



SIGNS OF SAFETY AS THE DEPARTMENT FOR CHILD PROTECTION'S CHILD PROTECTION PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

POLICY STATEMENT

The Department for Child Protection (the Department) utilises *Signs of Safety* as its child protection practice framework across all Departmental child protection services.

PURPOSE OF THE POLICY

The purpose of this Policy is to ensure *Signs of Safety* is integrated throughout the Department's child protection work, with the focus on applying it to child protection practice and as appropriate in other service areas.

BACKGROUND

Signs of Safety was developed in Western Australia in 1990s by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards in collaboration with child protection practitioners. *Signs of Safety* has been adopted in a number of jurisdictions internationally. The framework has and continues to evolve through the application of practice-based evidence and appreciative inquiry into practitioner and recipient defined best practice.

The *Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework* is used to determine:

- what supports are needed for families to care for their children;
- whether there is sufficient safety for the child to stay within the family;
- whether the situation is so dangerous that the child must be removed; and
- if the child is in the care system, whether there is enough safety for the child to return home.

Signs of Safety seeks to create a more constructive culture around child protection organisation and practice. Central to this framework is the use of specific practice tools and processes where professionals and family members can engage with each other in partnerships to address situations of child abuse and neglect.

Signs of Safety is implemented in conjunction with creating a culture of appreciative inquiry around frontline practice. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a process of asking questions and focusing on successful behaviours and practice. Its aim is to enhance practice depth amongst practitioners to deliver safer outcomes for vulnerable children. AI will be undertaken by all staff under the leadership of Practice Leaders in the Districts.

CORE PRINCIPLES

There are three core principles that underpin *Signs of Safety* including assessment and planning, safety planning and working with children and their families.

- 1) Working relationships – constructive working relationships between professionals and family members, and between professional themselves, are the heart and soul of effective practice in situations where children suffer abuse and neglect.

- 2) Thinking critically, fostering a stance of inquiry – as soon as the professional decides they know the truth about a given situation this begins to fracture working relationships with other professionals and family members, all of whom very likely hold different positions. The single most important factor in minimising errors (in child protection practice) is to admit that you may be wrong¹.
- 3) Landing grand aspirations in everyday practice – finding and documenting practitioner and clients’ descriptions of what on-the-ground good practice with complex and challenging cases looks like is a key to learning.

COMPREHENSIVE RISK ASSESSMENT

The purpose of using the *Signs of Safety assessment and planning form* is to generate child protection practice and decision making that is organised first and foremost around child safety.

Signs of Safety utilises a comprehensive approach to risk that:

- is simultaneously forensic in exploring harm and danger while at the same time eliciting and inquiring into strengths and safety;
- clearly articulates professional knowledge while also equally eliciting and drawing upon family knowledge and wisdom;
- is designed to undertake the risk assessment process with the full involvement of all stakeholders including children, families and professionals; and
- is holistic as it includes input from professionals and family members.



The *Signs of Safety assessment and planning form* (and the questioning processes and inquiring stance that underpins it) is designed to be the organising map for child protection intervention from case commencement to closure.

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

- 1) What are we worried about? (Observable behaviours that demonstrate harm/danger - past harm, future danger and complicating factors/missing information).
- 2) What's working well? (Observable behaviours that indicate existing strengths and safety).

¹ Munro, Eileen. (2008, p.125). *Effective Child Protection*. Sage Publications, Los Angeles. USA.

- 3) Judgement – a range of scaling questions can be asked. These should be tailored to the purpose and context of the circumstances. For example where are we on a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means there is enough safety for the Department to close the case and 0 means it is certain that the child will be (re) abused?
- 4) What needs to happen? (Immediate next steps to keep the child safe and build future safety, family goals and agency goals).

In addition, the assessment and planning form includes a section to articulate the reason for decision(s).

Specific tools for engaging children and their families (refer to the Casework Practice Manual) are used to:

- actively involve children, families and professionals in child protection assessments;
- enhance children's and families' understanding why professionals are intervening in their lives; and
- facilitate safety planning.

DISCIPLINES FOR USING *SIGNS OF SAFETY*

- 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 protection. Strengths need to be demonstrated as protection in relation to the danger, and over time.
- 3) Rendering all statements in straight-forward, rather than professionalised language, that can be readily understood by service recipients.
- 4) As much as possible all statements focus on specific, observable behaviours.
- 5) Skilful use of authority.
- 6) An underlying assumption that the assessment is a work in progress rather than a definitive set piece.

GROWING PRACTICE DEPTH

Growing practice depth in the use of *Signs of Safety* will be achieved through:

- developing the expertise, skills and knowledge of Practice Leader Facilitators;
- supporting the learning of Practice Leaders;
- integrating *Signs of Safety* training in both generic and district based learning activities;
- individual staff engaging in self-directed learning and reflective practice to enhance their expertise, skills and knowledge in applying *Signs of Safety* in all aspects of child protection casework; and
- ensuring opportunities to enhance practice depth are identified and implemented through the Reaching Forward and supervision process.

LEGISLATIVE MANDATE AND PRINCIPLES

Signs of Safety is consistent with the principles under *Children and Community Services Act 2004 (the Act)*.

The Act is the legislative basis that underpins the Department's mandate to safeguard or promote the wellbeing of children, individuals, families and communities, and to provide for the protection and care of children in circumstances where their parents have not provided, or are unlikely or unable to provide, that protection and care.

The Department complies with the principle that the best interests of the child are paramount (s.7 of *the Act*). The Department's child protection practices are guided by other sections in *the Act*.

RELATED POLICIES AND DOCUMENTS

- *Background Paper on the Adoption of Signs of Safety as the Department for Child Protection's Child Protection Practice Framework (2011)*
- *Casework Practice Manual chapter on Signs of Safety*
- *Policy on assessment and investigation processes (revised in 2011) and CPM guidelines on duty interactions and initial inquiries; safety and wellbeing assessments*
- *Policy and CPM guidelines on Neglect (2008, being revised in 2011)*
- *Policy and CPM guidelines on Child Sexual Abuse (2009)*

IMPLEMENTATION

Refer to the *Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework Review and Implementation Plan 2011-12*.

GUIDELINES

Signs of Safety tools and assessment and planning forms are in the Casework Practice Manual.

EFFECTIVE DATE

1 July 2011

REVIEW DATE

1 July 2014

OWNER

Executive Director, Policy and Learning Directorate