

5. Signs of Safety Assessment and Planning – Risk Assessment as the Heart of Constructive Child Protection Practice

5.1 Risk as the Defining Motif of Child Protection Practice

Child protection practice is probably the most demanding, contested and scrutinised work within the helping professions, primarily because the endeavour focuses on a society's most vulnerable children. Professionals must constantly consider and decide whether the family's care of a child is safe enough for that child to stay within the family or whether the situation is so dangerous that the child must be removed. If the child is in the care system, the practitioner must, until permanent out-of-home care becomes the priority, continually review whether there is enough safety for the child to return home.

All these decisions are risk assessments and demonstrate that the task is not a one-off event or periodic undertaking. Rather, assessing risk is something the worker must do constantly, after and during each successive contact, with every case. Risk assessment is the defining motif of child protection practice.

5.2 Risk Assessment as a Constructive Practice

One of the key reasons that more hopeful, relationally-grounded approaches have often failed to make significant headway within the child protection field is that they have failed to engage seriously with the risk assessment task. Child protection risk assessment is often dismissed as too judgmental, too forensic, and too intrusive by proponents of strengths- and solution-focused practice. This usually leaves the front line practitioner, who hopes to practice collaboratively, caught between strengths-based aspirations and the harsh, problem-saturated, forensic reality that they have ultimate responsibility for child safety. In these circumstances, a risk-averse interpretation of the forensic child protection imperative consistently leads to defensive intervention and the escalation of a defensive case culture (Barber, 2005).

Risk does not just define child protection work in isolation. It is, in fact, an increasingly defining motif of the social life of western countries in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994; Wilkinson, 2001). The problem is that risk is almost always regarded negatively. Risk must be avoided because everyone is worried about being blamed and sued for something and institutions have become increasingly risk-averse to the point of 'risk-phobia.' Risk is almost always only seen in terms of the BIG loss or the BIG failure; almost never in terms of the BIG win.

If we change the lens to look at sport, it is easier to consider risk differently. Usain Bolt doesn't hide from the World Championships, Serena Williams doesn't avoid Wimbledon, and Dawn Fraser didn't run from Tokyo in 1964. These players champ at the bit to get to such places because, while they may fail spectacularly on the biggest stage in front of millions, it is very possible they will succeed gloriously. The analogy isn't exact, particularly because no one dies at Wimbledon, the Olympics, or the World Championships, and no matter how successful, the outcomes in a high-risk child abuse case are rarely glorious. But in sport we can clearly see the vision of the BIG win.

In child protection work, that vision, the possibility of success, is so often extinguished. With the erasure of a vision of success within the risk equation, a professional's only hope is to avoid failure and the key motivation then readily defaults to the oft-repeated child protection maxim: 'Protect your backside.'

Signs of Safety seeks to 're-vision' this territory and reclaim the risk assessment task as a constructive solution-building undertaking; a process that incorporates the idea of a win as well as a loss. This more balanced approach is more risk intelligent because it is, in fact, how life is lived – every significant life decision holds hopes and fears and is informed by pros and cons. Signs of Safety does not set problems in opposition to strengths and solution focus, nor does it set forensic, rigorous professional inquiry against collaborative practice. Quite simply, the best child protection practice is always both forensic and collaborative and always demands that professionals draw upon, and are sensitive to, every scintilla of strength, hope and human capacity they can find within the ugly circumstances where children are abused.

5.3 Comprehensive Risk Assessment and Signs of Safety Assessment and Planning

The Signs of Safety seeks always to bring together the seeming disjunction between a problem and solution focus within its practice framework by utilising a comprehensive approach to risk that:

- is simultaneously forensic, exploring harm and danger with the same rigour as exploring strengths and safety;
- brings forward clearly articulated professional knowledge while equally eliciting and drawing upon family knowledge and wisdom;
- always undertakes the risk assessment process with the full involvement of all stakeholders, both professional and family, from the judge to the child, from the child protection worker to the parents and grandparents; and
- is naturally holistic since it brings everyone, both professional and family member, to the

assessment table. Some assessment frameworks trumpet their holistic credentials but often do so by slavishly and obsessively gathering vast amounts of information about every aspect of a family and child's life that overwhelms everyone involved with too much information.



Above: Comprehensive, balanced child protection risk assessment

The Signs of Safety grounds these aspirations in a one-page assessment and planning protocol. That protocol – or framework – maps harm, danger, complicating factors, strengths, existing and required safety, and a safety judgment. The Signs of Safety Assessment and Planning Protocol, 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 framework can be understood as containing four domains for 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.)
1. Where are we on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 means there is enough safety for child protection authorities to close the case and 0 means it is certain that the child will be (re)abused? (Judgment.)¹

¹ Zero on this safety scale is often also framed as meaning the situation is so dangerous the child must be removed permanently.

Signs of Safety® Assessment and Planning Framework

What are we Worried About?	What's Working Well?	What Needs to Happen?
<p>On a scale of 0–10 where 10 means everyone knows the children are safe enough for the child protection authorities to close the case and zero means things are so bad for the children that they can't live at home, where do we rate this situation? <i>Locate different people's judgements spatially on the two-way arrow.</i></p> <p>0 ←—————→ 10</p>		

Above: the 'Three Columns' Signs of Safety assessment and planning protocol

The four domains operating in the Signs of Safety assessment and planning are identified simply and clearly in the 'Three Columns' Signs of Safety assessment and planning protocol, as follows:

This Three Columns format at its simplest can also be used as a strategic planning framework that is useful for thinking through any human or organisational issue. In addition, it can be adapted as a review and planning tool across the full range of agency activity, including supervision, staffing, management, or policy issues.

The Signs of Safety assessment and planning framework incorporates the risk assessment analysis categories that are described in the illustration on the next page. The shading is used to link with the case example that follows.

Signs of Safety Comprehensive Briefing Paper

Signs of Safety® Assessment and Planning Framework

What are we Worried About?	What's Working Well?	What Needs to Happen?
HARM: Past hurt, injury or abuse to the child (likely) caused by adults. Also includes risk-taking behaviour by children/teens that indicates harm and/or is harmful to them.	Existing Strengths: People, plans and actions that contribute to a child's well-being and plans about how a child will be made safe when danger is present.	SAFETY GOALS: The behaviours and actions the child protection agency needs to see to be satisfied the child will be safe enough to close the case.
DANGER STATEMENTS: The harm or hurt that is believed likely to happen to the child(ren) if nothing in the family's situation changes.	EXISTING SAFETY: Actions taken by parents, caring adults and children to make sure the child is safe when the danger is present.	Next Steps: The immediate next actions that will be taken to build future safety.
Complicating Factors: Actions and behaviours in and around the family, the child and by professionals that make it more difficult to solve danger of future abuse.		

On a scale of 0–10 where 10 means everyone knows the children are safe enough for the child protection authorities to close the case and zero means things are so bad for the children that they can't live at home, where do we rate this situation?
Locate different people's judgments spatially on the two-way arrow.

0 ←————→ **10**

5.4 Case Example

The Signs of Safety 'map' presented here involves parents Merinda and Eddy, along with their children, six-year old Darel, four-year-old Alkira, and 18 month Jirra. The example focuses on emotional and physical harm of the children triggered by drinking, drug use, and domestic violence. The Signs of Safety assessment and planning for this case was completed together with Merinda and Eddy. It also draws on the children's exact words from interviews with them².

While the assessment on the next page looks simple, it is a form of simplicity that synthesises considerable complexity. There are many disciplines involved in using the Signs of Safety to arrive at this sort of assessment and plan.

² For brevity, this is an edited version of the mapping in this case. The full mapping and description of the casework can be found in Turnell and Etherington (2017).

Signs of Safety® Assessment and Planning Framework

What are we Worried About?	What's Working Well?	What Needs to Happen?
<p>Past Harm</p> <p>Merinda and Eddy both say that they have had lots of bad fights. CPS have heard about 21 separate fights between 16/10/2012 and 22/09/2013 with Darel, Alkira and Jirra nearby.</p> <p>On the 13/08/13 Darel called the Police saying that his mother had 'started up again'. When Police arrived, they found Darel, Alkira and Jirra crying and hiding in the bathroom. Merinda had rung Rose and Darel Snr to come and get the kids saying she was going to kill herself.</p> <p>In the last fight on 22/09/13, Eddy and Merinda were screaming and throwing things at each other. Merinda threw a glass of coke at Eddy, which hit the wall and smashed. Alkira badly cut her foot on the glass requiring stitches</p> <p>Sally and Diane talked to Darel and Alkira on 23/09/2013. Some of what they said was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "When Mum and Dad are arguing, I take my sisters and we hide in the bathroom." • "Mum and Dad were fighting and smashed the glass that cut my foot. I was really crying. I had a big needle. I was brave." • "Mum shouts really loud and I don't want baby to die...because Mum stressing out, shouting and throwing things around." • "Mum was in the car and driving the wrong way, she tried to smash into Dad, Jirra was in the car. I thought she would get squashed." <p>Danger Statements</p> <p>Sally and Diane from CPS are worried that when Merinda and Eddy fight they scream, shout, swear, throw things at each other, drive off dangerously with the kids in the car and Darel, Alkira and/or Jirra will be really upset and frightened and get hurt like on Tuesday night when Alkira cut her foot badly on a broken glass or end up in a really bad car accident and die.</p> <p>Sally and Diane are worried that Eddy and Merinda will hit the children when they misbehave and cause bruises or other injuries.</p> <p>Sally and Diane, Rose, Darel, Kerri and Pat are worried that Darel, Alkira and Jirra will think it is okay to scream, swear, throw things, hit, drive dangerously, threaten, punch or kick people, because of Merinda and Eddy's behaviour. If Darel, Alkira and Jirra do grow up doing these things they are more likely to have violent relationships, get into trouble with the Police and have the same problems in their future lives.</p>	<p>Existing Strengths</p> <p>Darel, Alkira and Jirra all get plenty of food and have good clothes, Darel is doing well at school and Alkira loves preschool, Jirra is on track developmentally.</p> <p>Darel and Alkira say they love playing football at the park with Dad and love playing hide and seek and building cubby houses with Mum.</p> <p>Merinda says she quit smoking weed two months ago and is not drinking alcohol after she went to Mum Rose's for a weekend. Eddy said that Merinda's strong will helped her to do this.</p> <p>Merinda and Eddy have talked to Sally and Diane about what triggers their fighting and say they want to make changes. Merinda and Eddy would like to go to a couple/family type rehab place like the one in Wanneroo to help them change their ways.</p> <p>Rose and Darel live nearby and help the family a lot, looking after the children and can calm both Merinda and Eddy down when they are angry.</p> <p>Eddy and Merinda haven't had much contact with Eddy's parents Kerri and Pat. Kerri and Pat say now they are back in touch and know what has been happening they are willing to do whatever it takes to help Eddy, Merinda and the kids out. Eddy and Merinda say this would be good and they want the help.</p> <p>Existing Safety</p> <p>On 24/09/13, CPS and Police met with Merinda and Eddy and they made a plan to send the children to live with Rose and Darel so they could both work on their problems. Darel, Alkira and Jirra have been staying at Rose and Darel's since then.</p>	<p>Safety Goals</p> <p>Sally and Diane from CPS want Darel, Alkira and Jirra to be back with Merinda and Eddy because they all want to be together and there have been so many good times in their family. For this to happen they need Merinda and Eddy to work with Sally, Dianne and other people in their family to create a story that explains to Darel, Alkira and Jirra what all the worries have been about and why they went to stay with nana Rose.</p> <p>Once the story has been shared with the children Merinda and Eddy and the safety network will work with CPS to make a plan that the children can understand and shows everyone that:</p> <p>When Merinda and Eddy do argue they can sort things out without hitting or screaming and so none of the kids get scared:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Darel, Alkira and Jirra will only be in the car with Merinda and/or Eddy when they are safe to drive • Eddy and Merinda have ways of telling the kids off without punching, hitting and screaming at them • CPS will close the case when the safety plan has been working for 6 months after Darel, Alkira and Jirra go home. <p>Next Steps</p> <p>Merinda and Eddy say they will stick to the safety plan and not visit the kids together.</p> <p>At the next meeting on Monday Diane and Sally will talk with Eddy and Merinda about creating an explanation for the kids about why they can't live with Eddy and Merinda at the moment. Over the next two weeks they will work together to create a full words and pictures story for the kids.</p> <p>After the words and picture story is finished Sally and Diane will help Eddy and Merinda and the safety network work on a long-term safety plan.</p>
<p>Safety Scale: On a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means, even if Merinda and Eddy do get stressed, angry and drink too much, everyone including the children know what Eddy, Miranda and the support people will do so no one gets screamed at, hit or scared and there's adults Darel, Alkira and Jirra can call and will come if they are worried and 0 means there's no plan to keep the kids safe when things start getting bad so the children can't be living with Eddy and Miranda right now, where would you rate the situation today?</p>		
<p>0 ←————→ 10</p>		

5.5 Signs of Safety Practice Disciplines

Together with the application of the principles listed in chapter 2, the Signs of Safety disciplines that underpin the effective use of the assessment and planning framework include the following:

- A clear and rigorous understanding of the distinction between past harm (shaded yellow above), future danger (shaded red), and complicating factors.

This way of analysing the danger information is underpinned by significant research regarding the factors that best predict abuse and re-abuse of children (Boffa and Podesta, 2004; Brearley, 1992; Child, Youth and Family, 2000; Dalglish, 2003; Department of Human Services, 2000; English, 1996; English and Pecora, 1994; Fluke et al., 2001; Johnson, 1996; Munro, 2002; Parton, 1998; Pecora and English, 1992; Reid et al., 1996; Schene, 1996; Sigurdson and Reid, 1996; Wald and Wolverton, 1993).

- A clear and rigorous distinction made between strengths and protection, based on the working definition that 'safety is regarded as strengths demonstrated as protection (in relation to the danger) over time'.

This definition was developed by Julie Boffa (Boffa and Podesta, 2004), the architect of the Victorian Risk Framework, and was refined from an earlier definition used by McPherson, Macnamara and Hemsworth (1997). This definition and its operational use are described in greater detail in Turnell and Essex (2006). Utilising this definition to interpret the constructive risk factors captured in the example just presented, there is only one known instance of existing safety (shaded red) related to the danger statement.

Proper analysis of danger and safety creates a platform where professionals can formulate clear safety goals describing what they need to see to close the case and withdraw from the family's life.

Assessment comprises three steps: gathering information, analysing information, and judgment. The higher the anxiety associated with any given case, the more information professionals tend to want to gather. Usually, though, what is needed most is not more information but careful analysis that will usually show that the professionals know more than enough to make a judgment and move into action. Making clear distinctions between harm,

danger, strengths and safety is always challenging for practitioners, but is the foundation of effective case practice.

- Rendering all statements in straightforward, instead of professionalised, language that can be readily understood by clients.

This practice is based on an understanding that the parents and children are the most crucial people to think themselves into and through (assess) the situation and that the best chances of change arise when everyone (professionals and family) readily understand each other.

- All statements should focus on specific, observable behaviours.

In the example above, instead of talking generally about domestic violence, clear details are provided of what happens when Merinda and Eddy fight and the impact on the children. Likewise the strengths and existing and required safety are described in clear behavioural terms.

The Signs of Safety approach always seeks to tease out facts from judgments by describing events and evidencing opinions with observable behaviours. Sticking to the facts always makes it easier to talk to family members than introducing more generalised meaning-laden terms. The process of arriving at judgment is held in abeyance to be brought forward in a straightforward fashion within the safety scaling activity.

- Skilful use of authority.

Mapping or assessing child protection cases together with family members almost always involves some level of coercion, which must be exercised skilfully. While oppressive use of authority is often crude and notable, skilful use is usually nuanced and often overlooked because its execution seems simple (Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran, 2008). Honouring parents is one of the quickest ways to gain their attention and respect, as are giving choice and always doing what is promised. Being very clear and explaining bottom line requirements, connecting requirements to what is needed to satisfy the agency and the court, and not taking emotional reactions personally are all part of a skilful practitioner's repertoire. Conscious and skilful use of authority is always a central part of garnering service recipient involvement in the Signs of Safety assessment.

- An underlying assumption that the assessment is a work in progress rather than a definitive set piece.

Assessment is often viewed in the helping professions as a 'one-off' activity undertaken when a form or protocol is completed. In reality, assessment is a dynamic process punctuated by critical decision-making points. The greatest challenge of assessment is to actively engage parents, children and their support people in the ongoing cycle of information gathering, analysis and judgment. Achieving this requires professionals to approach the assessment task from a stance of humility about what they think they know, rather than a paternalistic stance that asserts 'this is the way it is'.

The disciplines and principles underlying the use of the Signs of Safety assessment and planning are more fully described in Turnell and Edwards (1999) and Turnell and Essex (2006).