

Supporting Families To Work With Us When They Don't Agree With Us

Background to Signs of Safety Practice Group Facebook page and this resource

The interest in the Signs of Safety Practice Group Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/SofSCSSG/>) has been huge. Over 2500 child practitioners from around the world are currently participating, with the number growing every day. The group is focused on helping frontline practitioners use the Signs of Safety approach to do their work as best they possibly can during our shared journey with Covid-19. Many questions are being asked on the page and through the live broadcasts, and many ideas and resources are being shared. This is a wonderful example of a learning community and it is inspiring to be part of a large group of child protection practitioners eager to learn from and help each other.

We have picked out some of the most commonly asked questions and our licensed Signs of Safety Trainers and Consultants have set aside time to prepare detailed written responses. So, in this resource you will see the question and then the detailed response.

Question

"My hugest issue with SOS- a lot of parents won't tell us what they think they need because they tell us we had no right to take their kids"

Response

This is a great question and I know it's something that worries practitioners all over the world; I also want to recognise that in many jurisdictions, due to agency procedures, the team trying to complete this work may be different to the team that took the original difficult decision to remove those children. It's a complex bureaucratic world we try to navigate whilst supporting the most vulnerable children, young people and their families.

When I received this question, a number of factors were raised for me, these were:

- **Relationships** – we know these are at the heart of positive, effective and meaningful working relationships. Relationships are at the heart of the work we strive to do with children and their families and if we're struggling, a great place to start is honouring.
- **Using A Questioning Approach** – across the three columns of our assessment tool and seven analysis categories within that; in Signs of Safety, we lead through questions.
- **A clear Trajectory and Timeline** – building a vision of hope for the family.

When I hear that sort of complaint from a parent, I hear it being fundamental about our working relationships and I am passionate about this area. To quote Kevin Campbell who has presented at a number of International Gatherings and Family Finding events "Engagement is my responsibility and never the family's". Building a working relationship with parents in child protection case will always be a challenge, there are a myriad reasons why they might distrust us whatever model of practice we use. We also know that however we do the work the heart of creating change depends on a working relationship with the family and when a parent says something like this it's an opportunity to openly explore with them what needs to happen so we can work together. The people who define whether we have a working relationship with parents and family members are the family members themselves and we need to be flexible if one way isn't working

When I have worked with families that don't want to work with me initially, I know that comes from a place of fear and (at times) mistrust – especially if the agency I represent has taken that decision to remove their children. If the relationship with the family is poor it's going to be really difficult to move forward and achieve that shared goal we have – which is usually returning their children to their family network. Investment is needed here – if you're a manager, fear not, I'm not talking about now taking many weeks to build that relationship before the work can be done. Relationship building in children's services needs to happen quickly, and the responsibility is on our shoulders as the professionals. Quick relationship building isn't about collusion either, rather it's all about being respectful, hopeful, transparent whilst always holding true to the needs of the children – I've seen many a duty or

investigative worker do this in minutes on a doorstep. I mentioned honouring the family as a great start – thanking them for answering my call, the door, my questions – these are simple, but demonstrate there is always something to honour the family for.

It feels appropriate here to just mention the term ‘engagement’ and what it really means – it’s a term we hear a lot in child protection. It means very little and yet we tend to put so much emphasis on it, for example – mum is “engaged with us” often means mum is just letting us in the house, not that anything is necessarily changing for the children. Parents “engaging” with a service – often means they’re just rocking up to the service we referred to them and complying with the plan, not achieving any meaningful changes. Just think how many families we have worked with that have “engaged” with parenting courses yet we’ve just referred them to their fourth, fifth or sixth course – the “engagement” didn’t actually mean anything.

To get back directly to the question asked, if a family won’t tell me what they think they need because they feel we had no right to take their kids, we need to work on that first. Let’s go back to the beginning of looking at the identified harm, using family language where at all possible, and the language of those who identified the harm – the police, the hospital, the judge etc. – what was the harm and the impact on their children. How many families have you worked with that have told you they’re not clear on why their kids were taken? How many young people in the care system have told you they’re not 100% clear on why they can’t live at home. We have to get this bit of work nailed. This comes back to the bookends of the case, the What’s!

Danger Statement – this is **what** the agency is worried will happen to the children if nothing changes, based on the information in the first column. AND

Safety Goals – this is **what** the agency needs to see in order for us to not have those worries and know the children are safe in the future.

If we still have resistance – we need to use our relationship and questioning skills to help the family to be able to recognise why the professionals have the worries they do and help the family to see we all want to work towards that safety goal and be able to show everyone that the harm and danger will never happen in the future.

I have found a big part of the skill of building that has enabled me to build a working relationship quickly is to use solution-focused questions, often crafted before the visit. Try out the miracle question – *what is it the family want to achieve, what would the children say they want? What would life look like for the children if our working relationship had achieved everything they needed to see?* I have been met with the response of families simply wanting me out of their life and the trick is to roll with that resistance. This is one place to always bring in the relationship questions like, *‘Tell you the truth that works for me too, but I’ve got to convince my manager we’ve got the work done before I can get out of your life so can I ask you, what do you think my manager would say she needs to see that would convince her I could stop knocking on your door and be out of your life?’* Another variation of the theme could be *“What do you think the judge/The children guardian (if in court) would say they would need to see happening for the Children to be convinced we don’t need to be involved in your life”*. Push those questions further too so we’re always looking for impact and change *“what difference do you think they would say that would make for the children?”*. *“What do you suppose the children would say would be most helpful about those things happening?”*

When I worked on a duty team going out to families who were clearly wary and distrustful one thing our team found worked really well was to be explicit about the issue and say something like, *‘You’d have every right to feel pretty worried about me/us turning can I ask you what would be your worst fear about me coming into your family’s life?’* Our team found this laid a perfect foundation to ask a best hopes question, *‘I know this might seem like a crazy question but suppose me coming into your family’s was helpful, what would change, what would be better?’*

Building a vision is so important in all work we do with families, whether we’re working in voluntary or statutory children’s services – giving families a vision of - this is the work we’re going to do together and this is how long it could take (if everything that needs to happen happens within that timescale). Within the Signs of Safety this involves building a trajectory and timeline. Use the shared goals within this piece

of work. This is what we want e.g. children to return home – this is when and how it can happen (timeline) and these are all the pieces of work that would need to happen (the Trajectory) to achieve that within that timeline.

Even when families still don't really want to work with us, and many of them never really will want to, showing them we're genuinely looking for their children to be returned (whilst always maintaining the focus on the children's safety) in my experience is highly motivational for them and their networks.

As with all questions posed and the answers you'll receive, we as practitioners need to be firm and hold firm on our need to see evidenced strengths and safety for children, we are as Susie Essex (creator of Words and Pictures) would say "firm yet hugely, hugely kind".

I hope this is helpful and addressed the question asked. Let's keep working as a community as that's where our strengths lie. I'd love to hear other people's thoughts on the question. Thank you for the opportunity of being involved.