



# Briefing in a minute

## Signs of Safety

November 2016

### **What is Signs of Safety?**

Signs of Safety [SoS] is an innovative strengths-based, safety-organised approach to child protection casework. The model was created in Western Australia by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards, who worked with over 150 front-line statutory practitioners and based it on what those practitioners knew worked well with difficult cases.

SoS is a way of working which aims for families to have the best opportunity to: create safety and wellbeing for their children with community and professional support; be rigorous in assessing risk and planning for safety of children; and to be transparent in practice.

The SoS approach seeks to create a more constructive culture around child protection organisation and practice. Central to this is the use of specific practice tools and processes where professionals and families can engage with each other in partnership to address situations where children have suffered, or are at risk of harm.

### **Signs of Safety Practice Disciplines**

1. A clear and rigorous understanding of the distinction between past harm, future danger and complicating factors
2. A clear and rigorous distinction made between strengths and safety
3. Rendering all statements in straightforward, rather than professionalised language that can be understood by service users
4. All statements should focus on specific, observable behaviours (e.g. 'Mary is not taking prescribed medication or attending appointments with the psychiatrist') and avoid meaning-laden, judgment-loaded terms (e.g. she is 'controlling', 'he is in denial', 'she's an alcoholic')
5. Skillful use of authority
6. An underlying assumption that the assessment is a work in progress rather than a definitive set piece

## Signs of Safety Assessment and Planning Framework

Assessment and planning tools are used for 'mapping' the worries, strengths and required safety. The map encompasses 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 social worker, the family, their networks and other professionals, to 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, defining the danger, identifying existing safety and developing safety goals to address the danger statements, all expressed in succinct plain language.

The SoS Safety map, setting out the four domains of enquiry and the seven analysis categories is set out below.

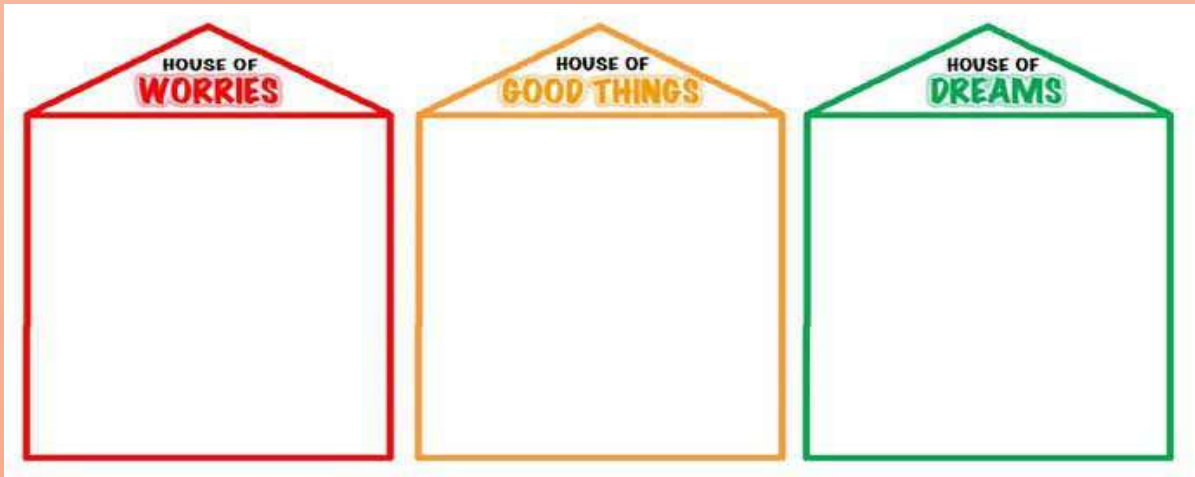
When we think about the situation facing this family:		
What are we worried about?	What's working well?	What needs to happen?
<b>HARM</b>	<b>Existing Strengths</b>	<b>SAFETY GOALS</b>
<b>DANGER</b>	<b>EXISTING SAFETY</b>	<b>Next Steps</b>
<b>Complicating Factors</b>		

On a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means everyone knows the children are safe enough for Children's Social Care 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 of the continuum)

0 ←————→ 10

## How does Signs of Safety Support us to Engage with Children?

Talking to children is at the heart of SoS. Tools for engaging children, to bring the child's voice into the assessment and critically as a catalyst for change, bringing it into the family. **The Three Houses** 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.

## The Signs of Safety Process

The core processes of SoS practice involve the following elements set out in the notionally sequential 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 those 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
- Developing safety goals that address the danger statements
- Building a safety plan with detailed actions to achieve the safety goals, drawing on a safety network comprising particularly extended family and friends, and also professionals
- Engaging the children, bringing their voice both into the assessment and directly to parents, and explaining to them what is happening

## Explanation of Key Signs of Safety Terms

### Danger Statements

- Danger Statements are a simple statement, one per worry spelling out – Who is worried? – What are they worried about? - ...and if nothing changes – why would you be worried about the child?

### Strengths

- Resources
- Good intentions
- People who care about the child or young person

### Safety Goals

- For each Danger Statement there should be a Safety Goal. These are the outcomes and should look at what we need to see to be satisfied that there is sufficient safety for us to be willing to close the case or no longer be worried
- Safety Goals are not the Safety Plan, it is what you want a Safety Plan to achieve
- Think about the words you use to start the Safety Goal to give hope to the family

### Safety

- Times when someone has kept the child safe when the danger was present

## Signs of Safety – where are we on our journey?

There is commitment to using SoS, which as solution focused model complements the current systemic approach to working with children and families within Children's Social Care.

There is therefore a clear expectation that SoS will thread through all of our practice to ensure that children and young people are safe and supported. In response we have reviewed a number of existing processes and documentation to ensure they are aligned to the model, these include strategy meetings, core groups/care teams and child protection conferences.

We are committed to ongoing training for social workers and more targeted training for Team Managers. We are developing our Practice Leads which includes them attending advanced training and are also extending the reach to partner agencies through the Newcastle Safeguarding Children Board partners.

For further information:

Signs of Safety website - <http://www.signsofsafety.net/>

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