

# Signs of Safety/ Wellbeing Guidance for Staff

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Based on the work of Dr. Andrew  
Turnell and Steve Edwards  
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## Origins

The Signs of Safety was developed by Turnell and Edwards who argued that traditionally child protection casework is undertaken from the perspective of risk assessment, and that given the ultimate goal is to achieve safety for the child/young person, this focus on risk is only half of the equation. The Signs of Safety Approach seeks to balance the equation by eliciting the existing strengths, safety and goals of the family/extended family that can contribute to better planning and achievement of safety for the child/young person. The approach promotes the careful assessment of risks and considers the ideas, competencies, existing safety and goals of the family/extended family. The approach is designed as a practical method of fostering a cooperative relationship between workers and family/extended family.

## Definition

The Signs of Safety is a strengths-based, safety-organized approach to child protection casework, created in Western Australia by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards working with over 150 front-line statutory practitioners.

The Signs of Safety model is an approach created by practitioners, based on what they know works with difficult cases. The essence of the tool is to consider the indicators of danger/harm alongside the indicators of safety and strengths and then make an overall judgment using a safety scale. The aim of the approach is to increase safety for the child/young person by using the strengths and resources that the family has to address the areas of danger or harm. This turns strengths into protective factors and over time workers will establish if these can become demonstrable 'signs of safety'.

The model has evolved since the 1990s and has been built on the experiences and feedback of case workers adopting the approach in the field. In practice the model can be used from the first stages of gathering information about an allegation through to case closure and has broad applicability to child protection work. There is no set period of intervention and it can range from a number of brief sessions to long term work with clients. The model has also been used widely in early intervention work and its application in practice extends beyond child protection.

Benefits of the approach include:

- Parents are clearer about what is expected of them and receive more relevant support
- The approach is open and encourages transparent decision making
- Professionals are required to be specific about their concerns
- Encourages better presentation of evidence
- Acknowledgement of strengths and focus on how to achieve better outcomes

## The Tools

### Signs of Safety Framework/ Case Mapping

Case Mapping is a tool within the Signs of Safety/ wellbeing approach to case management. It is a one page assessment.

*"Completing a case mapping is, in the end, simply a process of creating a map of the circumstances surrounding a vulnerable child, as with all maps, the Signs of Safety map needs always to be seen as a mechanism to arrive at a destination".*

At its simplest this framework can be understood as containing four domains of inquiry:

1. What are we worried about? (past harm, future danger and complicating factors)
2. What's working well? (existing strengths and safety)
3. What needs to happen? (future safety)
4. Where are we on a scale of 0 – 10 where 10 means there is enough safety to close the case and 0 means it is certain the child will be harmed

#### How to use the SOS Framework/ Case Mapping

Above all else, the Signs of Safety is a questioning approach and meaningful mapping can only be achieved when workers are asking good open questions that get to the heart of the issues.

The Signs of Safety Framework is a 'map' for setting out and organizing information. It is important when 'mapping' that the following is adhered to:

- Information is jargon free
- Straight forward, understandable statements are used
- Statements focus on specific, observable behaviors rather than vague statements based on interpretation that fail to give a 'sense' of the real situation (e.g. when the family play card games together, Joe is not allowed to join in and when they go on holiday he stays with his grandma rather than Joe is scapegoated in the family).

## Ears Process

Information is obtained using the EARS process- turning questions into conversations:

- **Elicit**  
What are you worried about?  
What's working well?  
What needs to happen?
- **Amplify** – behavioural detail  
When has that happened? How often? How do you know? EVIDENCE  
How do the concerns affect the child?  
When has that good thing happened? How often?
- **Reflect** – meaning/why?
- **Start over** – Are there any other worries that we have missed?  
Are there any other good things happening in this family that we have missed?  
Are there any other important things we have missed in the plan?

In order for the worker to gain an understanding of the family situation the information is organized onto the 'map' according to whether they represent:

- **Harm** - Action/behaviour- who did what, where, when, how and how do we know?  
Severity- How bad is the harm/concerns; acuteness; seriousness; gravity?  
Incidence- How often? What was the first, worst and last instance?  
Impact- What was the impact on the child/young Person?

Always make sure that questions are asked that make explicit how the issues are affecting the children. For example, the worker might say that the house is a mess with rubbish everywhere and that both parents are using drugs and have drug dealers visiting the house, but the crucial issue is how are these things causing harm or creating a danger for the children and what are we seeing that tells us the children are being harmed by these behaviours.

- **Complicating factors** – What have you seen, observed, heard or know that makes addressing the worries for the future more difficult to ascertain?
- **Strengths** – strengths demonstrated as protection (in relation to the danger) over time  
Action/behaviour who is doing what for the child/young person where and when that reduces the harm/worries how do we know?  
Incidence- How often? What was the first, best and last time that these actions/ behaviours occurred? Who, where, and when?

The worse the problem, the higher the risk situation for the child, the more vital it is that professionals identify meaningful strengths. Finding these positives (no matter how small) gives you something to honour family

members with and engage them with, which creates hope and a foundation on which it is possible to talk about the hard things.

- **Safety-** What's working well?  
What strengths have been demonstrated as protection over time relative to the future danger/concern and equate to the safety of the child/ young person.
- **Scaling** Given the danger/concerns and safety information on a scale of 0-10, where 0 means recurrence of similar or worse danger/concerns is certain and 10 means there is sufficient safety that has been demonstrated over time to address the future danger/concerns. Who rates where and why?
- **Danger Statement** – Who is worried about whose behaviour and what is the possible impact on the child/young person?
- **Plan-** What needs to happen?  
Agency goals: What will the agency need to see occur to be willing to close this case?  
Family goals: What does the family want generally and regarding the danger/concerns?  
Next steps; who needs to do what and when as a next step forward to reaching the goals?

The plan must be constructed relative to clearly identified and commonly understood worries.

- It must describe a set of specific behaviours that address the worries.
- It must be developed, refined over time.
- It must involve everyone in the family and as wide a family network as possible.
- It is important to not assume a professional being involved is a positive unless a clear description can be made of what specific benefit each professional is contributing to the family and for the child's safety and wellbeing.

## Three Columns

This second, 'three columns' alternative should not be seen as a different framework to the earlier one – it is simply a different version of the same framework. The first provides a more formal structure and is more suited to court and more formal contexts. It is also more appropriate when making a careful assessment of high-risk cases since it immediately points workers and supervisors toward a careful exploration of danger and harm. The three columns variation is usually easier to use at initial investigation with parents and with whole families. The three column version has the added advantage that it functions well as a strategic planning tool providing a very clear and focused map for reviewing practice management.

## Tools Involving Children

Alongside these two versions of the Signs of Safety framework, several additional versions of the same framework have been created that are specifically designed for use with children and young people, including:

- The Three Houses Tool
- Wizards and Fairies Tool
- The Safety House Tool
- Words and Pictures

## The Three Houses Tool

The Three Houses Tool was first created by Nicki Weld and Maggie Greening from New Zealand. The method takes the three key assessment questions of the Signs of Safety framework, (What are we worried about? What's working well? What needs to happen?) and locates them in three houses to make the issues more child-friendly.

### How to use the Three Houses

- Wherever possible, inform the parents or carers of the need to interview/meet the children, explain the three houses process to them and obtain permission to interview/meet the children.
- Make a decision whether to work with the child with/without parents or carers present, or whether another known trusted adult should be present
- Explain the three houses to the child using one sheet of paper per house
- Use words and drawings as appropriate and anything else useful to engage child in the process
- Often start with 'house of good things' particularly where child is anxious or uncertain
- Once finished, obtain permission of the child to show to others – parents, extended family and professionals. Address safety issues for child in presenting to others.
- Present the finished three houses assessment to the parents/ caregivers, usually beginning with 'house of good things'.

## When to use the Three Houses

The importance of involving children in their assessments and plans and ensuring they have a voice cannot be overstated. The Three Houses and the Wizards and Fairies tools give a way of eliciting the child's view on 3 key areas:

1. What are you worried about?
2. What's working well?
3. What needs to happen?

In short, this is a useful tool that has been proven over time in a variety of settings around the world and can be used with children of almost any age. The decision, however, of when to use it and with which children is down to the professional judgment of the caseworker.

## **The Wizards and Fairies Tool**

Vania Da Paz, a child protection worker from Rockingham, Western Australia, developed a very similar tool that serves the same purpose as the three houses tool but with different graphic representation. Rather than three houses, Vania explores the same three questions using the drawing of a fairy with a magic wand or a wizard figure.

## **The Safety House**

The Safety House explores five key elements with the child:

1. What will life look like in the child's safety house and the people who will live there?
2. People who the child thinks should visit and how they should be involved.
3. People the child sees as unsafe.
4. Rules of the Safety House.
5. Safety Path: using the path to the house as a scaling device for the child to express their readiness to reunite or safety in the family.

Undertaking the Safety House process with children should be done with full knowledge of the adults and with the children fully aware the parents are working with 'safety people' to create a new set of rules for their family so everyone knows the children are happy and safe. This creates a context where the child's safety house can readily be brought to the parents and network and their ideas contribute directly to growing the plan. This also underlines for the parents and network that the people they are ultimately most accountable to is not the statutory authorities but the children themselves.

## Words and Pictures

Turnell and Essex (2006) describe a 'Words and Pictures' explanation process for informing children and young people about serious child protection concerns and a safety planning method that both involves and directly speaks to children. The following illustrations are one example of each (both excerpted from Turnell and Essex, 2006). The examples are presented to give a feel for age-appropriate explanations and safety plans that locate children in the middle of the practice picture and do this without trivialising or minimising the seriousness of the child protection concerns.

The 'Words and Pictures' method also offers a powerful method of creating a meaningful explanation for looked-after children and young people who are typically very confused or uncertain why they have come into the care system. One example of this adaptation of the words and pictures method can found in Turnell and Essex, 2006, pp. 94-101.

### **Straightforward access safety plan in case where sexual abuse was substantiated against Father.**

1. *Daddy is never to be alone with Amelia & Alexandra.*

2. *When you visit Daddy, there will always be someone else there like Rebecca, Daddy's neighbours, Dan & Carol, or Daddy's friends, Mary & Fred.*

3. *When Alexandra & Amelia go to the beach or pool with Daddy, he won't come into the water with them.*

4. *If Alexandra or Amelia need help with personal things. Daddy won't help them. Rebecca will.*

**SAFETY PLAN** for Amelia & Alexandra when they are visiting Dad so everyone knows they're safe.

Artwork by Ruby Simms-Cumbers and Sonja Parker

### Template: Signs of Safety Plan

<b>Child's Name</b>		<b>Date of Birth</b>		<b>Case Facilitator</b>		<b>Date</b>	
<b>Attendees</b>				<b>Apologies</b>			

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Danger/ Harm/ Difficulties</u></b> What are we worried about</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action/behaviour- who did what, where, when, how and how do we know?</li> <li>Severity- How bad is the harm/concerns; acuteness; seriousness; gravity?</li> <li>Incidence- How often. What was the first, worst and last instance?</li> <li>Impact- What was the impact on the child/young Person?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Family Genogram</u></b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Safety</u></b> What's working well?</p> <p>What strengths have been demonstrated as protection overtime relative to the future danger/concern and equate to the safety of the child/ young person</p>					
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Complicating Factors</u></b> What have you seen, observed, heard or know that makes addressing the worries for the future more difficult to ascertain?</p>		<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Strengths</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action/behaviour who is doing what for the child/young person where and when that reduces the harm/worries how do we know?</li> <li>Incidence- How often? First, best and last times that these actions/behaviours occurred? Who, where and when?</li> <li>Impact on child/young person- what change was made?</li> </ul>					
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Plan</u></b> What needs to happen?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agency goals. What will the agency need to see occur to be willing to close this case?</li> <li>Family goals. What does the family want generally and regarding the danger/concerns?</li> <li>Next steps. Who needs to do what and when as a next step forward to reaching the goals?</li> </ul>						
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Danger Statement</u></b> Who is worried about whose behaviour and what is the possible impact on the child/young person?</p>		<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Scale</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">0 ← ..... → 10</p> <p>Given the danger/concerns and safety information on a scale of 0-10, where 0 means recurrence of similar or worse danger/concerns is certain and 10 means there is sufficient safety that has been demonstrated over time to address the future danger/concerns. Who rates where and why?</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td>1.</td></tr> <tr><td>2.</td></tr> <tr><td>3.</td></tr> <tr><td>4.</td></tr> <tr><td>5.</td></tr> </table>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1.							
2.							
3.							
4.							
5.							

### Template: Three Columns

*This document can be used during case supervisions or to develop case thinking and discussion.*

Name

DOB

Completed By

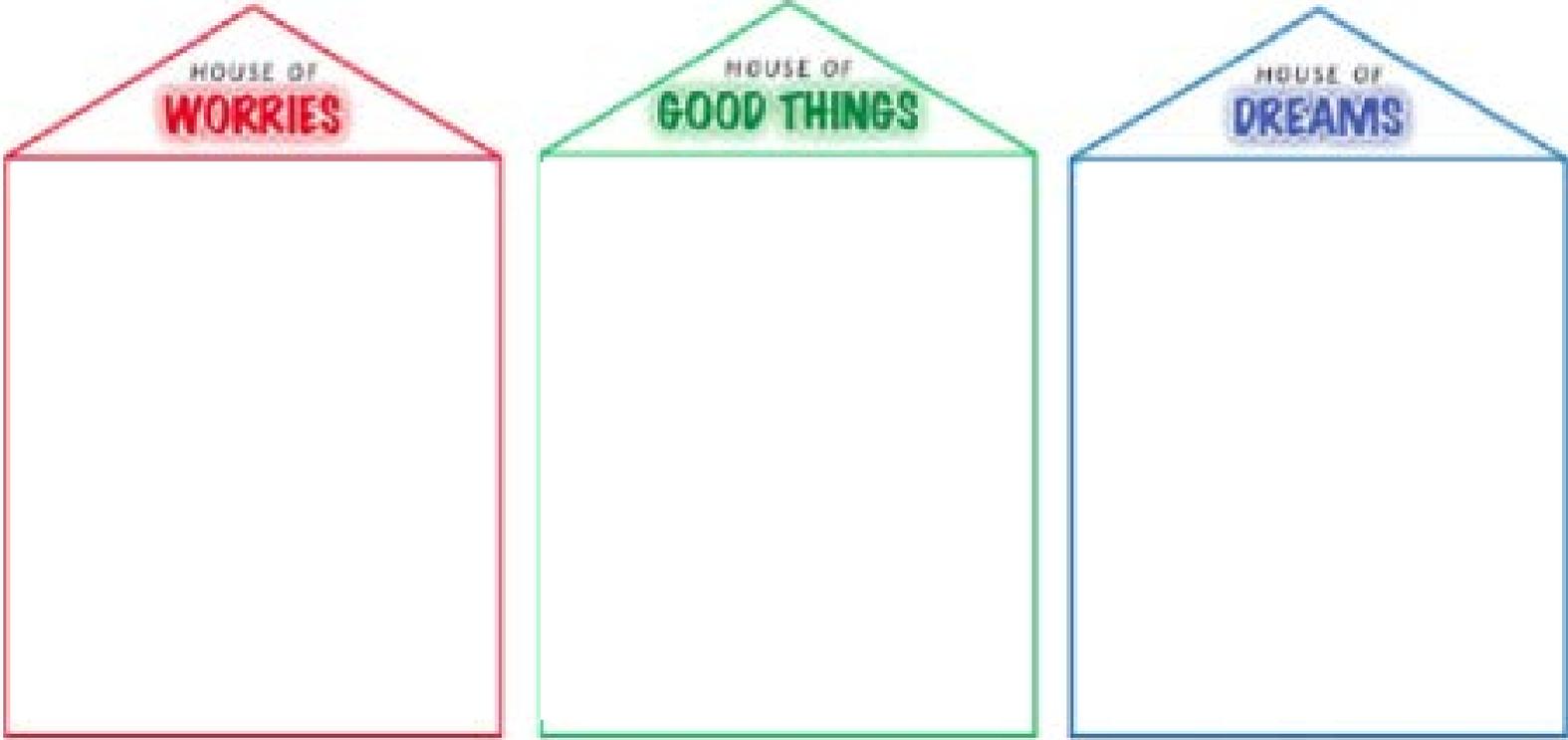
Date

What are we worried about?	What's working well?		What needs to happen?	
	Strengths	Safety	Our view	Your view

Given the danger/concerns and safety information on a scale of 0-10, where 0 means recurrence of similar or worse danger/concerns is certain and 10 means there is sufficient safety that has been demonstrated over time to address the future danger/concerns, where do we rate this situation?  
(If different judgements, place different people's numbers on the continuum)



**Template: Three Houses**



## Template: Wizards and Fairies



## Template: The Safety House

