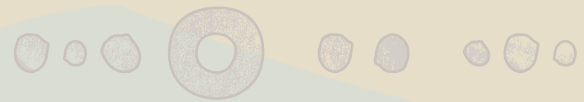




Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Communities**

# The Western Australia Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework

3rd Edition – July 2026



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# 1 Acknowledgement of Country

In the spirit of reconciliation, the Western Australian (WA) Government humbly recognises and honours the enduring presence and custodianship of the Traditional Owners of Country across WA. We acknowledge their profound connection to the land, water, and community that has spanned countless generations.

With deep respect, we pay tribute to the rich and diverse cultures of Aboriginal people, as well as the wisdom and guidance of Elders both past and present. As well as acknowledging the inspiring resilience and unwavering commitment of all Aboriginal people in preserving and nurturing their vibrant heritage.

We also acknowledge our Aboriginal colleagues, who walk beside us in this journey to change the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, and through culturally appropriate practice lead us to a future where Aboriginal children are safely connected to family and Country.





## 2 Minister's Foreword

I am pleased to present the third edition of the Western Australia (WA) Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework (the Framework), which is the core child protection framework in WA.

The safety and wellbeing of WA's children is a priority for the WA Government. The Framework affirms this and reflects our ongoing commitment to achieving the actions and targets set out in Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020.

Revisions of the Framework were informed by those with lived experience, Child Safety Practitioners, community consultations and the Framework's real-life application. I wish to thank those who have contributed to the revisions and your commitment to child safety.

Importantly, the revised Framework now includes the principle "Culture at the heart" and discipline "Culture guides practice at every step". The inclusion of the new principle and discipline supports Child Safety Practitioners across WA to walk alongside children and families as the experts in their own lives and deliver culturally responsive child protection practice. Other revisions to the Framework further strengthen trauma informed, Family and Domestic Violence (FDV) informed, accessible and inclusive child protection practice.

I am delighted to share with you the third edition of the Framework. It is not only a guide but a commitment to child safety through collaboration, curiosity and courage.

### **Hon Jessica Stojkovski MLA**

Minister for Child Protection; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence;  
Assisting the Minister for Transport; Peel.



### 3 Message from the Deputy Director General

WA Signs of Safety is the Department of Communities (Communities) core child protection Framework. Communities is committed to working with children and families who interface with the child protection system in ways that make it as easy as possible to navigate what can be a complex system. It means that no matter where a family intersects with Communities, from the north of the State to the south, families will be involved in a similar approach to promoting the safety and wellbeing of children and families, using the tools of the WA Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework. This includes discussions about Danger Statements and Safety Goals, Words and Pictures and Safety Plans. This consistent approach promotes family led child protection practice and listening to the voices and views of children, as critical elements of day-to-day work.

Over the last 18 years Signs of Safety has continued to be used and implemented across WA. It is wonderful to see the continual evolution of the Framework and innovations in practice to engage families. It is exciting to see feedback from child safety practitioners, children, young people, families and carers all who have been critical in the development of this Edition.

It has been heartening to see other agencies implementing Signs of Safety in their own right, as well as other jurisdictions nationally and internationally. Research evidence in different locations around the world continues to highlight the positive outcomes from jurisdictions who use Signs of Safety.

Communities acknowledge the courage and determination of Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards in bringing this framework to life with 150 Child Safety Practitioners through the 1990s. I have deep respect for the leaders of the day who commenced the statewide implementation of Signs of Safety in 2008.

In this 3rd Edition, I especially welcome the closer alignment to Family and Domestic Violence informed practice, the greater emphasis on culture reflected in the new principle and discipline introduced in 2025 and the strong focus on Family Finding.

I am very pleased to see the 3rd Edition of the WA Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework released and I thank all those who have contributed to the content and the examples used in this document.

I hope you will find this 3rd Edition both informative, instructive and inspirational. I continue to encourage workers to bring their best intelligence and their compassion to this work each day and to “stay at the table long enough until we understand each other better” (Wungening worker, 2025).

**Melanie Samuels**

Deputy Director General Child Protection and Family Support  
Department of Communities



## The WA Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework

The WA Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework (Framework) was developed to systematically improve outcomes for children, their families and the child protection workforce, by strengthening the focus on safety and prioritising the voices of children, parents and families to reduce risk to children.

The Framework was developed in WA and built on early work undertaken in the 1990s by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards. Based on Solution-Focused Brief Therapy and child protection practice, it was shaped on Country cared for by the world's longest continuing culture and refined by child protection Child Safety practitioners, children and families across the State, while also influencing safety focused practice around the world.

In 2008, the former Department for Child Protection and Family Support (now Communities) implemented the Framework through a rigorous process of practice learning, support and cultural change focus, which continues to the current time.

The Framework is used in all work with families at all points of child protection contact to ensure that child safety and strengthening the capacities of families, remains central to investigation, assessment, and planning. It also recognises the strengths and resources within families and their networks to help keep children safe.

In 2024, the WA Signs of Safety (WA SofS) Project commenced a three-year project to update the Framework. The Project aims to strengthen inclusivity of families with disability, be culturally responsive, FDV and trauma informed, and strengthen both the child protection workforce and service delivery. The WA SofS Project builds on the monitoring, evaluation and research findings of previous projects, while encouraging continuous learning and practice improvement that is centred in culturally responsive practice.

## Understanding practice depth<sup>1</sup>



### Practice depth

#### **Conveyor-belt practice (Ferguson, 2004), characterised by:**

responsiveness to efficiency drivers; getting cases through the system; meeting targets; speedy casework resolution; and general compliance with policy and practice guidelines.

#### **Pragmatic practice characterised by:**

compliance with policy and practice guidelines; moderate engagement with family and other agencies; efficient throughput of work; case management; and supervision.

#### **Reflective practice, characterised by:**

critical reflection on issues: principled, quality practice decision-making and interventions; depth of analysis; engagement with families and responsiveness to their needs while maintaining a child protection focus; mobilising supports and resources; and access to critical supervision.

Continuing to deepen and strengthen Signs of Safety relies on good leadership that supports child safety practitioners to engage in reflective practice. Child Safety Practitioners who are supported to ask good questions, build effective relationships with families and undertake good analysis while being child focussed are cognisant of the importance of good processes as opposed to just the final product. If Child Safety practitioners engage in practice that is procedural and compliance driven, the practice is likely to be less meaningful. In the latter kind of practice, there is more likelihood cases will be referred again back to Communities as issues have not been dealt with adequately.

Signs of Safety practice asks Child Safety practitioners and leaders to resist 'conveyor-belt practice'<sup>2</sup> and move to meaningful engagement that helps facilitate sustainable change in the lives of children and families interfacing with the child protection system.

The 2025 revision of the Framework was informed by broad consultation with child protection staff, clients, and external stakeholders, with the aim of strengthening the Framework and practice, aligning it with research findings, and deepening practice wisdom.

1 [Signs of Safety Comprehensive Briefing Paper - Signs of Safety Knowledge Bank](#), diagram by Megan Chapman and Jo Field, Child Youth and Family New Zealand.

2 The term "conveyor-belt practice" was introduced by Professor Harry Ferguson to describe child protection work at the expense of relationship based social work.

Communities is committed to the priority reform areas of Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 (the National Framework) and National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020 (the National Agreement), by recognising the needs of Aboriginal children as a specific priority. This is consistent with Communities Aboriginal Cultural Framework 2024–2034, the State Governments Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021–2029, and Communities' Strategic Plan 2026–2030.

The Framework is strongly aligned with Communities' FDV Informed Practice Approach and Safe & Together Model which focusses on strength-based partnering with FDV victim-survivors and intervening with people using violence to reduce risk and harm to the child. By framing abusive and coercive behaviours as a parenting choice and using a perpetrator pattern-based approach to understand the full impact of their behaviours on family functioning, we can more effectively promote the safety and wellbeing of children and families. The Framework should be read in conjunction with practice guidance in the Child Protection Practice Guide (the Guide), and for child safety practitioners, practice examples on the Signs of Safety Knowledge Hive [Signs of Safety Knowledge Hive - Home](#)

This 3rd Edition of the Framework replaces the 2011 Framework and the policy “Signs of Safety as the Departments Child Protection Framework” drafted in 2008 and updated in 2011.



## WA Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework – at a glance

### WA Signs of Safety Principles



**Culture at the heart**



**Working relationships**



**Thinking critically, fostering a stance of inquiry**



**Landing grand aspirations in everyday practice**

### WA Signs of Safety Disciplines

**1**

Clear rigorous distinction between past harm, future danger and complicating factors

**2**

Clear rigorous distinction between strengths and protection

**3**

Plain language that is understood by the family and carries meaning

**4**

Statements with specific, observable behaviours that avoid meaning-laden labels

**5**

Culture guides practice at every step

**6**

Skilful use of authority

**7**

Assessment is always a work in progress

### Domains of analysis

What are we worried about?

What is working well?

What needs to happen?

Scaling questions

### Tools

Signs of Safety Planning Map and Assessment

Three Houses

Appreciative Inquiry

Words and Pictures

### Processes

Safety Planning

Group Supervision

Trajectories

## 5 Children's Voices

Research shows that children and young people involved in child protection systems may feel excluded from decision-making and lack understanding about why they are involved with child protection or in care. Additionally, Aboriginal led initiatives such as the National Agreement and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, emphasise the need for participation of children and young people in shared decision making. Section 10 of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* establishes the principle of child participation, while policy and practice guidelines also emphasise the importance of listening to children, however child safety practitioners can struggle to apply this in practice due to limited tools and guidance<sup>3</sup>. Young consultants from CREATE<sup>4</sup>, an organisation for children and young people with an out-of-home-care (OOHC) experience, have also reported similar perspectives, including comments at the 2025 WA Signs of Safety Gathering;

**"Children in care deserve more than survival, they deserve pride, they deserve belonging, they deserve to grow up knowing exactly who they are because no one tried to take that away from them. To the young people in care – your voice is powerful, your voice matters. And to the people working in this space, your actions really do matter more than you think. Together we can build a system that doesn't just keep kids safe, but keeps them connected, grounded and strong."**

**Cheyenn and Valentina**  
November 2025.

Since 2004, the Framework has developed practical tools that help child safety practitioners involve children meaningfully in assessments, interventions, and case planning. These include the Three Houses Tool, the Fairy/Wizard Tool, or associated local adaptations such as Three Turtles, and the Words and Pictures approach, which empower children and young people to express their views, influence decisions affecting them, and understand those decisions in an age-appropriate way. These tools can be adapted to suit each child's individual needs, recognising their unique cultural and identity needs, as well as preferences and interests.

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3 [Children's Voices Reports Across Australia - NAPCAN](#)

4 CREATE is a uniquely Australian organisation, which provides support and a direct voice for young people in the Australian care system so they can influence governments and professionals. Round table report due for publication late 2025.

## 6 Principles of Signs of Safety<sup>5</sup>

WA Signs of Safety seeks to create a positive and collaborative culture in child protection organisations and practice by using specific tools and processes to assist professionals and families partner together to address child abuse and neglect utilising the core principles.

In 2025, Communities introduced the principal “Culture at the heart” and discipline “Culture guides practice at every step” to prioritise and emphasise culturally responsive practice to address the growing overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in OOHC.



### Culture at the heart

Culture at the heart recognises that the strength, identity and wellbeing of Aboriginal and CaLD children are intrinsically linked to their family, community, Country and cultural protocols. It centres the voice of the child in all assessments and decisions. It values extended family and kinship systems, supports self-determination, and works alongside Community leaders and Elders to collaboratively promote safety that is culturally meaningful and sustainable.

Culturally responsive practice in relation to Aboriginal people, is defined as ‘the ability to recognise cultural difference and respond respectfully and professionally in a ‘safe way’ (Aboriginal Cultural Framework 2024–2034).

Aboriginal children are overrepresented in the OOHC system in WA. To reduce the number of Aboriginal children in OOHC, the WA context has a specific State and National reform agenda with an intentional approach to culturally responsive practice, systems and services. Communities is intentionally partnering with and empowering Aboriginal people to actively participate in child protection processes and sharing decision-making including safety planning and family finding, recognising that safety for children must include strong connection to their identity, culture, and community.

As a new principle, Culture at the heart affirms the importance of child protection responses which empower families to grow their strengths. It recognises that Aboriginal and CaLD families should lead the process of creating safety for their own children and are the experts in their own lives. Communities is increasingly partnering with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and the culturally diverse community, to walk alongside families and deliver culturally safe responses to concerns for children.

Communities’ acknowledge the ongoing trauma of the Stolen Generation and Aboriginal people’s right to greater self-determination by applying culturally responsive practice with ACCOs, Elders, Community leaders and Aboriginal people with lived experience. In alignment with the Communities’ ACCO Strategy 2022–2032, the Framework elevates the importance of a tailored approach and responsiveness to the diverse needs and lived experiences of Aboriginal families.

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<sup>5</sup> [Signs of Safety Comprehensive Briefing Paper - Signs of Safety Knowledge Bank](#)

This affirms Communities' commitment of respecting, embracing and celebrating Aboriginal people, knowledge and their continuing connection to Country, culture and kin (Aboriginal Cultural Framework 2024–2034).

This principle is applicable to all cultural groups and acknowledges the importance of respecting, recognising and valuing all cultural connections as essential to an individual's wellbeing and identity.



## Working relationships

Genuine, constructive relationships between families and professionals are essential to effective child protection practice. A growing body of research highlights the need for collaborative and constructive relationships between all parties to achieve best outcomes for vulnerable children, individuals and communities.

In child protection practice, building effective working relationships recognises and addresses the power imbalances that exist between families, professionals, and government agencies.

It is especially important to acknowledge the significant role of government in the lives of families, as well as the historical and ongoing impacts of child removal practices in Australia—particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Acknowledging this context and intergenerational history directly shapes how trust is built and how families experience the child protection system today.

Meaningful relationships allow us to engage with the complex, lived realities of parents, children, and carers, while also recognising the pressures and emotional demands placed on workers themselves. By holding space for these complexities, Child Safety Practitioners can foster relationships that prioritise safety, respect, and genuine partnership.

Families should be supported to fully participate in the planning for their children. For this to occur barriers to participation need to be identified and addressed. Ways to do this include:

- using families' preferred communication approach,
- using professional interpreters when English is not a first language,
- using Easy Read<sup>6</sup> material or Blurred Borders cards<sup>7</sup>, and
- tools or other adaptations which are adjusted according to the needs of the family.

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6 [Easy Read](#) is a Developmental Disability WA initiative.

7 [Blurred Borders](#) was created by Legal Aid WA as part of the Blurred Borders Project



## **Munro's maxim: thinking critically, fostering a stance of inquiry**

Critical thinking is essential in child protection practice, enabling child safety practitioners to identify and challenge assumptions and biases, and develop effective interventions and solutions. Child protection practice operates in a complex environment where professionals face pressure to establish definitive versions of the truth. Research highlights that once child safety practitioners adopt a fixed position, this can damage relationships with families and colleagues and limit the ability to critically evaluate new information. Eileen Munro's work emphasises that reducing error in child protection practice depends on child safety practitioners acknowledging the possibility of being wrong. Effective practice leadership therefore requires fostering a culture of critical reflection and inquiry, discouraging rigid truth claims, and promoting openness to multiple perspectives throughout assessment and decision-making processes.

Enacting Munro's maxim requires that all processes supporting and informing practice foster a questioning approach or a spirit of inquiry as the core professional stance for child safety practitioners. This highlights the need for individual and group supervision to identify and address confirmation bias, consider power imbalance, critically evaluate evidence and promote sound professional judgement through shared decision making and transparency with all stakeholders.



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

WA Signs of Safety has been developed alongside child safety practitioners to ensure child protection leadership and practice are informed by real practice and the experiences of families. In the face of the complexity of challenges faced by families, and the seemingly insurmountable barriers to overcome, this principle reminds us to hold hope for children, families and communities, and to demonstrate this hope in each interaction we have. Hope and optimism are contagious. The hope of a Child Safety Practitioner can show children and families that their goals are reachable.

Celebrating and sharing success through learning opportunities such as Gatherings and Appreciative Inquiry, is critical in motivating and inspiring collaboration, helping us to better address our key priorities and achieve improved outcomes for all children and families.

Using this learning with a clear vision of better outcomes for all children, enables Child Safety Practitioners to hold hope, inspire family-led solutions and continuously improve how we land those aspirations, to create positive and long lasting change for families.

## 7 Disciplines of Signs of Safety

Together with the application of the principles, the disciplines of WA Signs of Safety underpin the effective use of the assessment and planning tools.

### A clear and rigorous understanding of the distinction between past harm, future danger and complicating factors.

To make informed and responsible decisions with families it is essential to clearly distinguish between three key concepts: past harm, future danger, and complicating factors.

- **Past harm** refers to substantiated harm as a result of incidents or patterns of abuse, neglect, or trauma that have already occurred.
- **Future danger** involves the likelihood of harm as a result of abuse and/or neglect will occur again if no action is taken. This is a forward-looking assessment based on current behaviours, patterns, or environmental factors.
- **Complicating factors** are conditions or circumstances that may not directly cause harm but can make it difficult to assess or manage risk and build safety. These might include parental mental health issues, substance use, or structural disadvantage. They are not inherently harmful but can obscure the clarity of a situation or increase vulnerability.

FDV is a pattern of behaviours intended to coerce, control and create fear within an intimate or familial relationship. The prevalence of FDV has risen to the degree that it is now described as a significant and devastating issue in WA. FDV<sup>8</sup> is a factor in the majority of child protection cases. It may be the primary reason for referral or a factor contributing to the presenting problem. As a result, Child Safety Practitioners assume that FDV exists within a family until it is screened out.

Screening for FDV, mapping perpetrator behaviour and impact on the adult and child victim-survivors and family functioning are critical for identifying past harm, assessing future danger and partnering with the adult victim-survivor to increase safety. Intervening with perpetrators as parents is essential to addressing the safety concerns and working towards changed behaviour that reduces the likelihood of future harm.

By recognising the cumulative harm that can be caused by experiencing multiple or repeated abuse experiences, we can partner with families to reduce the likelihood of future danger and minimise the impact of trauma through a focus on strengths and access to healing supports.

Understanding the distinctions between past harm, future danger and complicating factors helps Child Safety Practitioners respond appropriately, acknowledging past harm and mitigating future risks through safety planning, and addressing complicating factors without mistaking them for risk to child safety.

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8 [Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence](#)

## A clear and rigorous distinction made between strengths and protection.

- **Strengths** refer to positive attributes, resources, or behaviours exhibited by individuals, families, or communities. These might include emotional resilience, supportive relationships, or problem-solving skills.
- **Protection (safety)** goes a step further. It involves the **active and sustained use of those strengths** to directly mitigate or prevent the identified danger.

When partnering with an adult victim-survivor, exploring how they keep themselves and their children safe, stable and nurtured despite the perpetrator's pattern of behaviour, can identify protection over time. This can be used as a basis to develop the safety network and safety plan, while parallel work with the perpetrator focuses on identifying steps they can take towards behaviour change to build evidence of safety and strengthen protection over time.

## Plain language that is understood by and carries meaning for the family.

Communication barriers and lack of shared meaning is a crucial factor in child protection involvement and failing to achieve intended outcomes. It is critical to adapt communication to the needs of the child and family; formulating danger statements and safety goals to be written clearly with the family, strengthening a shared understanding of the risks that could occur if the behaviour was to continue. Avoiding the use of professional jargon and clearly describing expected behaviour in the language used by the family, is the best foundation for shared action. Using the language and meaning expressed by the family to identify strengths, foster shared hope, and support all involved to work towards a common goal.

## Statements that focus on specific, observable behaviours

Using specific descriptors for behaviour, strengths and safety is critical; 'She is a good mother' is far less meaningful than 'she provides a safe and comfortable home, with nurturing food and predictable routines'. Reframing judgmental language such as 'she is an alcoholic', or 'parents are in denial' to concrete behavioural statements like, 'she is drinking at least 6 cans every day', or 'the parents do not share the professionals' concerns' helps avoid implied judgement and focus on specific behaviour and impact.

Understanding how these behaviours impact the children's experience of safety or harm is then explored through the process of mapping and use of the safety scale.

## Culture guides practice at every step

We can actively put culture at the heart by engaging families in discussions about their culture, values and beliefs and how this impacts their lives and connection to community. By understanding a families' context and what is important to them, we are better able to support meaningful, realistic and sustainable safety plans. By reflectively considering the Aboriginal Cultural Framework, cultural capability continuum, and using an approach of cultural humility (an ongoing process of self-reflection combined with an openness to the beliefs, customs and values of others) we can ensure culture is at the heart of child protection work.



### Cultural Competency Continuum from Department of Communities Aboriginal Cultural Framework

Cultural responsiveness shapes child protection practice to promote engagement to respect families' background whilst prioritising child safety. Child Safety Practitioners are supported to adapt assessments, interventions and safety plans to inform practice with place-based cultural protocols. To do so, child safety practitioners learn the child's culture through direct consultation, using interpreters and consultation with Aboriginal Practice Leaders and/or the Cultural Diversity Team and other relevant cultural leaders. Safety planning is achieved through partnership with extended family, community networks and cultural continuity (e.g. language). By consulting with the Cultural Diversity Team, Aboriginal Practice Leaders, ACCO's, Elders and family leaders with cultural authority, we can encourage early engagement to foster genuine partnerships with families and test our shared understanding of what can and does work in practice.

Child Safety Practitioners recognise Traditional Owners through Acknowledgement of Country and cultural protocols when partnering with families. In intentionally seeking to establish early engagement with ACCOs, Communities foster culturally responsive service aligned with national goals of the National Agreement and the National Framework.

Ongoing reflections to explore bias are promoted to avoid assumptions and cultural blindness, ensuring assessments focus on the family's strengths and best interests of the child. Aboriginal Practice Leaders, the Cultural Diversity Team and district leadership support Child Safety Practitioners to reflect and self-assess their cultural learning, aligned with the Cultural Competency Continuum. Examples of this can be found in the Rockingham District work led by Aboriginal Practice Leader Lynley Pickett.

The discipline elevates the importance of culture for children, taking into account a child's ethnicity, spirituality and religion, and all customs and practices. It enables the delivery of practice, services and systems tailored to a families' unique context, language and culture.

## **Skilful use of authority**

Mapping or assessing child protection concerns together with family members involves some level of power imbalance, which needs to be approached skilfully. Parents who are involved with child protection often report a sense of shame and do not want other family or friends to know what the worries are, or how their child has been hurt. Helping parents to see that sharing risks with a wider safety network can support them and their child as well as highlighting consequences of not having the right support to keep their child safe, requires skilful engagement and clear articulation of why transparency is needed.

Helping the family and network to articulate their aspirations and create a pathway to hope for their future is a skilful use of authority, achieving safe enough care for the family to continue to raise their children without intervention.

Acknowledging that Communities has statutory authority to intervene in families' lives, Child Safety Practitioners need to also honour and elevate family expertise in their own lives. Communities must be open and honest about the possible consequences of ongoing danger to effectively and collaboratively safety plan with the child, family, network and other professionals.

It is critical to acknowledge the trauma and lack of trust in government for Aboriginal families which has been created by past policy and intervention.

## **Assessment is a work in progress**

The Framework seeks to create assessments which draw from a professional stance of inquiry and humility rather than a paternalistic professional stance that asserts professional expertise over families' lived experience. Change is continuous, so assessment must be continuously revised and tested based on new information to ensure plans are adapted as needed.

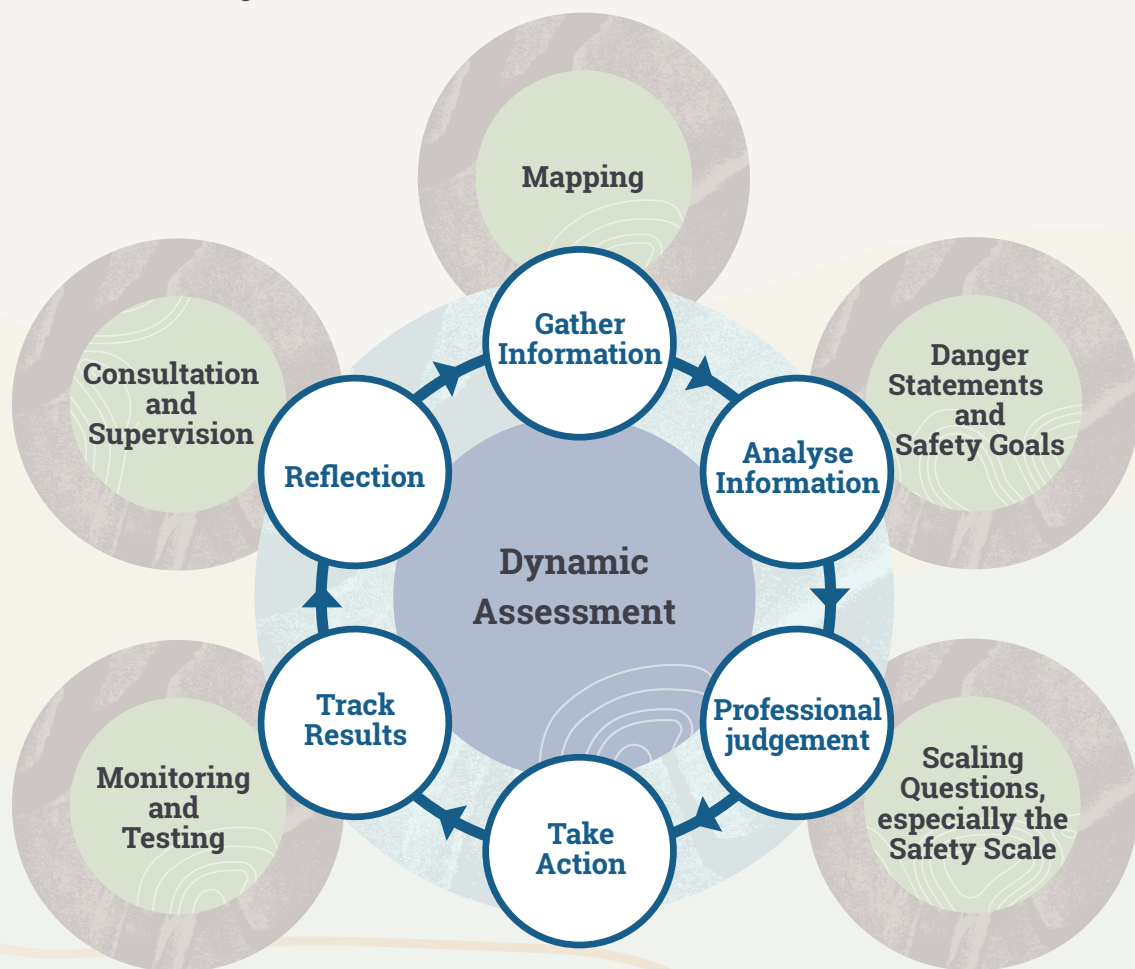
## 8 Safety focused practice

### The goal is always child safety

The Framework is designed to create a shared focus and understanding among all stakeholders including family and professionals. It is designed to help everyone think their way into and through a case from those with the most power (such as the Director General, a Judge or Child Psychiatrist) to those with the least (the child). The overarching goal is that safety for children will increase with increased insight, understanding and joint planning.

Completing a Signs of Safety assessment and planning form, is a process of creating a map of the circumstances surrounding a vulnerable child, with as much information as possible to allow effective analysis, well-informed decision making and achieving positive outcomes. The WA Signs of Safety map should always be seen as a tool to guide Child Safety Practitioners towards the destination of strengthening future safety.

The expected destination should be rigorous, sustainable, everyday child safety in the child's home or place where the child lives. Partnering with families throughout their journey by using their own language and lived experience to recognise strengths, nurture shared hope, and sustain collective commitment toward meaningful and aligned goals. It is therefore imperative that Child Safety Practitioners are equipped with knowledge and understanding of theories and methodologies which guide and assist the assessment, planning and professional judgement processes used in mapping. This is a dynamic process as illustrated in the diagram below;



Dynamic Assessment Cycle adapted from Signs of Safety® Comprehensive Briefing Paper (4th edition) Dr Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy (April 2017)

The dynamic assessment cycle illustrates that assessment is always a work in progress. Child Safety Practitioners will continue to ask questions, scale safety and review and revise thinking alongside the family, to ensure that assumptions are checked and results validated to support continued progress towards increased safety.

## Family Finding

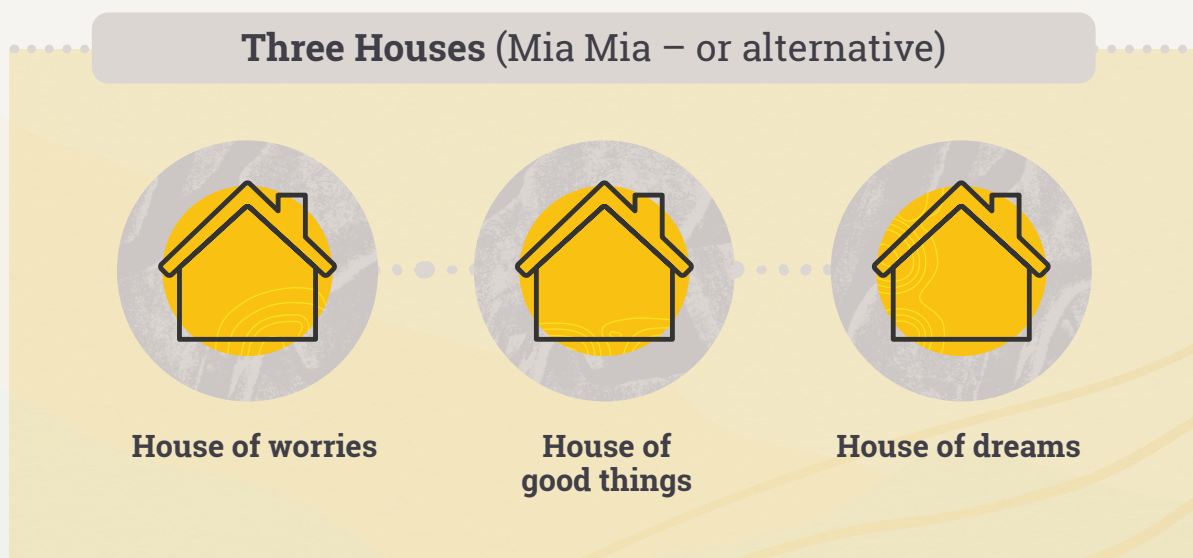
The single factor most closely associated with positive outcomes for children is having safe, meaningful, lifelong connections to family.

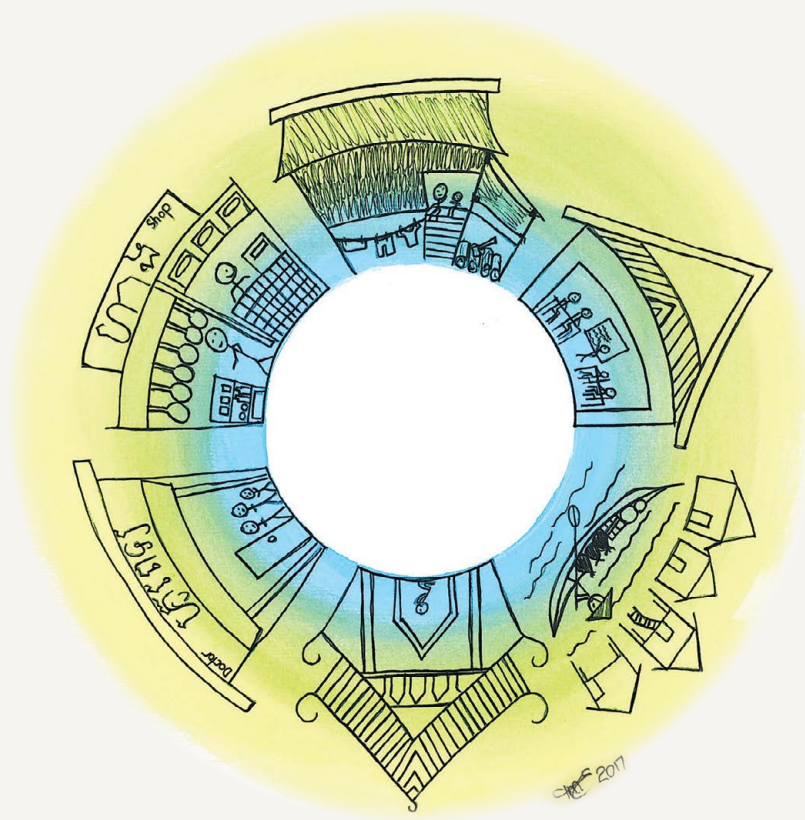
Family Finding is a values-based model, recognising children's rights used in child protection to reconnect and restore important relationships between a child and their family, culture and community. The model acknowledges harm associated with disconnection and loneliness, often reported by children, young people and adults who have an OOHC experience. Aboriginal children and families experience intergenerational trauma from historical colonisation, dispossession, structural disadvantage and racism, which can be compounded by disconnection from family. Family finding (The Guide reference: B.14) should be commenced from the beginning of Communities' involvement with children and families. It not only helps maintain or recreate lifelong connections when children have come into care, it can also help to find a safety network to keep a child safely with family.

## Tools to involve children and young people in assessment and planning.

### Three Houses tool

The Three Houses tool takes the three key assessment questions of the Framework – what are we worried about; what's working well and what needs to happen – and locates them in three houses, making the issues visual and accessible for children. Houses were initially used, but any image that is meaningful to the child and helps them talk about their worries, good things and hopes can be used.





Above: My Three Villages by Katrina Etherington

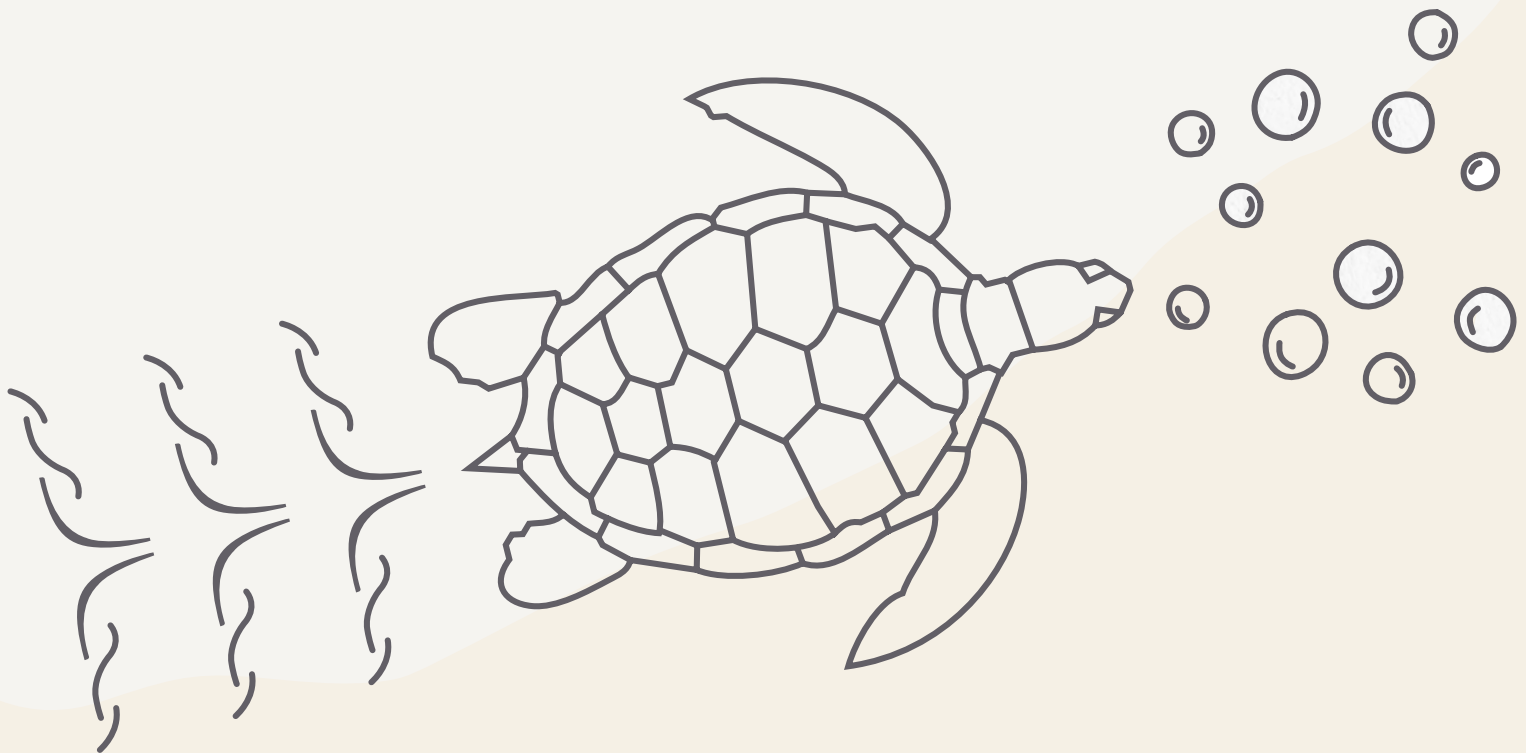
## The Fairy/Wizard and other tools

The Fairies and Wizards Tool, which serves the same purpose as the Three Houses tool, but with different graphic representation to engage children.



Fairy and Wizard by Vania Da Paz

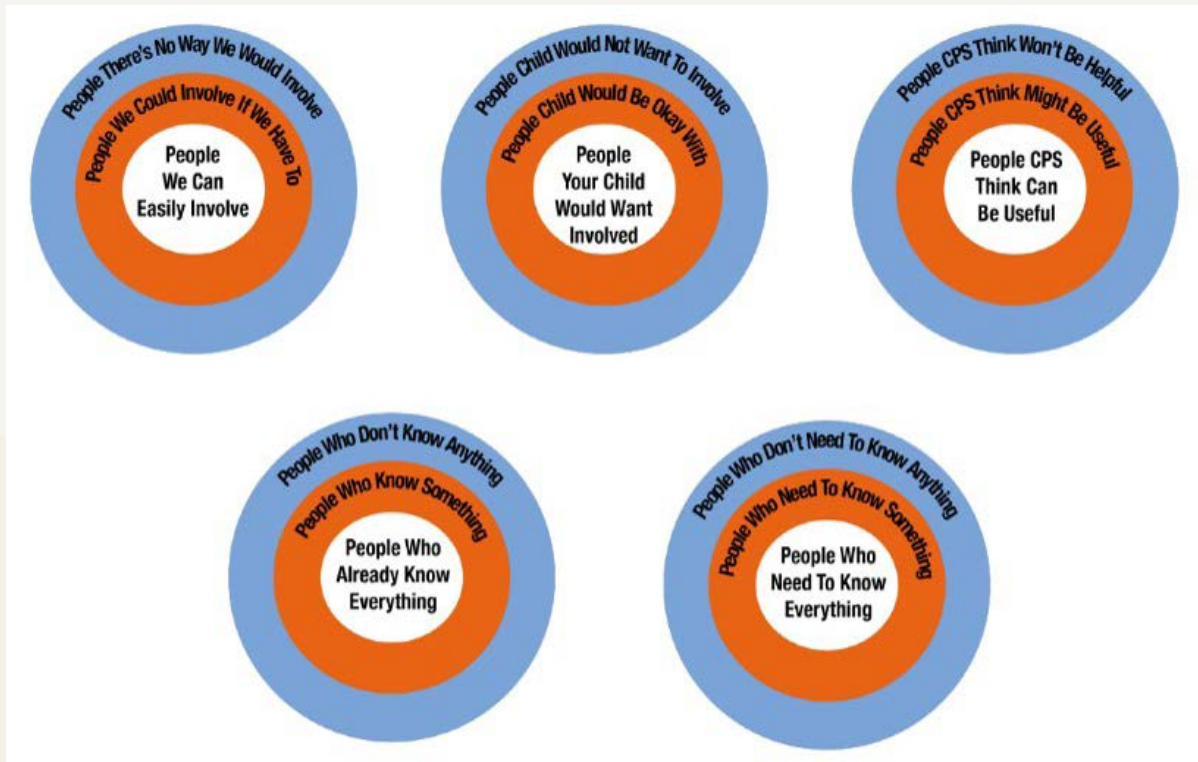
Engaging children using drawings that are meaningful to them such as animals from dreamtime stories, a serpent, an emu or a turtle, that hold meaning to them and their culture, may be appropriate with Aboriginal children.



Breakthrough opportunities can arise with parents from the use of these tools, as they allow parents to hear the children's views directly.

Another engagement tool, adapted for use with children or the whole family, is the safety circles tool.

## “Family Safety Circles” Tool



Family Safety Circles tool by Susie Essex

Examples of adapted Three Houses, Wizards and Fairies and other alternatives can be found on the Signs of Safety Knowledge Hive ([Signs of Safety Knowledge Hive - Home](#)) along with other examples and local adaptations of tools.

Other tools such as “The Story Animals” or the Protective Behaviours Safety Hand provide children with an opportunity to explore difficult conversations and feelings. These tools help identify the child’s safety network or trusted adults who know about the child’s situation and can take action to help the child feels safe. They also help children to communicate about “early warning signs” that something might be wrong or unsafe and introduce the idea of a personal space bubble, encouraging them to talk about their concerns with their safety network.

## Words and Pictures explanations and safety plans

A 'Words and Pictures' explanation is a family-led process used for helping children and families understand everyone's worries and how the family, network and professionals will work together to strengthen safety for them. It enables children and their families to process events, share an understanding of why child protection and other agencies are involved, and provide consistent language and explanations that the whole safety network can use. This process is developed collaboratively with parents and extended family and should include foster or family carers if children are in OOHC. The explanation should be reviewed and updated regularly to support the child's understanding of decisions made throughout their involvement with child protection.

### A basic structure for Words and Pictures explanation

| Title               | Who was worried about the children?                        | What were they worried about?                |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
|                     |                                                            |                                              |
| What happened then? | What are private parts?<br>(only for sexual abuse matters) | What is everyone doing<br>about the worries? |
|                     |                                                            |                                              |

Words and pictures can be used in 3 main forms,

- Short form – to share the danger statements and safety goals and reasons for Communities' involvement
- Words and Pictures safety plan – helping everyone have a shared understand of the safety plan.
- Words and Pictures for life-story work – helping children to have a clear agreed understanding of their life story and critical decisions.

## 9 Signs of Safety Mapping

Child protection practice is one of the most demanding, contested, and scrutinised areas of work within the helping professions, primarily because the focus is on society's most vulnerable children. Child Safety Practitioners must intrude on the private family domain, rarely a welcome activity, in order to assess and analyse the strengths of the family, the needs of the family and child, the safety of the child and how to best assist the family to increase the safety of the child. If the child must enter OOHC, the Child Safety Practitioner must continually review whether there is enough safety for the child to return home, to extend family, reduce supervision and support safe natural time with people important to the child.

All of these decisions are part of risk assessments, which are not a one-off event or periodic undertaking, rather it is something the worker must do constantly, during and after every contact with every family.

### **Risk assessment as a constructive practice**

WA Signs of Safety seeks to reframe risk assessment as constructive, optimistic and solution-focused; believing that change is possible, and that families have the capacity to bring about change. The Child Safety Practitioner's role is to mobilise this capacity.

Effective child protection practice should be both forensic and collaborative, requiring professionals to skilfully draw out strengths, hope, and human potential, even within circumstances where children are harmed as a result of abuse and/or neglect.

The Framework seeks to analyse both risks and safety by utilising a comprehensive approach to risk that:

- Is forensic in exploring harm and danger while eliciting and inquiring into strengths and safety.
- Combines family knowledge and wisdom with professional advice.
- Is holistic, bringing the immediate and extended family, community members and professionals to the table to share information.



Dynamic Assessment Cycle adapted from Signs of Safety® Comprehensive Briefing Paper (4th edition) Dr Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy (April 2017)

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

Child Safety Practitioners are encouraged to consider the use of communication tools to help build a clear map, including the Blurred Borders process map and stickers, and the Blurred Borders empowerment cards (for example) to support parents to express themselves in meetings if they are worried about being heard.

**What are we worried about?**

Worries related to substantiated past harm, future danger and complicating factors.

**HARM STATEMENT:**

The harm statement is a clear explanation of the past, substantiated harm to the child.

**Who** perpetrated the harm to the child.

**What** the relationship between the perpetrator and the child.

**Describe** the behaviours of the perpetrator (the abuse) and the impact of the behaviours on the child (the harm).

**Elements of a harm statement**

**Who** got hurt? (name of the child)

**What** happened? (describe the abuse)

**Who** caused the harm?

**When** did it happen? (date)

**What** was the impact on the child? (describe the harm)

**DANGER STATEMENT:**

A specific description of what Communities is worried will happen to the child if nothing changes in relation to the danger (abuse).

**Elements of a danger statement**

**Who** is worried?

**What** Communities is most worried will happen to the child if nothing changes

**What** is the behaviour of the parents they are worried about?

**Uses** plain language that is understandable to the individual, even if they don't agree, and One abuse type per draft danger statement

**COMPLICATING FACTORS:**

Behaviour, factors and situations of the family and professionals that increases the worries or makes increasing the child's safety more complicated but do not directly relate to the danger statement.

**What is working well?**

What are the existing strengths and safety that help keep the child safe from future danger?

**STRENGTHS:**

Observable behaviours that contribute to the general safety and care for the child, and

Statements or wishes indicating a willingness to change behaviours related to the harm or danger statements, which, if actioned, would increase safety for the child.

**EXISTING SAFETY:**

Specific actions the family and safety network already do, and

Situations that have already occurred that create safety for the child in relation to the danger statement.

**Safety is strengths demonstrated as protection over time**

On a scale of 0 – 10 (10 being the safety goal to 0 being the danger statement and immediate action needs to occur).

# Mapping Elements

## What needs to happen?

What does everyone need to do next to build enough safety for the child?

## SAFETY GOAL:

Clear statements about what behaviours Communities needs to see the parents doing to address the worries and be confident the child will be kept safe from harm and can close the case.

Focuses on what safety looks like, rather than how it is achieved.

## Elements of a safety goal

**Who** needs to see?

**What** are the behaviours of the parents/ caregivers that Communities needs to see (in relation to the danger) to be confident the child is safe enough.

**One** draft safety goal per danger statement.

## NEXT STEPS:

Describe the immediate next actions needed to achieve safety for the child. This includes:

**What** actions need to be taken/ information needs to be gathered.

**Who** will do what.

**When** it needs to be done.

**When** will this be reviewed (next meeting).

## SAFETY PLANNING:

Describes what the parents and family will do to show the child will be safe in their care in the future.

## Safety Goals

**Communities Goals** – safety goal that states what Communities needs to see the parents doing to keep the child safe in their care.

**Family Goals** – if the family disagrees, record the family’s statement describing their goal and what they will do to demonstrate to Communities that the child is safe in their care.

## Safety Network

A group of people who have agreed to work with the parents and Communities to build a robust safety plan that demonstrates the child is safe in the care of their parents and the case can be closed.

## Safety Plan (the safety goal is what the safety plan must achieve)

The plan is developed by the safety network. Communities comes to the meeting with the following:

- Draft Danger Statement and related draft Safety Goal
- **Bottom Lines** – Communities’ non-negotiable conditions that must be met; what the safety plan must demonstrate
- And lots of questions!

The rules of the safety plan must be **SMART**.

**Specific**

**Measurable**

**Achievable**

**Relevant**

**Time limited**

## Trajectory

A detailed, reviewable step-by-step plan that shows everyone the steps involved and the expected timeframe to reach the safety scale rating of safe enough to achieve reunification/case closure.

**Who** is scaling, **What** is their score and **Describe** what needs to happen for the score to go up to the next number and what scale rating is safe enough to close the case.

## 10 Collaborative Safety Planning

Working together with the parents, children and a network of their friends, family, community and Elders (safety network) to promote child safety, requires the professionals to facilitate the safety planning process with equal measures of skilful authority, vision-building and purposeful questioning.

### Preparation

Factors impacting safety must be considered, particularly where indicators of FDV are present. Efforts to increase safety for the children should focus on partnering with the adult victim-survivor while also engaging the perpetrator to take responsibility for their pattern of behaviour and its impact on the family. The way in which family members are engaged in safety planning must be carefully considered and may need multiple discussions / meetings to ensure safety in communication. It may consider the need for family discussions facilitated by someone other than the Child Safety Practitioner, including safe family members or community leaders if chosen by the family. While cultural norms, gender roles, and familial expectations, including avoidance relationships and men's and women's business must be respected and considered, the safety of all family members remains the priority.

Signs of Safety meetings with families should include open, honest and shared discussion of risks. When inclusion of a family member may increase risk, separate meetings and clear agreements about information sharing are essential. It is important to discuss the safety plan that was developed with the perpetrator with the adult victim-survivor before finalising the plan to ensure there are no elements of the safety plan that may be related to coercive control behaviours.

Aboriginal Family-led Decision Making is currently seeing positive feedback from family and community members as a means of addressing power differences and historical trauma from intervention. By making decisions about their children's safety in a culturally safe way, families feel a greater sense of self-determination. Family-led safety planning can be incorporated to support all families to have strengthened self-determination and greater control over the safety planning process to best address their needs.

### Involving a strong safety network

Children are safer and happier when surrounded by people who care about them, connected to culture, community and Country. Parents are encouraged to involve as many trusted family and friends as possible. This safety network helps break secrecy and shame and stays involved even after the case is closed to support children's safety and wellbeing.

Professionals must support families in building this network, especially when shame or fear makes it hard. Approaches like Family Finding help identify and strengthen connections. The safety network are the safe people for the child even after safety is achieved and child protection is no longer involved. These are the safe people the child knows they can go to if they feel unsafe again.

## **Explaining danger statements and setting safety goals**

Parents might feel confused about what they need to do to satisfy child protection, and to create safety and address the worries for their children. Once the danger statements are clear, professionals and family must agree on the safety goals—specific behaviours that show the child is safe. Each danger statement must have a safety goal that sets out how the family can demonstrate the specific danger has been reduced. This helps families understand what's expected and avoids confusion or shifting priorities. They should be framed in positive, safety focused language and clearly describe the behaviours expected to demonstrate that the network no longer needs to be worried.

## **Scaling**

Scaling is a structured process that is used to assess and discuss the current situation regarding a child's safety or other key aspects of a family's circumstance. This process makes differing viewpoints explicit, encourages constructive dialogue about what has led to the current rating, and identifies what needs to happen for improvement. The process helps to move away from absolute judgments, supports collaborative safety planning and can help to identify and measure progress.

## **Trajectories towards safety or reunification**

Trajectories help families stay motivated and ensure everyone knows what needs to happen, by when, and what the outcomes will be. Safety scaling should be reviewed to help measure progress towards safety goals, or address changes in perceptions of safety from the network.

Safety plans and tools like Words and Pictures should be reviewed regularly during child protection involvement to track progress and can be adjusted as needed. The review process is a collaborative and strengths-based process that creates opportunities for reflection, learning, and growth alongside families. It acknowledges that meaningful change often requires trying different approaches, adapting supports, and building on what is working well. The review process is grounded in curiosity, partnership, and shared problem-solving, fostering hope and resilience while maintaining focus on the family's goals and aspirations.

## **Involving children in safety planning:**

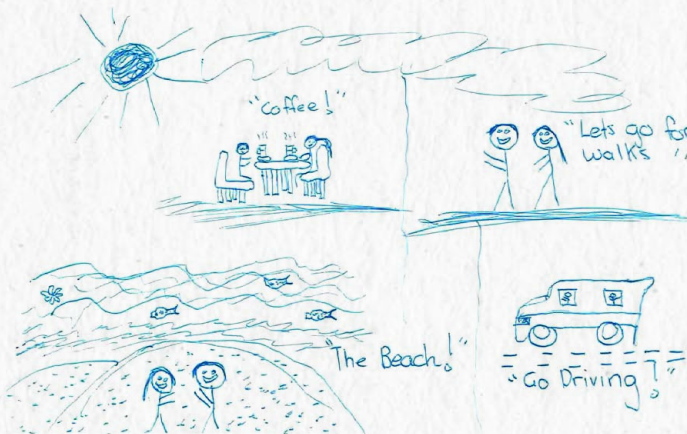
Professionals must work collaboratively with children, parents, and the safety network to develop a child-focused safety plan that addresses the identified worries. The plan should clearly outline what the child can do if they feel unsafe, including who they can talk to and how those trusted adults will respond to increase safety. The plan may include alternative ways for the child to express feeling unsafe, such as using safety objects when telling someone is difficult.

The safety plan should be practiced when the child is feeling safe so that they can trust the adults to act to keep them safe when they need it. The child's safety plan can use Words and Pictures or other formats that work best for the child and family. Making a clear commitment to the child to act when they feel unsafe, helps to build confidence and shows them that the safety network is committed to change.

## Words and Pictures ♥ Our Family Story

and

Mum loves both of you big much! ♥



The ladies from the Department had worries for both of you



The ladies were worried that [redacted] might get too close to the both of you, and you might have your mouth, chest, vagina or bum touched, photographed or videoed and this could make you feel not good or confused about safe boundaries and how the adults are supposed to protect you.



Mum and [redacted] have been working with the ladies at the Department to make sure that you are both safe.



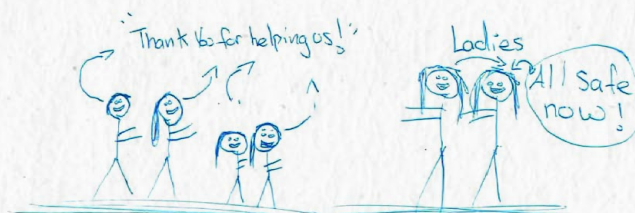
The ladies at the Department have spoken to [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], and [redacted] make a plan to make sure you're safe.



The ladies from the Department will visit you regularly to check in and make sure you are both safe.



This plan is just for a little while, and once the ladies from the Department are happy that you are both safe with [redacted] and [redacted] they will come and tell you that they don't need to visit anymore.



Further examples can be found on the Signs of Safety Knowledge Hive ([Signs of Safety Knowledge Hive - Home](#))

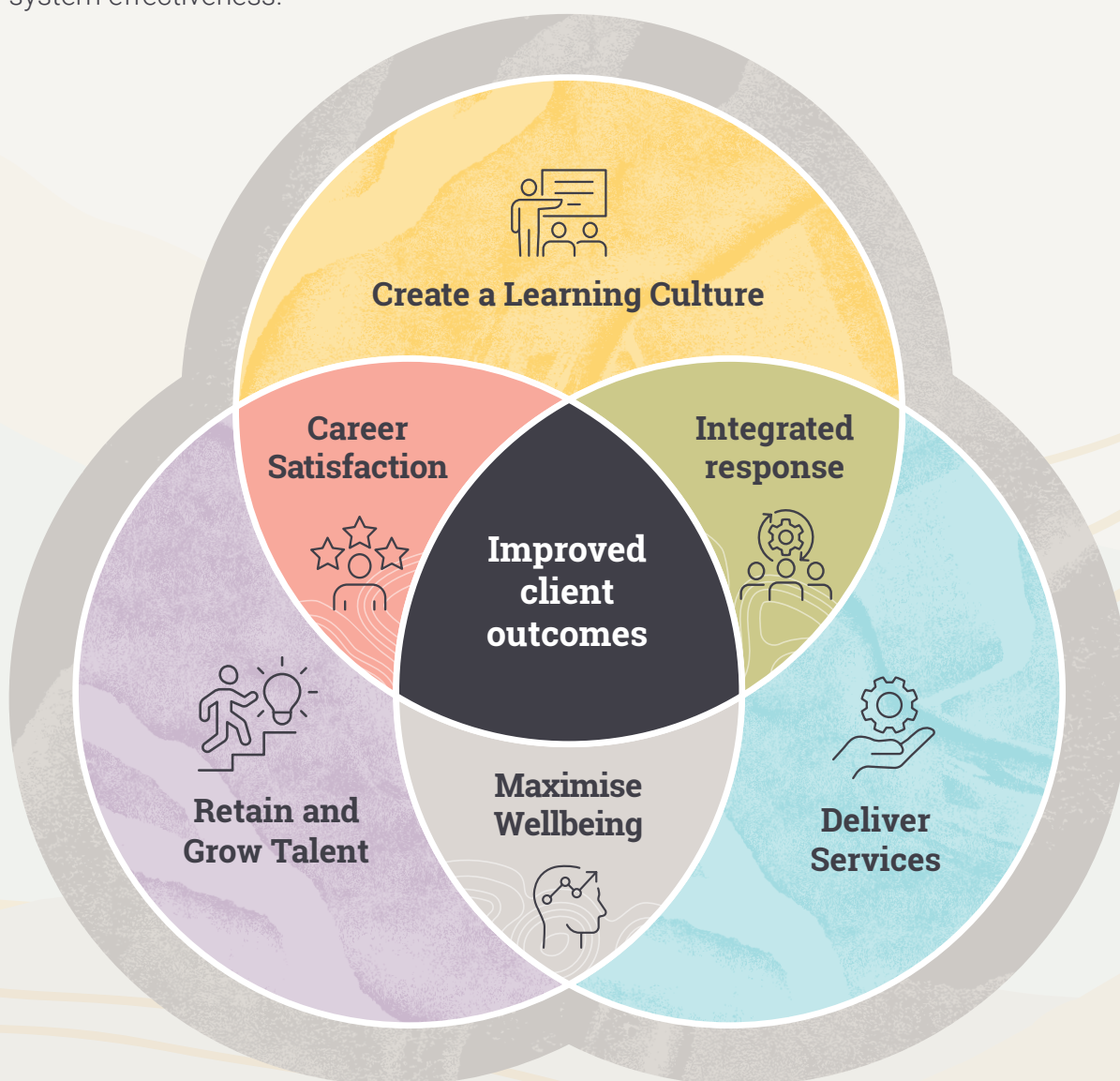
## 11 Signs of Safety in organisational learning

The Framework promotes leadership that grows practice depth and builds a culture of appreciative inquiry around child protection practice through reflective organisational learning grounded in WA Signs of Safety principles and disciplines.

Communities' Strategic Plan 2026–2030 has a focus on continuous improvement in service delivery and on supporting our people and workplace to use innovative and integrated approaches to deliver responsive services. This is all done through a culture of learning, development and growth which promotes cultural responsiveness.

Communities workforce development strategy recognises that its people – current and future – are key to delivering positive outcomes for vulnerable children, families and communities.

The Strategic Plan includes creating a rich, positive learning culture in each region to increase capability and foster wellbeing; to retain and grow its people and partners' confidence, skills and expertise; and to deliver services to maximise positive outcomes and system effectiveness.



## Sustaining the learning journey

Communities is committed to supporting the development of an in-depth understanding of WA Signs of Safety by all staff and within all child protection practice contexts. This commitment is supported through training, supervision, mentoring, coaching and employee experience, using tools such as the WA Signs of Safety capability matrices and considering the Moment's that Matter – Communities Employee Experience model.

The additional principle and discipline added to the Framework needs specific support to embed, alongside the Aboriginal Capability Framework, [Aboriginal Cultural Framework 2024–2034](#) through learning and development, coaching and mentoring as well as monitoring to make sure the expected changes in WA Signs of Safety practice are evident.

Continuing to embed WA Signs of Safety as the central framework for all child protection practice requires a sustained commitment from all Communities' staff to be involved in maintaining, nourishing, and growing the use of the Framework through a continuing organisational learning journey. Sharing learning, monitoring and reviewing performance and reflection on professional development is critical, as is celebrating practice through opportunities including WA Signs of Safety Gatherings.

Communities uses an action learning cycle to continuously improve child protection practice including regular revision of the Framework, the Guide and child protection learning activity to best support the professional development of a diverse workforce.

## Using Appreciative Inquiry

WA Signs of Safety is implemented in conjunction with creating a culture of appreciative inquiry in child protection practice. Appreciative inquiry is a process of asking questions and focusing on successful behaviours and practice. Its aim is to enhance practice depth amongst child safety practitioners to deliver safer outcomes for vulnerable children.

Appreciative inquiry is often noted as the theoretical underpinning of strength-based theory, practices, and research. It is a paradigm based on the premise that organisations change in the direction in which they inquire. The driving principle is that an organisation (or individual) that investigates problems keeps finding problems whereas an investigation of what there is to appreciate in itself will discover what success is.

Yarning and narrative practice recognise storytelling, cultural protocols, and relational ways of learning as critical to culturally safe and effective child protection practice with Aboriginal families.

## Appreciative Inquiry Model (AI) - 5D Cycle



These approaches support child safety practitioners to build respectful partnerships, strengthen cultural understanding through two-way learning, and create space for families' voices, experiences, and strengths to guide meaningful engagement and decision-making.

Appreciative Inquiry enables child safety practitioners to explore what is working well, strengthen practice wisdom, and support learning that is accessible, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience.

Child protection practice is complex. For this reason, it is critical that Child Safety Practitioners continue to build, reflect on, and share evidence of effective practice.

WA Signs of Safety has evolved through a strong commitment to practice-based evidence, shaped by the experiences and insights of child safety practitioners, children, and families at the centre of the work. Its ongoing development is grounded in appreciative inquiry and frontline learning, with a focus on understanding and amplifying practices that create safety, strengthen relationships, and support sustainable change for families.

Building a culture of reflective practice, appreciative inquiry, and child safety practitioner-led learning is central to continuous improvement. This commitment underpins the monitoring, evaluation, and organisational learning approach embedded within the 2025 Framework revisions, strengthening frontline capability and supporting better outcomes for children and families.

## 12 How will we know the Framework is effective?

Implementation of the revised Framework will include ongoing engagement through a change management approach with all stakeholders informed by best practice evidence and a plan for monitoring and evaluating the practice changes.

Communities' collects a number of performance indicators that could be impacted over time by the progressive growth in depth and effectiveness of child protection practice.

Implementation of the Framework includes a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. The lessons from the implementation and the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework will contribute towards the continuous improvement cycle to deliver contemporary signs of safety practice.

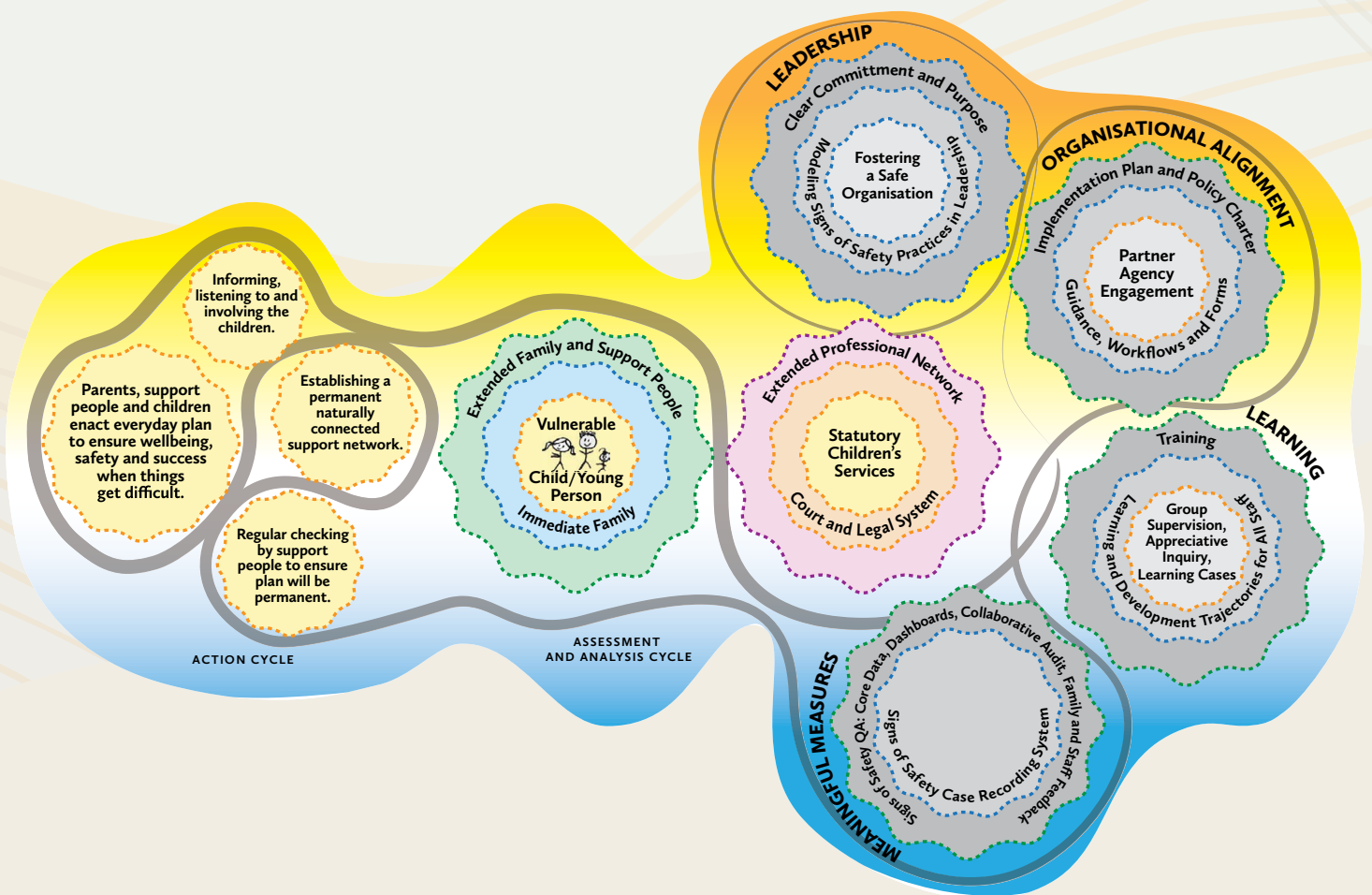
The monitoring and evaluation framework and regular updates on child safety practitioner and service user feedback will be available for staff on the WA Signs of Safety [SharePoint page](#) and for external stakeholders on the [website](#).

### Signs of Safety Organisational Implementation



Dynamic Assessment Cycle adapted from Signs of Safety® Comprehensive Briefing Paper (4th edition) Dr Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy (April 2017)

## Signs of Safety Organisational Theory of Change<sup>9</sup>





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