

Signs of Safety in Orkney

Since 2010 social workers in Orkney have been using signs of safety, a systemic, solution focussed approach to child protection, assessment, planning and engagement with families. The approach is predominantly applied to child protection assessment and planning and is integral to the child's plan.

Constructive working relationships:

Between professionals and family members, and between professionals themselves.

Thinking critically:

All processes that support and inform practice foster a questioning and curious approach or 'spirit of enquiry' as the core professional stance of the child protection practitioner.

Rigour, skilfulness and greater depth of practice:

By locating it in what on-the-ground good practice with complex and challenging cases looks, smells and lives like.

Importance of risk assessment:

- The best child protection practice is always both forensic and collaborative.
- Is simultaneously forensic in exploring **harm and danger** while at the same time inquiring into **strengths and safety**.
- Brings forward clearly articulated **professional knowledge** while also equally eliciting and drawing upon **family knowledge** and wisdom.
- Is designed to always undertake the risk assessment process with the **full involvement of all stakeholders**, both professional and family.
- Is **naturally holistic** since it brings everyone, (both professional and family member) to the assessment table.

Signs of Safety Assessment:

- Maps the harm, danger, complicating factors, strengths, existing and required safety and a safety judgment (scale) in situations where children are at risk of harm.
- Is the organising map for child protection intervention from case commencement to closure.
- At its simplest contains four domains for inquiry:
 - What are we worried about? (Past harm, future danger and complicating factors).
 - What's working well? (Existing strengths and safety).
 - What needs to happen? (Future safety).
 - Where are we on a scale of 0 to 10 (where 10 means there is enough safety for child protection agencies to close the case and 0 means it is certain that the child will be (re)abused).

Key Signs of Safety disciplines:

- A clear and rigorous understanding of the distinction between past harm, future danger and complicating factors.
- A clear and rigorous distinction made between strengths and protection; 'safety is regarded as strengths demonstrated as protection (in relation to the danger) over time'.
- Rendering all statements in straight-forward rather than professionalised language that can be readily understood by children and families.
- As much as possible all statements focus on specific, observable behaviours.
- Skillful use of authority.
- An underlying assumption that the assessment is a work in progress rather than a definitive set piece.

Child Protection Conferences using Signs of Safety:

- Shifts the balance of power.
 - Significant change in the approach of chairs.
 - Importance of multi-agency ownership and engagement.
 - Requires professionals to synthesise and analyse information.
 - Develops intervention plans rather than monitoring plans – requires different emphasis and focus.
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- Chair meets family first.
 - Layout of room to help families feel comfortable.
 - Refreshments.
 - Style of chairing – active, facilitative, enabling and collaborative.
 - Succinct presentation of information.
 - Family gets opportunity to respond.
 - Clear and transparent focus on **risk**, danger, harm, complicating factors and **safety**.
 - Risk statement and genogram form part of case conference report.
 - Plan – focus on bringing about change.
 - Decision on registration last.

Safety goals and safety plans:

Safety goals - an articulation of the exact things the statutory professionals need to see to be satisfied that this children are safe.

Safety goals are what **needs** to be achieved.

The safety plan is **how** those goals can be achieved.

Requires skillful **use of authority, purposive questioning and vision-building** to motivate parents that specific safety plans can be created to get the job done.

The safety plan is an integral part of the child's plan. If a child's name is placed on the child protection register the safety plan will become the child protection plan.

Example safety goals:

“We want to tell you what we need to see to be satisfied the children are safe and also to ask you for your best ideas about what needs to happen. Should we tell you what we think first or should we look at what you think needs to happen?”

“Given that child protection are worried you will use drugs again and won’t feed and care for the baby what do you think needs to happen to show then nothing like this can happen in the future?”

The safety plan:

- Developing the rules to create safety.
- Requires a lot of thought!
- Usually requires significant behavioural change on the part of the family.
- Importance of involving a network around the family to build safety.
- Identify the issues and challenges which get in the way of creating an effective, lasting plan.
- Involve the network in solving the issues.
- Identify and monitor triggers and difficulties.

Monitoring Progress:

Create a sense of progress and achievement – so parents feel rewarded for their efforts.

The best way to secure change is for professionals to **assist parents to notice and detail their successes** and for the professionals to be positive in highlighting their efforts.

The more the professionals do this, the more the parents and the network will open up about the difficulties they are experiencing in implementing the plan.

Involving children:

- Development of tools and processes with practitioners.
- Designed to more actively involve children in child protection assessment.
- In understanding why professional intervention has happened.
- Use of words and pictures explanations.
- Child relevant safety planning.