new assessment information in working with some children. If this information raises additional safety issues, then it is important to talk to the child or young person about their concerns or your concerns and to develop a plan together about how to ensure they will be safe once this information has been presented to others. Sometimes this will mean bringing the child into care (if they are not already in care), at least while the issues are explored with their parents. Involving the children in this process will sometimes slow down the pace at which professionals act, but whenever possible, it is important to go at a pace that the child is comfortable with. If the worker feels compelled to make decisions that go beyond what the child is comfortable with, these decisions need to be explained to the child before any action is taken.

6. Showing the child's Safety House to others

The final step in the Safety House process involves bringing the child's Safety House, and the child's voice and ideas expressed within their Safety House, to everyone involved in the broader collaborative planning process. As discussed above, workers will need to talk with the child about who will present the Safety House, whether that is the child and the worker or just the worker. It is usually important to bring the child's Safety House to the parents first and explore the Safety House with them fully before taking it to the broader collaborative planning group.

In Zoe's case, Zoe wanted her mother to see her Safety House first and we sat down together with Tanya during Zoe's next contact visit to show her Zoe's Safety House. Zoe explained her Safety House to her mother, describing each of the pictures and then reading the rules aloud to her mother. Tanya was very moved by Zoe's thoughts and after hearing the second rule about calling the police and Zoe's idea about the signs next to the door, said "That's brilliant. Let's do that". Tanya started to cry when Zoe read her third rule about someone having to help Tanya when she gets really sad and told Zoe that that was an important rule. And after Zoe read her fourth rule about wanting to stay at her school, Tanya acknowledged that Zoe had had to move schools too many times and that she would try to make sure that Zoe could stay at her school.

Sonja then talked to Zoe and Tanya about showing Zoe's Safety House to the family network and professionals who were involved in the collaborative planning process and Zoe and Tanya decided that Tanya would show Zoe's Safety House to everyone at the next meeting. At this meeting, Child Safety agreed to pay for locks for the windows of Tanya's house. In discussing Zoe's third rule, Sonja asked Tanya for her ideas about what would help her when she was feeling really sad. Tanya said that it would help her to talk with her mum (Nana) and close friend, Andrea, and both of them

agreed that they would be part of a plan to help Tanya and Zoe when Tanya was feeling really sad. The group agreed that this needed to be worked out in a lot more detail. Tanya also said that she wanted to have someone she could talk to, like a counsellor, to help her to not feel so sad about things that had happened in the past.

In Zac's case, the reunification agency worker, Jo, was present when Zac and Sonja worked on his Safety House and Jo said that Zac talked more during this one session than in all the weeks she had been working with him. Jo said that the Safety House process helped to confirm that Zac was feeling very positive about returning to live with his mother and Bob and helped to identify the other family members who were important to Zac. Jo also said that the information about Charlie's role was important and that she would be highlighting this information with Child Safety.

Jo and myself met with Zac's mum, Megan, a few days later to present Zac's Safety House. Bob was not able to be at the meeting as he was working and Zac said that he and his Mum would show his Safety House to Bob later in the day when Zac came for his contact visit. In presenting Zac's Safety House to Megan, Sonja briefly explained the purpose of the Safety House and then gave Megan a copy of Zac's Safety House and talked through each part. Megan said that she was not surprised by anything that Zac had written/drawn in his Safety House and that seeing his Safety House helped her to know that she was on the right track.

7. Involving the child in the ongoing collaborative planning

As the collaborative planning process with the family and network continues, make sure you regularly come back to the child (with the parents' consent) to help the child understand what is happening and to find out their views on how things are progressing. The child's Safety House can be added to or updated over time, or they can do a new Safety House if things have significantly changed. It can be very powerful for the parents/caregivers and for others involved in working with the family to see the child moving further along the pathway toward their 'Safety House'.

And working with the child over time will also make it more possible to develop a relationship of trust with the child, which may mean that over time they feel more confident in sharing information that they may not have been ready to talk about in earlier conversations.

Safety House Template and Prompt Sheet

A template for the Safety House is provided at the end of this booklet for photocopying purposes. The template can also be downloaded from www.spconsultancy.com.au

A summary of each of the Safety House elements and suggested questions are provided on a prompt sheet, provided at the end of this booklet, which workers may find useful to photocopy and have alongside them as they begin to use the Safety House tool.

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Prompt sheet for using the Safety House

1. Inside the Safety House: The inner circle and inside the four walls

Inner circle:

- Child draws her or himself in the inner circle (leaving space to draw others).
- Who else would live in your Safety House with you?

Inside the house:

- What are the important things that _____ (eg Mummy and Daddy) would do in your Safety House to make sure that you are safe?
- Are there any important objects or things that need to be in your Safety House to make sure that you are always safe?

2. Visiting the Safety House: The outer circle

- Who would/will come to visit you in your Safety House to help make sure that you are safe?
- When _____ (each of the safety people identified above) come to visit you in your Safety House, what are the important things that they need to do to help you be safe?

3. The red circle: Unsafe people

- When you go home to live with _____ (eg. Mum and Dad), is there anyone who you don't want to have living in your safety house or coming to visit you?

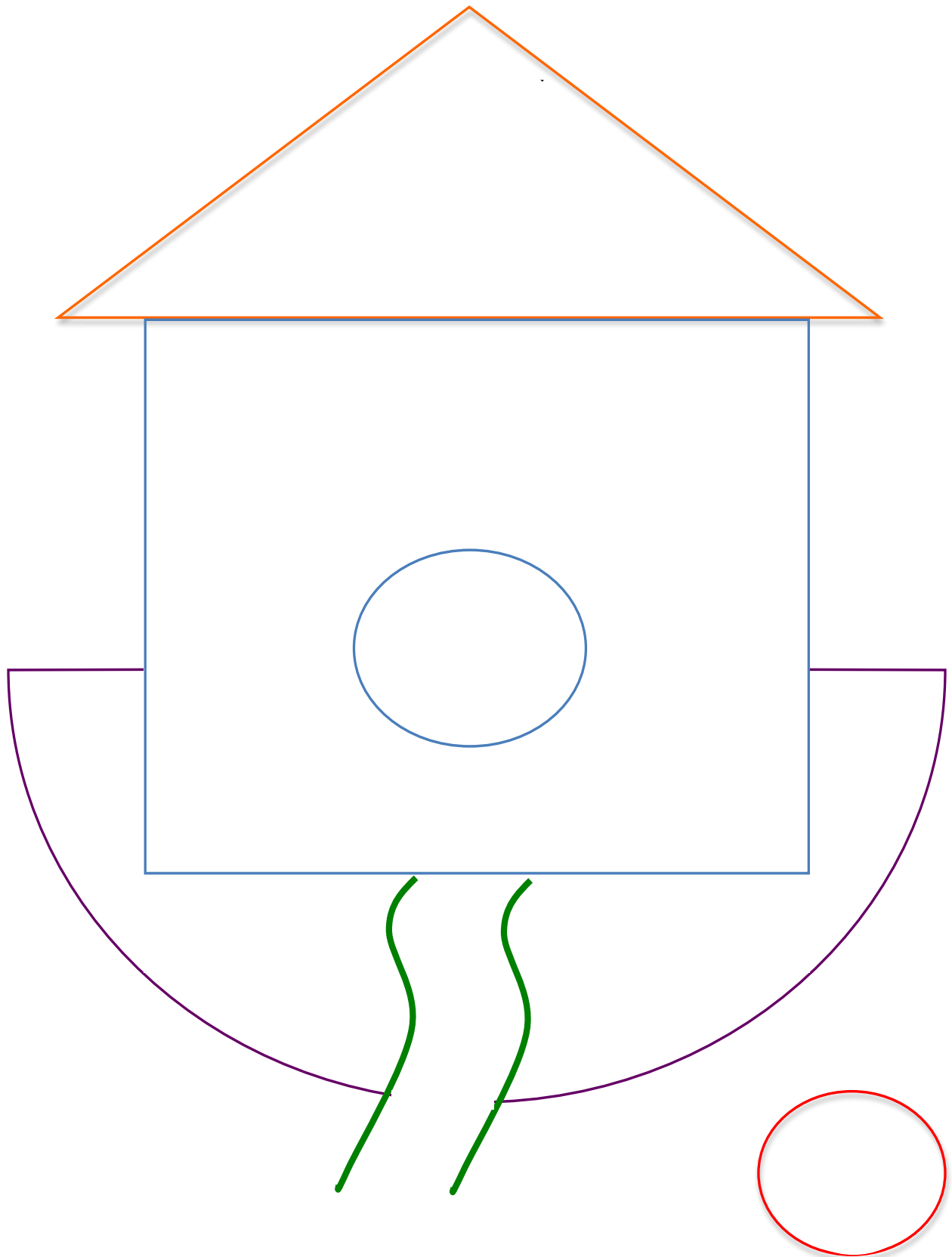
4. The roof

- Remember we talked about how all those adults are talking together to make a special plan for when you go home? One of the things they are trying to decide is what the rules of the plan should be. What do you think? What would the rules of the house be so that you and everyone one would know that nothing like _____ (use specific worries) would ever happen again?
- Something you were worried about was _____. What rule do we need to have to make sure that doesn't happen when you go home to live with Mum and Dad?
- If your _____ (sister/Nana etc) was here, what would they say needs to be in the rules?

5. The Safety Path

- If the beginning of the path is where everyone was very worried and you weren't able to live with Mum and Dad and you had to go and live with _____ and the end of the path at the front door is where all of those worries have been sorted out and you will be completely safe living with Mum and Dad, where do you think things are right now?
- If the beginning of the path is that you feel very worried that if you go home to live with Mum (or have an overnight stay) that Mum will start using drugs again and then not be able to look after you properly and the end of the path at the door is that everything in your Safety House is happening and you're not worried at all that Mum will use drugs again, where are you right now?

My Safety House



Circles of Safety & Support

A tool to help parents identify people for their family's safety & support network



by Sonja Parker



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www.partneringforsafety.com.au

Identifying people for the family's network

A core component of a strengths-based, safety-centred practice approach is the development or strengthening of the family's safety and support network. The safety and support network is made up of people such as extended family, friends and community members who will work with the parents and involved professionals to develop and maintain a plan that will ensure the children's long term safety, belonging and wellbeing. The safety and support network provides support to the parents and safety for the children, and in some situations, safety for the adult whose behaviour we are worried about.

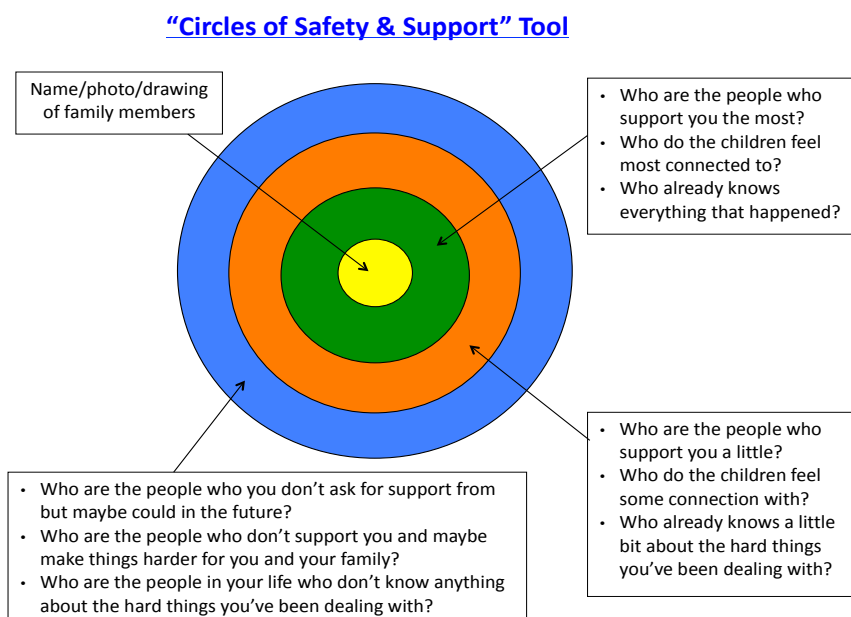
The Circles of Safety and Support tool, inspired by the concentric circles used by Susie Essex in the Words & Pictures method and the circles concept from the Protective Behaviours approach, is a visual tool that has been designed to help identify people for the family's safety and support network. This tool also helps workers have conversations with family members about why a safety and support network is necessary, about the role the network can play, and the process of determining who would be the most appropriate people to participate in this network.

The Circles of Safety and Support tool can be used on the very first visit with a family or at the point when you are starting to talk with family about the importance of involving a network of family and friends and involved professionals. Many parents and caregivers are reluctant to involve other family members or friends in conversations with child protection workers and it is quite common for parents/caregivers to say that they do not have people in their lives who could be part of a safety and support network. The Circles of Safety and Support tool helps workers to introduce and explore the idea of involving a network.

This booklet contains an overview of the Circles of Safety and Support tool, a detailed case example, and a suggested process for using this tool with families.

Structure of the tool

The Circles of Safety and Support tool is a very simple tool, consisting of three concentric circles drawn around the family. The family members (children and parents/ caregivers) are represented in the middle of the tool (in the yellow circle) by a quick drawing of the family, by writing the family member's names or by a photo of the family or children.



The innermost circle (green) is where we write the names of all the people in the children's and the family's life who already know about what happened that led to the children being taken into care or that led to child protection services being involved with the family, or who are already actively involved in supporting the family.

The middle circle (orange) is where we write the names of those people in the family's life who provide a little support to the parents and the children and/or know some of what has happened but don't know all the details. Perhaps they know that the children are not in the care of the family and that something happened that led to that, but they do not know the details of what happened.

The outermost circle (blue) is where we write the names of those people who don't know anything about what has happened and don't know that child protection services are involved with the family.

Using the Circles of Safety and Support tool

1. *Talking about the need for a safety and support network*

The first step in the process of using the Circles of Safety and Support tool flows directly out of the conversation with parents/caregivers about what we mean by a safety and support network and the fact that a network needs to be in place for the safety planning work to progress. When discussing the need for a network I usually say something like:

For our child protection agency to be confident that the things that we are worried about aren't going to happen to the children in the future, we need to know that there will be a safety and support network for the children; a group of people who see the children often and who will be part of the process of working with you and with us to develop a plan that will show everyone that the things we are worried about are not going to happen to the children in the future. You know that old saying that it takes a village to raise a child? Well the safety and support network is a bit like that village. We need to know that it's not just you and the kids on your own and that once child protection services walk away, that there will be a group of people who will be part of the children's lives and will help you to make sure that the children will always be safe in relation to the things we are worried about.

As family members start to talk about who might be part of the safety and support network or start to say that they don't have any people in their life who could be part of the network, you can move straight into using the Circles of Safety and Support tool. At this point I usually say something like: "Okay, so let me ask you a question" and as I'm saying that, I draw a large circle on a piece of paper and place this paper on the table between myself and the parents/caregivers so that it is visible to everyone.

2. *The Inner Circle*

I then ask the question:

- *Who are the people in your life and your child's life who already know about what has happened that led to your child/children being in care (or to child protection services being involved with your family)?*

As the parents/caregivers identify people who know what has happened, the names of these people are written into the inner circle (leave a little space right in the middle to come back to later and put the children's and parents' names or pictures).

Giving Compliments

As soon as the parents/caregivers identify one name, you have the opportunity to compliment parents for the openness and courage they have shown in talking openly with people about what has happened. In terms of bringing a sense of positive energy to the process, the earlier you can provide compliments to the parents, the better. For example, if a mum has just let me know that there are people in her life who she's had the courage to talk to about what has happened, I want to acknowledge and honour her courage by saying something like:

- *I imagine that might have been difficult to tell your mum about what happened. How did you manage to do that/find the courage to do that?*

or

- *You told all these people about what has happened. Wow, that can't have been easy. How did you manage to do that?*

Then continue asking "*Who else already knows what has happened?*" until the parents/caregivers have identified all of the people in their lives who already know what has happened and these names have been recorded in the inner circle. Having these people identified in the inner circles creates the opportunity for further learning about the parents/caregivers by asking questions like:

- *Who in the circle was the hardest person for you to talk to about this?*
- *How did you do that?*
- *What helped you to do that?*
- *Who was the first person that you told?*

The parent's/caregiver's answers to these questions will also provide important information about their relationships with the possible safety and support network people.

3. The Middle Circle

The next step in the process is to create the middle (second) circle by drawing a circle around the inner circle and then asking:

- *Who are the people in your life and the kids' lives who know a little bit about what has happened; who don't know the whole story but maybe know some of what has happened? Or maybe they know that something has happened but don't know any of the details?*

So then in the middle (second) circle, we write the names of those people who know a little bit or some of what has happened. Again, you can give further compliments to the parents/caregivers as more people are identified.

4. The Outer Circle

The next step is to create the outer circle by drawing a third circle around the other two circles. The question you are then asking is:

- *Who are the people in your life and your children's lives who don't know anything about what has happened?*

As these people are identified, their names are written into the outermost (third) circle.

5. Moving people from the outer circles to the inner circle

If there are not already sufficient/appropriate people in the inner circle (who meet the criteria of already knowing what has happened), the next part of the process is to explore who the parents/caregivers are willing to move from the outer two circles into the inner circle.

I usually start to make the connection between the inner circle and the safety and support network more explicit by saying something like:

Remember I said at the beginning that people in the safety and support network would need to know about what has happened in the past, well you've already got these people in this inner circle who you've been willing to talk to about what has happened, so you've already got these people as possible people for the network. So now we need to make sure we have enough people in this inner circle and the right people in this inner circle for the children's safety and support network.

If there are not enough people in the inner circle, then I usually explore who from the outer circles could become part of the inner circle by asking questions such as:

- *Who else from these outer circles do you think needs to be part of this inner circle?*
- *Is there anyone in these two outer circles who you have thought about telling or come close to telling, but you haven't quite gotten there yet?*
- *Who would Grandma (for example - pick a person already in the inner circle) say needs to be in this inner circle with her?*
- *Who would the kids want to have in this inner circle?*
- *You know all of these people, I don't know them yet, but who do you think I would want to have in this inner circle?*
- *Who of all of these people do you feel most comfortable with/most understood by and think would be important to have as part of the safety and support network?*
- *The suggestions of who else could be brought into the inner circle can be represented visually by doing things like drawing arrows that connect the people's names in the outer circles with the inner circle, or the suggested people can be added to the inner circle in a different colour to distinguish them from the people who already know what has happened.*

6. How many people do we need in the network?

At some point within this process, the question of how many people need to be in the safety and support network will usually be asked. This can feel like one of those 'how long is a piece of string' questions, but it is nonetheless one that we need to answer and to try to quantify.

There is no one definitive required number for the safety and support network that applies to every family situation. The number of people needed for the network needs to be determined based on the seriousness and nature of the concerns, the age and vulnerability of the children, and the availability of the other safety and support network people. We need to know that there are enough people in the network to be able to meet the day-to-day arrangements required in the safety plan. If, for example, our safety goal requires 24/7 supervision of the children while they are with one or both parents, there would need to be a large enough number of people in the network to make that possible, and a much larger number than if we require the children to be supervised by the network when the children have occasional contact with granddad (for example).

The decision about how many people are needed for the safety and support network needs to be thought through and talked through with everyone involved in the safety planning process to ensure that everyone is confident that the number and availability of people in the network are going to be able to maintain and monitor the safety plan.

7. *Talking about what we mean by 'safety' people*

What has happened so far in the process is that the parents/caregivers have now identified a number of people who could potentially be part of the children's safety and support network. The Circles of Safety and Support tool can now be used to begin having the conversation about the need for the network to be assessed as 'safe' people and the process for making this decision/ assessing whether or not someone is a 'safe' person.

I usually introduce the idea of assessing whether or not someone is a 'safe' person by asking questions such as:

- *If you suddenly got sick and had to go into hospital, which of the people in this inner circle would you be prepared to leave your kids with?*
- *Who do you think your children would be willing/feel safe staying with?*
- *If grandma (or one of the other people in the inner circle) was here looking at the people in this inner circle, who would she say she was happy for her grandkids to be left with?*
- *I have met any of these people yet but they are all people that you know, so who do you think I would be happy to have the kids staying with?*

The information provided by the parents/caregivers in response to these questions can be represented visually by doing things like putting a circle around the names of the people who are identified as 'safe' people (you could use one colour for Mum's views, for example, and a different colour for who Mum thinks others would nominate as 'safe' people) and question marks or crosses put through those people who have been identified as potentially 'unsafe' people.

By asking questions from a variety of points of view (the parent's, the children's, grandma's, and the worker's view), you are demonstrating that the decision about whether or not someone is regarded as a safe person is based on information provided by a range of people involved with the family. You are also introducing the idea that this decision will be made collaboratively, with the significant people in the children's lives being involved in the process of assessing whether or not it is appropriate for someone to be part of the children's safety and support network.

While the ultimate decision about whether or not someone is assessed as being an appropriate person for the safety and support network rests with the statutory agency, the information provided by the parents/caregivers, the children and by other people in the safety and support network is a vital part of that decision-making process.

8. *What do people need to know to be part of the network?*

Once the people who 'know everything' (in the inner circle) have been identified, you are then able to explore with the parents/caregivers what these people actually know and what else they need to know. I usually start this conversation by asking a question such as:

- *You said that these are the people who know everything about what has happened. Can we now talk about what it is that they actually know? What have you told them?*

A bottom line for the safety and support network is that people in the network need to know child protection services' views about what has happened to the children in the past and to understand the worries that professionals have about what might happen to the children in the future in the parents' care. This doesn't mean that the parents or the network need to agree with these views, but they do need to understand that these are the views held by child protection services and that these are the views that the safety plan must address, over time, for the child protection agency to be willing to close the case.

At a minimum, we would want the safety and support network to be presented with the harm statements (what the child protection agency (CS) believe has happened to these children or any other children in the past in the care of these parents), the worry statements (what CS are worried may happen to the children in the future in the care of these parents) and the goal statements (what CS would need to see the family doing, over time, in their care of the children that would satisfy everyone that there was enough safety to close the case).

9. *How do we ensure that everyone is informed?*

There are a number of ways that this information can be presented to the safety and support network:

- The parents/caregivers can take responsibility for talking this information through with all the potential people for the safety and support network prior to the first safety and support network meeting. If this happens, it is important that child protection services go over this information at the initial network meeting to make sure that everyone is clear about CPS' views.
- A copy of the assessment and planning framework can be provided to all the potential people for the safety and support network prior to the first network meeting and this can be discussed/ explored further at the meeting.
- The Words and Pictures document that has been prepared for the children can be presented to the safety and support network at the first network meeting as a means of ensuring that everyone understands CPS' views. (For further information on the Words and Pictures process, see "The Resolutions Approach: Working with 'Denied' Child Abuse", Turnell & Essex, 2006, or the Words and Pictures DVD, available at www.signsofsafety.net).

10. *The role of the safety and support network*

The Circles of Safety and Support tool can also help you to talk with the parents/caregivers about what the safety and support network would need to do. The safety and support network is an integral part of the safety planning process and so it is important that parents/caregivers understand what it is that the network will be asked to do and how this fits into the overall safety planning process. In most cases, it is the parents/caregivers who will be asking people to be part of the children's safety and support network and will be inviting them to the first meeting, so it is important that parents have had the opportunity to think and talk this through.

I usually start talking about the role of the network by saying something like:

- *We've got all these people now in this inner circle who know about what has happened and who could be part of the safety and support network, and I think it's fantastic that you've got so many people who already know what has happened. And you have also suggested other people from the outer two circles who you would be willing to have know about what has happened so that these other people could also be part of the network. So can we talk now in a bit more detail about what the network would need to do?*

Before presenting further information to the family about the safety planning process and how the safety and support network fits into this, I usually try to ascertain what the parents already know/ understand about the role of the safety and support network by asking a question such as:

- *I know we haven't talked a lot about the network, but if these people agreed to be part of your children's safety and support network, what do you imagine they are going to need to do?*

I would then continue asking *"What else do you think the network is going to need to do?"* until you are pretty clear that the parents have had the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge/ understanding about the role of the safety and support network.

At a minimum, we would expect the safety and support network to:

- Listen to CS' views about what has happened to the children in the past and their future worries that the detailed plan needs to address.
- Come to meetings with the parents/CS to develop the detailed plan that will demonstrate to everyone that the children will always be safe and well in relation to these identified worries. The number of meetings could be as few as one or two or could be as many as a dozen, depending on the complexity of the situation.
- Continue working with the family and CS to monitor how the plan is working. This is usually for a period of somewhere between 6 months and 2 years, depending on how long CS would need to see the plan in place and working for them to be confident that the plan will continue working once CS close the case.
- Continue supporting the family to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the children for as long as the children remain vulnerable to the identified worries. CS will need to have the conversation about how long the safety and support network will need to be actively involved for with the family and the safety and support network prior to CS closing the case.

11. *Bringing the Circles to other people in the family*

So far in using this tool, you have captured the parent/caregiver's ideas about who could be involved in the safety and support network. Other family members might have ideas about additional people who could be part of the safety and support network.

At this point in the process, I usually then ask the parents' permission to show their Circles of Safety and Support to others in the family (the children, grandma, the other parent if not present, etc) to seek their ideas. This meeting with the children or other family members can happen with the parent present or not, depending on the parent's preference. If the parent is going to be present, it can be useful for them to be the person who explains the circles of safety and support to the children or to other family members. Any additional people suggested can be added to the circles and the same questioning process can be used to understand the children/other family members' views about who needs to be part of the inner circle/safety and support network.

As the safety and support network is formed and begins to meet, the parents' Circles of Safety and Support can also be brought to the safety and support network and the network can consider the question of whether or not additional people are required for the safety and support network and who they could be.

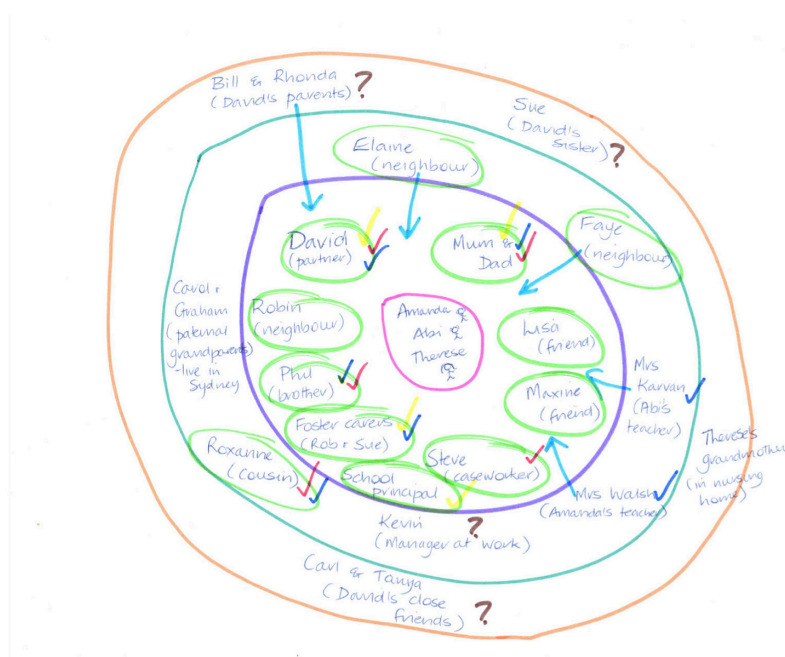
12. Where to from here?

The final step in the Circles of Safety and Support process is to talk with the parents/caregivers about where to from here. Important next steps are:

- Deciding who is going to talk with the possible safety and support network people to ask them to be part of the children's network and when is this going to happen?
- Setting a date for the first meeting of the safety and support network (which will also involve the parents/caregivers and child protection services) and deciding where is this going to be held?
- Deciding what process will be used to ensure that everyone in the safety and support network understands the concerns.

Case Example

Amanda and Abi's Circles of Safety and Support



The Circles of Safety and Support example above is an anonymised example from my work with a family in Perth, Western Australia. This family consists of a mother, who I will call Therese, and her two daughters, Abi (6yrs) and Amanda (8yrs). Abi and Amanda were placed in the care of the Department for Child Protection (DCP) two years ago due to the girls witnessing significant family violence between Therese and her partner at the time, the girls being hit by Therese's partner, and the girls often being left on their own at night while Therese and her partner went out to parties and to buy drugs.

Two years later, DCP referred the family to a reunification service as Therese had separated from her partner and had demonstrated that she was no longer using drugs. During my first meeting with Therese, I explained what the reunification and planning process would involve and began to talk to Therese about the need for a network of safety and support. Therese said that she didn't really have anyone who could be part of a network and I then drew a large circle on the page and

asked Therese the following question:

- *So let me just ask you a question.... Who are the people in your life and the girls' lives who know about what happened in the past, about Terry hitting the girls and the girls seeing all those fights between you and Terry, and the girls being left on their own at night while you and Terry went out? Who are the people in your life who already know about what has happened?*

Therese immediately said that her partner, David (who she had been in a relationship with for about 6 months), knew everything about what had happened, and then added that her mum and dad also knew what had happened. I wrote David's name and her mum and dad into the inner circle and then used that opportunity to compliment Therese by saying *"That can't have been easy telling your new partner about that difficult stuff from your past. How did you manage to do that?"* Therese said that she had been pretty nervous telling David but that she learnt in her drug rehab program that unless she was honest with people, she wasn't going to be able to have much of a relationship with them.

I then asked Therese *"Who else knows what happened?"* Therese said that her friends from the drug rehab program knew what had happened and when I asked her for their names, she gave me the names of two friends she had made during the program, Lisa and Maxine. I wrote their names in the circle and then asked again *"Who else knows what happened?"* Therese thought for a while and said *"My brother, but I don't see him much"*. I explained that it didn't matter at this stage how much she saw him; what we were doing was writing down the names of all the people who already knew what had happened. So I then wrote her brother's name (Phil) into the circle. I continued asking *"Who else knows?"* and writing their names in the circle until Therese said that she couldn't think of anyone else. At this point I asked *"Just think for a moment about all the people in the girls' life... Is there anyone else in their life who knows about what has happened?"* From this question, Therese added the girls' foster carers, their DCP caseworker and the person who brought them on contact visits, as well as the principal at the school which the girls attended. All of these names were added to the inner circle.

I then drew a second circle around this inner circle and asked *"Who are the people in your life and the girls' lives who know some of what happened; who don't know all the details, but know a little bit about what happened?"* Therese listed a number of people, including two more of her neighbours, Elaine and Faye; both of the girls' teachers; her cousin, Roxanne; and Kevin, the manager of the shop where Therese worked part-time. I then asked Therese *"Is there anyone else, in your family for example or the girls' dad's side of the family, who know something about what has happened?"* Therese then added the girls' paternal grandparents, who she said she didn't speak to much as they lived interstate and they had stopped having much contact after the girls' father had died four years ago.

When Therese said that she couldn't think of anyone else to add to that circle, I then drew a third circle around the first two and asked *"So now who are the people in your life who don't know anything about what happened?"* Therese thought for quite a while and then said *"David's family and friends, I guess. I've only met them a couple of times because they live outside of Perth, but I haven't told them that the girls don't live with me. They all think that we'd just left the kids at home with friends while we came to visit"*. I asked Therese who she thought were the most important of those people and Therese listed Bill and Rhonda (David's parents), Sue (David's sister) and Carl and Tanya (his closest friends). I wrote all of these names in the outer circle and then asked *"Who else is in your life who doesn't know anything about what happened?"* Therese said that she had never told her grandmother about what had happened as her grandmother was in a nursing home and didn't know that the girls were in care. I added her grandmother to the outer circle.

Once we'd finished putting the names in all three circles, I then asked Therese *"Looking at all the people you have put in these safety circles, is there anyone else who is important to you and important to the girls who we haven't put into the circles yet?"* Therese looked at her circles of safety and support and said *"No, that's everyone"*.

Therese had listed 11 people in the inner circle, 8 people in the middle circle, and 6 people in the outer circle, giving us 25 people who were potential members of the safety network.

I then talked started to explore with Therese how 'safe' she regarded the people she had listed within her circles of safety and support, which I did by asking:

- *I want to ask you a question about all of these people now. Imagine that your girls are living back home with you and then you had to go to hospital suddenly. Of all the people you have put in these circles, who would you be willing to leave your girls with?*

Therese looked at the circles and straight away started pointing out the people that she would be willing to leave her girls with. I circled these people with a green pen. Therese also said that some of the people who she didn't yet know well enough, such as David's family and friends, and her manager at work, were possible safe people. I put a question mark next to these people.

Once we had identified who Therese regarded as 'safe' people for Abi and Amanda, I then started to explore other people's views. I did this by asking questions such as:

- *If you had to go to hospital, who do you think the girls would feel comfortable staying with? Who would your mum be willing for her granddaughters to stay with? Who do you think Steve, your caseworker, would be happy for the girls to stay with?*

Therese thoughts about her mum's views were represented with a red tick; her girls' views with a blue tick and Steve's views with a yellow tick.

Using Therese's circles of safety and support, I then talked with Therese about how many people she thought would need to be in Abi and Amanda's safety network, which led to a discussion about the role of the safety network. Therese said that if the safety network needed to come to meetings and help to develop the plan and then keep visiting afterwards to make sure that the plan was working, she thought there would need to be about 10 people so that a couple of people, like her mum and dad, weren't having to do all the work. Therese said though that she didn't feeling comfortable asking people to commit this much time to working with her and the girls and that she wasn't sure if they would agree to do it. At this point I reiterated again that having a safety network was a bottom line for the girls to return home and complimented Therese on being willing to think this through with me in so much detail.

This part of the conversation took quite a while, with me holding the bottom line of the safety network needing to happen and needing to have enough people to be able to perform the role effectively, and Therese eventually said that she understood that she had to have a safety network in place before the girls could come home.

I then asked Therese to think about who in the inner circle she thought would be good to have as part of the safety network. Therese said that she wanted to have her mum and dad, David, her brother if he was willing, her friends Lisa and Maxine and her neighbour, Robin. Therese added that she didn't think that Steve, her caseworker, the school principal or the foster parents would really count as part of the safety network and so then we started to explore who from the outer circles Therese would be willing to move to the inner circle.

To do this, I asked Therese questions such as:

- *Who from these outer two circles do you think needs to be in this inner circle and part of the safety and support network?*
- *Who would you be most comfortable talking with about what happened to the girls?*
- *Who do you think from these outer circles could most support you and the girls in creating the kind of life you want for you all?*
- *Who do you think your mum would want to have in there with her? Who do you think the girls would want to have in this inner circle and part of their network?*

Therese said that she thought both her neighbours, Elaine and Faye, needed to be in the inner circle, and that the girls would want their teachers part of the inner circle. Therese also said that while she didn't know David's parents very well, they seemed like good people and she would be willing to talk with them if David was okay with that. The people that Therese was willing to move to the inner circle, we showed by drawing arrows linking them to the inner circle.

That was as much as Therese and I covered during our first session together. Therese said that she wanted to show her circles of safety and support to David and to her mum and talk to them about the safety and support network and who needed to be part of it. We agreed that after she had done that, she and I would then talk together again about how to start inviting the people we had identified to a meeting to talk about the safety and support network. Therese's circles of safety and support led to a network of 13 people for Abi and Amanda, who at the time of writing this booklet, are all participating in the process of developing a plan for Abi and Amanda.

Some important process considerations

As you will see from the suggested process outlined above and the case example, there are a lot of detailed conversations with families that can result from the use of the Circles of Safety and Support tool. It may be necessary to use the tool over a number of sessions rather than trying to complete all of the work within one session.

The suggested process outlined above is not necessarily a linear process. You may find that you move from one stage to another, depending on what comments or questions the parents/ caregivers ask. What is important to remember is to record the information visually (it doesn't have to be neat or pretty; this is a working document!) and to cover all of the areas outlined in the process.

Conclusion

As discussed at the beginning of this booklet, developing and/or strengthening a family's safety and support network is a core component of a strengths-based, safety-centred practice approach. This booklet focuses on the development of a safety and support network through the use of the Circles of Safety and Support tool and isn't intended to give a thorough overview of the broader collaborative planning process. For further information on detailed collaborative planning, please see the reference list at the back of this booklet.

Additional Resources

Parker, S. (2011). The Case Consultation Process: A process for consulting on child protection cases using the Collaborative Risk Assessment and Planning Framework. SP Consultancy (www.spconsultancy.com.au)

Parker, S. (In Press). A Safety Planning Tool: A tool that provides structure and guidance in the process of working with families and safety networks to develop detailed safety plans. SP Consultancy (www.spconsultancy.com.au)

Parker, S. (2009). The Safety House: A tool for including children in safety planning, SP Consultancy (www.spconsultancy.com.au)

Parker, S. (2010). The Future House: Involving parents and caregivers in the safety planning process. SP Consultancy (www.spconsultancy.com.au)

Weld, N. and Parker, S. (2014) Using the Three Houses Tool: Involving children and young people in child protection assessment and planning. SP Consultancy (www.spconsultancy.com.au)

Turnell, A. and Edwards, S. (1999). Signs of Safety: A safety and solution oriented approach to child protection casework, New York: WW Norton.

Turnell A. and Essex S. (2006). Working with 'denied' child abuse: the resolutions approach. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Turnell, A and Parker, S (2009). Introduction to the signs of safety. [DVD and Workbook], Resolutions Consultancy (www.signsofsafety.net)

Turnell, A. (In Press). Building safety in child protection services: working with a strengths and solution focus, London: Palgrave.

Turnell, A. (Forthcoming). Effective safety planning in child protection casework. [Workbook and DVD], Resolutions Consultancy (www.signsofsafety.net)

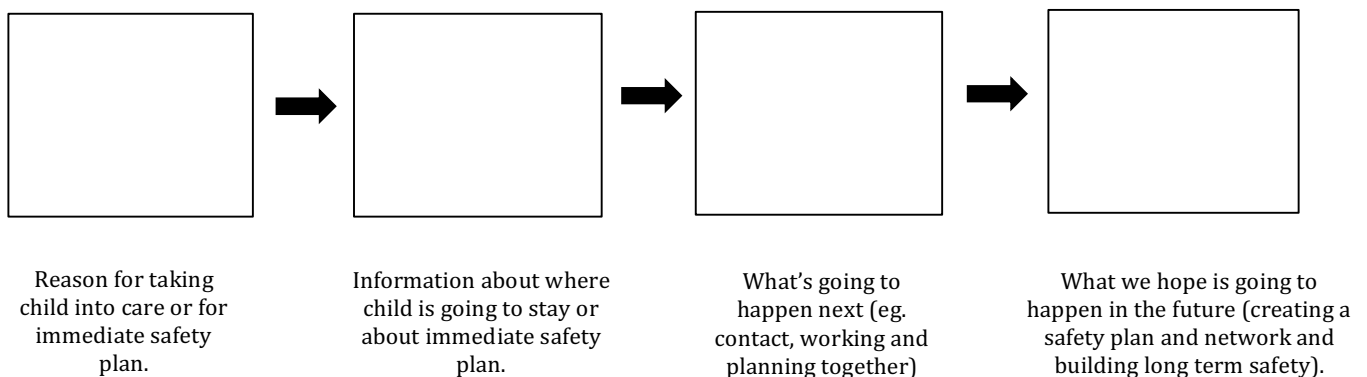
Weld, N. (2008). The three houses tool: building safety and positive change. In M. Calder (Ed.) Contemporary risk assessment in safeguarding children, Lyme Regis: Russell House.

The 'Immediate Story'

The 'Immediate Story' is a clear, simply worded story that is developed by the child protection agency and provided to the child at the point when the child is removed from the parents' care (or as soon as possible afterwards), or when the agency starts working with the family to create an immediate safety plan. The 'Immediate Story' provides a simple explanation to the child about the reason for the child protection intervention, about what is happening now or has just happened (for example, the child is being removed from their parents' care and going to stay with other family members or foster carers, or Dad is going to stay somewhere else and Grandma is going to move in), and what is going to happen next in the safety planning process.

The 'Immediate Story' method has been developed by Sonja Parker as part of her work with Arianne Struik¹, in developing trauma-informed safety planning. Even with the best of intentions, our child protection processes (particularly when they involve the removal of a child or the threat of removal of a child) can be shocking and potentially traumatising for children (and parents), so a clear and simple explanation is essential to help mitigate any unintended harm or trauma from our interventions. Research² shows that a shocking event doesn't have to be traumatising if you are able to understand what is going on and you are able to receive comfort from someone who understands. The 'Immediate Story' provides a clear and immediate explanation to children (and parents) that helps to minimise the traumatic impact of CPS intervention. The story also provides an immediate explanation to parents, foster carers and family members so that they are able to reinforce this explanation and provide informed comfort and support to the child.

'Immediate Story'



¹ Arianne Struik: <http://www.ariannestruik.com>

² http://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/sites/dmh/files/report/cafu/DMH-CAFU_Psychological_Trauma_Moroz.pdf

The 'Immediate Story' has four components:

1. Who made the decision that child can't live with parents at the moment or that an immediate safety plan is needed, and a simple explanation about why this decision was made.
2. Where the child is going to be living in the short/medium term or summary of immediate safety plan.
3. What's going to happen next (in the short term) eg. establishing contact, planning together.
4. What we hope is going to happen long term (creating a safety plan and strengthening the family's support and safety network and building long term safety so that the child can return home or the family can live together again).

The first part of the 'Immediate Story' contains a clear explanation from the child protection agency about the reason for the child protection intervention. Children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect will often think that they are to blame for what is happening and that they are not able to stay with their parents (or that Dad has to go and live somewhere else) because they are a 'bad child'³. This simple explanation, provided early in the process, helps to counter any belief the child may develop that somehow it is all their fault. While this message to the child would be more powerful if it was coming from the parents, at this early stage in the child protection intervention it is usually not possible to develop a more detailed explanation in collaboration with the parents. This part of the story can be built on later within the collaboratively developed 'Words and Pictures' process⁴. It also forms an introduction to the importance of the 'Trauma Healing Story'⁵, which will be developed later as part of the healing and trauma treatment process.

The second part of the 'Immediate Story' provides a brief explanation about where the child is going to stay (if they are being removed from the parents' care) or about the most important details of the immediate safety plan (eg. if Dad is going to stay somewhere else and Grandma is moving in). Particularly when a child is being removed from their family's care, the situation will often be extremely distressing, frightening and confusing for a child, so simple information about where they are going to stay and who they will be staying with, can help to minimise any further trauma. Alongside the 'Immediate Story', a foster carer profile⁶ is provided to the child, with simple information and photographs of the carers, their family and home.

³ Struik, A (2014). *Treating Chronically Traumatized Children: Don't Let Sleeping Dogs Lie!* Routledge.

⁴ Turnell A. and Essex S. (2006). Working with 'denied' child abuse: the resolutions approach. Buckingham: Open University Press.

⁵ Arianne Struik: <http://www.ariannestruik.com>

⁶ Jill Devlin, from Open Home Foundation in New Zealand, developed the idea of creating profiles for foster carers (Te Whanau Nei). For some wonderful examples of foster carer profiles, please see Sonja's website: www.spconsultancy.com.au/resources.html

Including information about the foster carers within the 'Immediate Story' and then showing this story to the parents, also begins to build a relationship between the parents and the carers. One of the obstacles to successful reunification is a lack of communication and collaboration between parents and foster carers. While building this relationship is a complex and at times challenging process, the simple act of providing parents with some information about the people who are caring for their child can start the process of building a collaborative working relationship. This also opens up the possibility of the parents being willing to create their own profile⁷, which can be provided to the foster carers or other professionals involved in working with the family, to assist in building a working relationship and to minimise any demonising of the parents.

The third part of the 'Immediate Story' reassures the child that they will be having contact with their parents and provides an explanation about when the planning for contact will happen. When a child is removed from the care of their parents, or when a parent moves out of the home as part of an immediate safety plan, establishing safe and meaningful contact between the children and their family is one of the most critical and immediate issues that the child protection agency must deal with. It is also usually one of the first issues that children and parents want to focus on. Establishing safe visits for the child with their parents (and other significant family members) so that the child can receive comfort from their attachment figures, needs to happen as quickly as possible to minimise any additional trauma for the child. The child's primary attachments with his or her parents (or significant caretakers) also need to be upheld for the child to be able to develop healthy attachments with other caretakers and in future relationships⁸.

The fourth part of the 'Immediate Story' provides parents, children, safety and support network members and other professionals (including carers) with an overview of the safety planning process and initial information about the most important non-negotiables of the safety planning process (such as the need for a safety and support network, that safety needs to be demonstrated, and that everyone will need to work together to develop a comprehensive safety plan that leaves everyone confident that the child will be safe in the parents' care in the future). While more detailed information about the safety planning process will need to be provided over time (when people are not as distressed and are able to process more detailed information), it is important to provide at least an overview of the safety planning process at this point so that children and parents are able to begin to participate in the safety planning process and are able to hold on to some hope that it will be possible for the child to return to the parents' care or for the family to live together again. The 'Immediate Story' connects the past, present and future in a way that helps people to retain a sense of hope about the future and not become stuck in the pain of the present or the past.

⁷ Sonja has developed a parent profile template. An example and template is available from her website: www.spconsultancy.com.au/resources.html

⁸ Struik, A (2014). *Treating Chronically Traumatized Children: Don't Let Sleeping Dogs Lie!* Routledge.

So, in summary, the ***purpose*** of the 'Immediate Story' is to:

- Minimise any unintended trauma to children caused by child protection interventions, by providing a clear explanation about what is happening and why. This explanation also helps parents and foster carers provide informed comfort to the child.
- Create a focus on future safety from day one, by providing a simple and clear overview of the safety planning process that helps parents and children retain a sense of hope about future reunification and assists them in understanding and then participating in safety planning, including the development of a safety and support network.
- Bring an immediate focus to the importance of establishing contact visits and collaborative planning for regular, frequent and safe contact.
- Start to build a relationship between parents and foster carers (in situations of out of home care) that can help to minimise trauma for the child, contribute to the child's healing and increase the likelihood of successful reunification.
- Create a bridge to the development of a more detailed and collaboratively developed 'Words and Pictures' story, which is both a necessary foundation for safety planning and contributes to healing for the child (and often for the parents).

'Immediate Story' templates

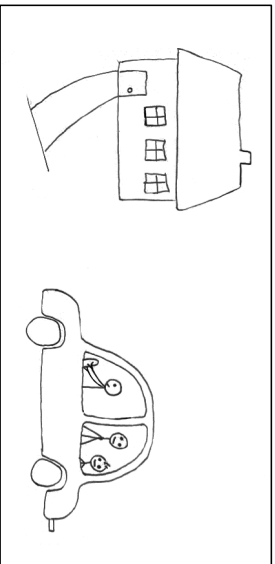
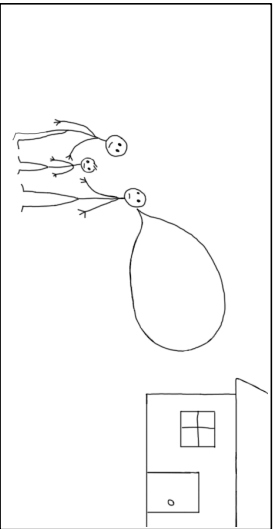
The casework that is required when a child is removed from their parents' care or an immediate safety plan is being developed can be incredibly taxing for caseworkers (in both time and emotion). Sonja has developed a number of 'Immediate Story' templates so that an 'Immediate Story' can be developed for a family with a minimum amount of work. These templates can be tailored to suit each family by changing a few details or adding personal information.

Templates have been developed for a number of scenarios:

- When a child is being removed from their parents' care and going to stay with foster carers.
- When a child is being removed from their parents' care and going to stay with relatives.
- When an immediate safety plan has been developed that leads to significant changes in the family (eg. one parent moving out, another family member moving in, etc).

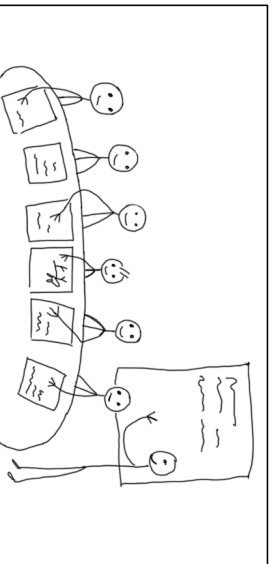
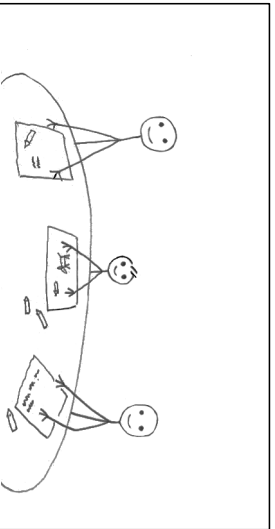
Case Example (for a 5 yr old child who is being taken into care):

Immediate Story for Max



My name is Sonja and I work for the Department for Child Protection. Our job is to help parents and families look after their children and keep them safe. Mum and Dad have got some big problems at the moment and my boss and I are worried that you might get hurt if you keep living with Mum and Dad. So we have decided that you can't stay with Mum and Dad until those problems get fixed up.

We have special people who look after children when they can't stay with their Mum and Dad and they are called foster carers. I am taking you to stay with two of our foster carers, who are called David and Tracy. We know that this might be scary for you, so can I show you some pictures of Tracy and David and of their home where you will be staying?

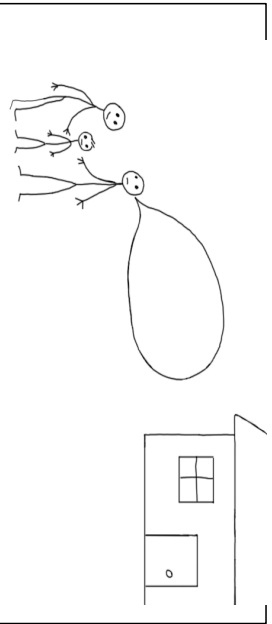


I will come back and see you tomorrow and then we can talk about what is going to happen next. We will make some plans about when you are going to see your Mum and Dad and how we can make sure that you are safe during your visits with Mum and Dad.

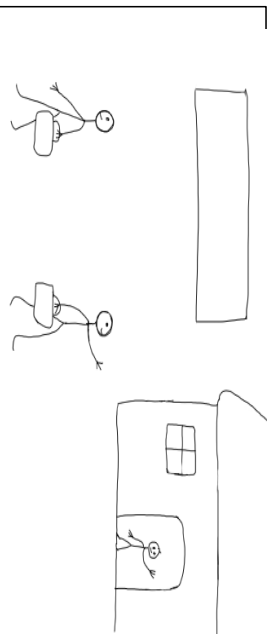
My job is to try to help Mum and Dad fix up the problems so that you can go back home to live with them. I will ask Mum and Dad to invite other people (like family and friends) to come and work with us and help us to make a special plan, called a safety plan, so that the problems can be fixed up and you are able to go back home.

Case Example (for a 6 yr old child, with an immediate safety plan):

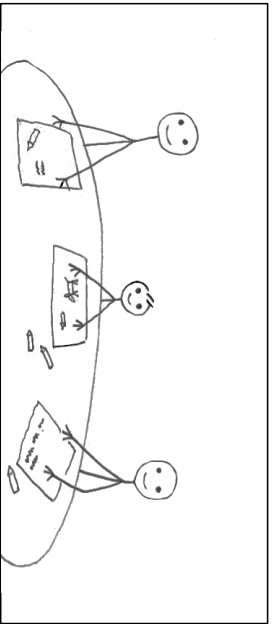
Immediate Story for Kimmy



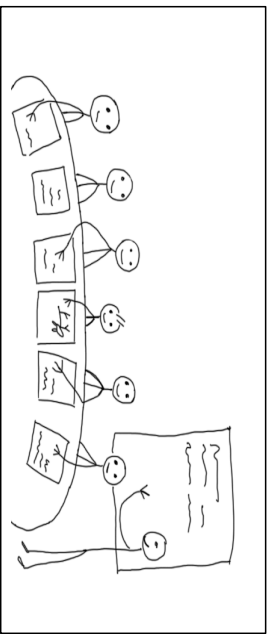
My name is Sonja and I work for the Department for Child Protection. Our job is to help parents and families look after their children and keep them safe. Mum and Dad are dealing with some big problems at the moment, which sometimes makes it hard for them to look after you and keep you safe. My boss and I are worried that you might get hurt because of those problems and so we have asked Mum and Dad to make a special plan, called a safety plan, to make sure that you don't get hurt.



The first part of the safety plan says that Dad is going to go and stay with Auntie Kerry and Grandma is going to come and stay at your house. Dad is going to stay at Auntie Kerry's until the big problems get fixed up. Dad can come home to visit, but only when Grandma is there. Mum and Dad are making this plan because they want you to be able to stay at home and be safe.



I will come back and see you tomorrow and we will look at the safety plan together and I will ask you about your ideas. We will also make a plan so that you and Dad can see each other, while he is living at Auntie Kerry's house.



I will keep visiting you all once or twice a week, to help Mum and Dad keep you safe and to talk with everyone about how to fix up the problems. I am going to ask Mum and Dad to invite other people (like Grandma and Auntie Kerry and other family and friends) to help us to make a really strong safety plan, so that the problems can be fixed up and Dad can come back home to live.

Process for using the 'Immediate Story'

1. Preparing the 'Immediate Story'

The 'Immediate Story' templates have been developed to help you prepare the 'Immediate Story' as quickly as possible and with a minimum amount of work. You can use the basic information that is contained in the template and modify or add specific details that are relevant for each family. You can use the pictures that are contained in the template or you can draw your own pictures so that they are more relevant to the particular family. Remember that the 'Immediate Story' doesn't need to contain too much information – just enough to help the child and parents understand what is happening and help the caregivers provide informed support to the child. The 'Immediate Story' provides the foundation for the collaboratively developed and detailed 'Words and Pictures' story, so the family will have a lot of opportunity to contribute to the story over time. It is helpful to put the story inside a folder with plastic inserts, so that the story can be added to as the safety planning process continues.

1.1 When a child is being taken into care

Prepare the 'Immediate Story' before the child is taken into care (whenever possible) so that the story can be read to the child (if they are old enough) as soon as possible after they have been removed from their parents' care. A copy of the story can then be left with the child and the foster carers/relative carers, so that the explanation can be reinforced with the child over time.

1.2 When an immediate safety plan is necessary

In some situations, you will know ahead of time that you are going to be working with the family to develop an immediate safety plan and at other times, it will only be during your initial assessment meeting or in the course of your work with a family that it will become clear that an immediate safety plan is necessary. If there is time for you to prepare the 'Immediate Story', then you will be able to add some information beforehand that is specific to the family and other information (such as the details of the immediate safety plan) will need to be added afterwards. You can use an ipad/tablet to add this information during your visit (in collaboration with the parents), or you can print out the 'Immediate Story' with a blank section that can be filled in by hand during your visit and then presented to the child.

In situations where you are not aware ahead of time that you will be working with the family to create an immediate safety plan, then the 'Immediate Story' will need to be prepared on your return to the office. If possible, discuss the 'Immediate Story' and the importance of the child being presented with this story with the parents (and any safety and support network people who are involved at this point) when you are meeting together to create the immediate safety plan. You can then arrange to bring the 'Immediate Story' to the parents and go through it with them, before presenting it to the child.

2. When to present the 'Immediate Story'

The 'Immediate Story' is just that – a story that is introduced to the child (and the parents) as quickly as possible to minimise any possible traumatic impact from our child protection interventions. So the 'Immediate Story' process involves presenting this story to the children and parents as close to the time of removal or immediate safety planning as possible.

2.1 When a child is being taken into care

If the removal of the child is being done with the knowledge of the parents or caregivers, then it may be possible to introduce the 'Immediate Story' to the parents beforehand and to present the story to the child before they are taken into care. In situations where the removal of the child is not able to be discussed with the parents and the child beforehand, then it is important to go through the 'Immediate Story' with the child as soon as possible – for example, in the car on the way to the carer's home, in the office before transporting the child to the carer's home. Given that the child may be highly distressed, no situation will be ideal, but try to arrange some time and quiet space to talk with the child and go through the 'Immediate Story' to help them to understand what is happening.

2.2 When an immediate safety plan is necessary

In situations where you are creating an immediate safety plan with a family, the plan may involve significant changes such the child going to live somewhere else for a period, members of the family moving out of the house or another family member moving in as a safety person. It is important that the 'Immediate Story' is provided to the child as soon as possible after the immediate safety plan is put into place, so that they are able to understand the reason for these significant changes and what will be happening in the future. As discussed in the previous section, you may not be able to present the 'Immediate Story' to the child on the day that the immediate safety plan is put into place, but it is important that this happens as quickly as possible afterwards. The more significant the changes involved in the immediate safety plan, the more important it is that the child is provided with an immediate explanation.

3. Introducing the 'Immediate Story' to the child

Place the story in front of the child and explain to the child that this story is something that you have written (and drawn) to help them understand what is happening. As you are going through the story, read each section carefully to the child and help them to look at the pictures and talk about what is happening in each of the pictures. Older children and teenagers may prefer to read the story themselves and if that is the case, make sure you still go through it with them afterwards.

Some children will want to ask questions in response to the story (see below) and some children will want to add to the pictures and/or to the story. For other children, just hearing the story will be as much participation as they are able to manage at this point.

It is useful to pause as you are going through the 'Immediate Story' to offer the child or young person the opportunity to ask questions. Some children will find it difficult to ask questions and you can help to normalise the process by saying something like:

I've explained a lot of things to you. When I've explained all of this to other kids, some kids have some questions. Do you have any questions? It's okay to ask me questions about anything at all.

And when you've finished going through the story, it's helpful to again offer the child or young person the opportunity to ask questions:

Do you have any other questions? And you can ask me some more questions when I come back to see you tomorrow if you think of anything else.

As you are going through the story, some children or young people will want to add to the story and/or to the pictures. Allow the child or young person to add whatever they want, as this process will help them both to express how they are feeling and also begin to participate in the process of talking with you about their thoughts and feelings. If the child or young person does make changes, take a photo of changes so that you have a copy and leave the original document with them.

4. Presenting the 'Immediate Story' to the parents

Although the 'Immediate Story' has been written at a level that the child can understand, it is also a powerful document to work through with the parents. Given the high level of distress and emotion that is likely to be associated with the removal of the children or immediate safety planning, as well as the other issues that parents may be dealing with, such as substance use, mental health issues, intellectual disability and trauma from earlier experiences, parents may not be able to take in or remember much of what has been talked about. The simplicity of the 'Immediate Story' can significantly help parents to make sense of what is going on and what is going to happen in the future. Leaving a copy with the parents will enable the parents to revisit the 'Immediate Story' over time.

4.1 When a child is being taken into care

After the 'Immediate Story' has been presented to the child or young person, you will then need to present the story to the parents as soon as possible and explain that this is the story that you have provided to their child. It is important to explain to parents that we have provided this story to their child as a way of helping the child to understand what is happening. If parents are in a position to be able to hear more detailed information, you can also explain to the parents that this 'Immediate Story' will help to minimise the trauma for their child.

Many parents will be very distressed and/or angry so soon after their child has been removed, so it may not be a conversation that is easy to have, but taking time to try to have this conversation and to go

through the 'Immediate Story' with the parents, can help parents understand more about what is happening – even if they don't agree with it - and then feel more able to participate in the safety planning process.

Explain to the parents that the safety planning process will involve working together to create a more detailed 'Words and Pictures' story for the child and that at this early stage, the 'Immediate Story' is just a brief and simple explanation for the child. Ask parents if there are any important comments or information that they would like to add to the 'Immediate Story'. Explain to the parents that they don't have to agree with the child protection agency's views and that comments from the parents that say that they don't agree can be included. Some parents will want to add their comments and voice to the story, whereas others will not want to do so at this point.

As discussed in point 2 above, if the removal of the child is being done with the full knowledge of the parents, then it may be possible to introduce the 'Immediate Story' to the parents before going through it with the child. If this is the case, parents may be able to suggest changes to the language that will be more appropriate for their child and may want to add to the story, as discussed above. If the parents want to be with you as you present the story to the child, then you will need to ensure that the parents understand the importance of the story and that they will support the explanation being provided to the child. The parents don't need to agree with the story, but they need to be willing to allow you to provide this explanation to the child.

4.2 When an immediate safety plan is necessary

In situations where an immediate safety plan is being put into place, it will often be possible (and preferable) to talk through the 'Immediate Story' with the parents before it is presented to the children. As discussed above, parents can add their comments to the 'Immediate Story', but for some parents, just going through the 'Immediate Story' with you will be as much as they can manage at this stage. Either way, let parents know that part of the safety planning process will involve working together to create a more detailed 'Words and Pictures' story for the child.

If the parents want to be with you as you present the story to the child, then you will need to ensure that the parents understand the importance of the story and that they will support the explanation being provided to the child. The parents don't need to agree with the story, but they need to be willing to allow you to provide this explanation to the child.

5. Presenting the 'Immediate Story' to foster carers and relative carers.

Presenting the 'Immediate Story' to the foster carers or relative carers will assist the carers to provide informed support to the child. One of the common challenges in child protection work is that there is often not a commonly understood story in the beginning about why the child has come into care or why

an immediate safety plan is needed, and so the child receives either different explanations from different people or is given no answer or a partial answer in response to their questions. Foster carers and relative carers frequently don't know what to say in response to the child's questions or are worried about saying the wrong thing. While the 'Immediate Story' doesn't contain a detailed explanation and doesn't include the parents' views, it does provide foster carers and relative carers with a simple explanation that they can reinforce with the child about what is happening and what will be happening next.

If you are introducing the 'Immediate Story' to the child or young person after you arrive at the carer's house, then the foster carer or relative carer can sit with you and the child as you go through the story. If you have presented the story to the child prior to arriving at the carer's house, then you can go through the story again with the carers and include the child in this if possible. Going through the story with the children and carers together will reinforce the explanation with the child and also communicate to the child that it is okay for them to talk about these issues with their carer and to ask questions.

You will also need to leave a copy of the 'Immediate Story' with the foster carers or relative carers, so that they are able to go through it again with the child if that is appropriate, or read it again themselves to help them answer questions from the child.

6. Follow up visits with the child

It is important to visit the child again as soon as possible after the child has been placed in care (or an immediate safety plan is in place) to go back over the story with them and also to involve the child in planning what is happening next. The stress of the situation will often mean that the child isn't able to understand or remember the explanation that they were given previously.

Establishing visits for the child with their parents (and other significant family members) so that the child can receive comfort needs to happen as quickly as possible to minimise any additional trauma for the child. Removing a child from their parents is an extremely stressful situation and can be traumatizing for a child, and the child can 'freeze' all feelings. This may also be the case in situations of immediate safety planning where the child goes to stay with someone else or one of the parents/family members needs to move out of the house.

To be able to cope with such a stressful experience, children need an attachment figure to regulate that stress for them. In child protection situations, allowing the parents to provide comfort to the child may seem contradictory because we are trying to protect the child from the parents' behaviour, but in a lot of cases (not all) the parents are also the most important source of comfort and so establishing safe contact as quickly as possible can allow for this comfort to be provided to the child. For the child to be able to learn to trust and be comforted by the new carers over time, the child's attachment system

needs to be activated and it is contact with the biological parents that can activate the child's attachment system and 'defrost' the child.

The Safety House tool can be used with the child to help them participate in planning for safe contact with their parents. Involving the child in planning for safe contact will help them to understand more about the safety planning process and begin to be able to participate in meaningful ways.

As the safety planning process with the family continues, make sure you regularly come back to the child to help the child understand what is happening and to find out their views on how things are progressing. And working with the child over time will also make it more possible to develop a relationship of trust with the child, which may mean that over time they feel more confident in asking questions and sharing thoughts and information that they may not have been ready to talk about in earlier conversations.

Change of Placement

A version of the 'Immediate Story' can also be used to minimise the confusion and possible trauma for a child as a result of a change of placement.