

## **SIGNS OF SAFETY SUMMARY**

The development of *Signs of Safety* began in the 1990's drawing on solution-focused therapy and the direct experience of effective practice by child protection workers and the experiences of families. It is now a comprehensive and mature approach being implemented in over 100 jurisdictions in 17 countries around the world.

*Signs of Safety* continues to evolve within its core framework reflecting innovation by child protection workers in the international *Signs of Safety* community, the experiences of families and adaption in varying jurisdictions.

Jurisdiction wide implementations have highlighted the role of *Signs of Safety* in transforming not only child protection practice but also the child welfare organisations, as policy, learning and leadership are aligned to the approach.

### **DESCRIPTION OF SIGNS OF SAFETY PRACTICE**

*Signs of Safety* is an integrated framework for how to do child intervention work - the principles for practice; the disciplines for practitioners' application of the approach; a range of tools for assessment and planning, decision making and engaging children and families; and processes through which the work is undertaken with families and children, and including partner agencies.

*Signs of Safety* practice returns child intervention to being the catalyst that initiates behavior change by families.

### **Principles - underpinning the approach**

#### ***Working relationships are fundamental, with families and other professionals***

Relationships must be forged and maintained in the face of the coercive nature of child protection intervention, biases towards pre-judgment of families and different perspectives of professionals.

#### ***Stance of critical inquiry - always being prepared to admit you may have it wrong***

As Eileen Munro observes, "the major source of error in child protection is not being prepared to admit you may have it wrong". Child protection investigations need to take a questioning approach and remain open minded. They cannot be the formulation of a hypothesis and fitting the evidence to support that hypothesis.

#### ***Landing grand aspirations in everyday practice***

Families and front line practitioners are the arbiters of whether practice works. This "practice led evidence" has informed the development of *Signs of Safety* and continues to be the engine of learning for practitioners and to drive innovation and evolution of the approach.

## **Disciplines – guiding workers’ behavior and application of the approach**

***Clear distinction between past harm*** (the harm that has actually occurred, not what we are frightened about), ***future danger*** (on the basis of the past harm, what child protection authorities are worried could occur if there is no change in the families’ behavior), ***and complicating factors*** (the circumstances of the family that lie behind the neglect or abuse, most commonly such as mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse and family violence).

***Clear distinction between strengths*** (positive aspects of the family such as their love for the children) ***and protection*** (actual behaviors that demonstrate a capacity to protect the children, such as removing dangerous adults from the household, or occasions when the parents felt as if they could but did not harm the child).

***Plain language*** that can be readily understood by families, in all verbal and written communication.

***Statements focusing on specific observable behaviors***, avoiding meaning laden, imprecise and poorly understood labels and diagnostic descriptors.

***Skillful use of authority***, using the statutory authority of child protection but giving families choices about how to work with authorities and finding ways that work for them.

***Assessment is always a work in progress***, although this cannot preclude taking action.

### **Tools**

***Assessment and planning*** tools are used for “mapping” the complicating factors, with the past harm and future danger in succinct statements, the existing strengths and safety, and the required safety, all in plain language. There are various versions internationally but all encompass the four domains for enquiry:

The “***three columns***”:

- What we are worried about (past harm, future danger, complicating factors)
- What is working well (existing strengths and existing safety)
- What needs to happen (family and child protection authority safety goals and next steps for future safety)

And the **scaling question** to make judgments about how safe the child is, from the perspective of the child protection authorities, the family, their networks and other professionals, to bring the case to judgment, develop understanding between the parties and to drive change.

Within these domains of enquiry are the risk assessment analysis categories that involve defining the harm, outlining the danger, identifying existing safety and defining safety goals to address the danger statements, all in succinct plain language.

When we think about the situation facing this family:		
What are we Worried About?	What's Working Well?	What Needs to Happen?
HARM	Existing strengths	SAFETY GOALS
DANGER STATEMENTS	EXISTING SAFETY	Next steps
Complicating factors		

On a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means everyone knows the children are safe enough for the child protection authorities to close the case and zero means things are so bad for the children they can't live at home, where do we rate this situation? (If different judgements place different people's number on the continuum).

0 ← → 10

Tools for **engaging children**, bringing the child's voice into the assessment, and most critically as a catalyst for change, to the family. The **three houses** (good things, bad things, dreams) is a child's version of the three columns to capture their experience.

**Words and pictures explanations** are used for parents to explain what has happened and what is happening to the children, and if applicable, set out the safety plan. Words and pictures serve as both the explanation that children need to understand their situation and as a catalyst for change for families.

There are variations and additions based on these core tools that have been developed by practitioners to suit specific needs and cultural settings.

**Processes**

Child protection practice is rarely linear and never formulaic as the principles and disciplines illustrate. Notwithstanding this reality, the core processes of *Signs of Safety* practice involve the following elements set out in a logical order:

- Mapping the assessment and plan, doing so with the family and in time with their network (extended family, friends and professional agencies with whom the family is engaged and who share a concern for the children).
- Being as committed to identifying what is working well - and identifying the strengths demonstrated as safety, the 'signs of safety' - as being clear about the worries.
- Narrowing the key factors and conclusions into succinct and clear statements of past harm and future danger.
- Making a judgment about how safe the children are.
- Building a safety plan from safety goals and actions that address the danger statements.
- The safety plan drawing on a safety network comprising particularly extended family and friends, and also professionals.
- Engaging the children, both bringing their voice into the assessment and parents explaining to them what is happening.

## **RESEARCH EVIDENCE AND STUDIES**

Qualitative and quantitative evaluation and research, and administrative data from implementing jurisdictions around the world, consistently indicate the following outcomes:

- Families feel more empowered and are more able to understand and address the concerns and requirements of child protection authorities.
- The number of children removed from families reduces relative to the number of families with whom authorities work more intensively to build safety around the children.
- Practitioners report greater job satisfaction due to the clarity of the approach, the usefulness of the tools and the impact for the children and families.

In considering these outcomes it is important to remember that the goal of practice is to improve children's safety not to keep families together as an end in itself.

The evidence and theory base for *Signs of Safety* has developed substantially within action research, collaborative and appreciative inquiry, or broadly "practice based evidence", and means the approach is built from what is probably the strongest single knowledge base of what works in actual child protection practice (see for example: Christianson, and Maloney, 2006; Teoh et. al., 2003; Turnell 2004; 2006; 2007; Turnell and Edwards, 1997; 1999; Turnell, Elliott and Hogg 2007; Turnell and Essex, 2006; 2013; Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran 2008; Turnell, Vesterhauge-Petersen and Vesterhauge-Petersen, 2013). The *Signs of Safety* community has also begun to publish on effective leadership and implementation (see Turnell, Munro and Murphy, 2013; Australian Centre of for Child Protection, 2014 in press).

The significant quantitative practice data sets and research undertaken or underway since the 2000s include:

- Minnesota, USA outcomes - Casey Family Services and the Wilder Foundation <http://www.wilder.org/Search/Pages/Results.aspx?k=signs%20of%20safety>
- Ontario, Canada - *The use of mapping in child welfare investigations: A strength-based hybrid intervention* (Versanov, *Child Care in Practice* in press 2014)
- England - The NSPCC studies (DSCF 2009; Gardner, 2008) summarized in Turnell 2012 and NSPCC 2013
- Netherlands – outcomes study by TNO and ZonMw – more information at <http://www.signsofsafety.net/signs-of-safety-research/>

Two major research efforts are underway that will inform the development of meaningful measures of practice and its impact for both performance management in organisations and outcome research:

- Fidelity measures - Casey Family Programs through an international program, including Alberta, is developing measures for families, workers, supervisors and leadership <http://sofs.s3.amazonaws.com/downloads/131207%20The%20Signs%20of%20Safety%20Fidelity%20%20Research%20Project%20S%20of%20S%20Website.pdf>
- Theory of change (results logic) - Australian Centre of for Child Protection (ACCP), University of South Australia, research is defining the essential elements of practice leading to the outcomes for children and families <http://www.signsofsafety.net/2920-2/>

## IMPLEMENTATION

“Implementing a practice framework, *Signs of Safety*, is fitting a complex social system into a complex social system” (Munro echoing Pawson 2006).

Implementation science indicates that a persistent and comprehensive approach is required for effective implementation. While outcomes are apparent quickly, widespread and sustainable adoption and outcomes take time. Experience implementing the *Signs of Safety* suggests the following key components of implementation:

- **Structural arrangements** including a project plan (for multiple years), effective project management and governance, core documentation, and over time aligning all policies and procedures with *Signs of Safety*, and continuing review and implementation planning.
- **Learning strategies** including basic training for practice staff and advanced training and coaching for supervisors, and over time deliberate workplace based strategies, and aligned individual and group supervision.
- **Leadership imperatives** including a clear and explicit organisational commitment to *Signs of Safety*, and over time strong, visible and engaged senior management demonstratively focussed on practice, growing organisational congruence with the approach (“parallel process”), and critically, fostering a safe organisation (building confidence that workers will be supported through anxiety, crises and contention).