

Notes on the Signs of Safety

A Solution and Safety Oriented Approach to Child Protection Casework

(ACTUAL HARDCOVER TEXT
CIRCULATED TO PROJECT
MEMBERS FOR DISCUSSION)

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The authors' premise:

A 'revolutionary' change to the approach to child protection work is occurring. The authors posit 12 practice principles that serve as guides for child protection workers (see pages 4,5)

And 6 practice elements (see page 6)

The authors state that the following changes are occurring world-wide:

- The field of child welfare is undergoing a paradigm shift to adopting a 'strength perspective' rather than a deficit point of view to clients.

This change is somewhat redressing the main focus on child(ren) to the child-within-a-family, and movement from a problem-solving, to a solution-building (turning away from deficit point of view toward clients) model.

As well, the helping relationship is changing from the traditional approach, wherein the expert has all the answers, to an approach where collaboration with the client, even an abusive and neglectful parent, is both possible and recommended.

- The new focus is on discovery of resources, however small, to expose building blocks for change.

Rose's Story is a powerful reminder that we are most caring and respectful of clients when we ask questions and listen to their ideas on how to improve their own lives allowing them to decide what is best for them. (*Rose's Story* is a stark account of how one well-meaning child welfare worker after another failed to ask questions of a child they were trying to serve.)

- The need among workers is to reconceptualize the *helping* relationship as a *collaborative* relationship.
- The child protective services approach is changing to a family (protective) services approach and as a result is changing the adversarial practice that has dominated the field.

Finally, we not only need to protect the child, as well as express respect for the parent.

INTRODUCTION:

Partnership with the family is something worth aspiring to in child protection practice. How?

By using:

An approach that enables workers to make and commit to assessments/judgments based on a balance of information regarding danger and safety.

An approach that would assist workers to get "unstuck" in difficult and protracted cases, that would be flexible and responsive to diverse client situations and cultures, and that would enable them to draw on client's strengths while being mindful of the safety of the child(ren) involved.

An (i.e. signs of safety) approach that has been accelerated and enhanced by connections with practitioners, researchers and child protection agencies in Australia, the U.K. and Canada.

An approach that takes child protection risk assessment, from the perspective of existing and potential safety, while including assessments of harm and danger as well.

CHAPTER ONE:

CHILD PROTECTION; A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

a) The Causes: An Increasingly Complex Picture

Child protection professionals the world over are facing dramatically increasing workloads (Australia, up 75% from 1990 to 1995; U.S. up 40% since 1987)

Increased attention is being given to child maltreatment as countries around the globe have become more aware of child abuse and neglect at all levels of society.

An increasingly complex picture of what constitutes neglect or abuse exists world-wide, with differing standards, profiles of child abusers appropriate to the 1970's or 1980's no longer fit, with differing models of causal analysis such as 'cycles of abuse', 'correlation between poverty and child abuse', etc.

b) Responding to the Problem: More Complexity

A paradigm shift is also occurring in response practices: from seeing the problem in purely medical or psychological terms towards a more socio-legal perspective with particular focus on risk assessment protocols.

Increased tension exists in the child welfare field concerning how to respond to very serious maltreatment.

In addition, the problem is how to recognize the occasional families that cannot be assisted or coerced to respond to provide increased safety, without demonizing excessive numbers of other families with the same, though inappropriate, label.

Summary of findings world-wide that led to the Signs of Safety approach:

'Doing something different can make a difference in child protection' :

- think differently about how the work is approached e.g. building partnerships
- step outside of the 'expert' role, e.g. abandon paternalism, focus on collaboration
- approach the client with a genuine sense of respect and engagement
- without abandoning legal authority, exercise that same authority in a manner that fosters cooperation between the professional and the family
- the voice of the service recipient needs to be heard

Examples:

1. U.S. – challenge against the county of Milwaukee regarding the failure to provide services to children who were long-time wards
2. U.K. – 1989 Child Act – establishes the fact that child protection professionals cannot expect to act unilaterally ; some level of collaboration and interaction is always necessary; created partnership as a central political and bureaucratic concept, but raised the question of how it was to be implemented
3. New Zealand – 1989 the Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act – enshrined the principle of family participation in decisions that affect their children. Enacted as a result of pressure from the Maori people who were tired of the history of paternalism and the removal of their children. Established concept of ' family group conference' to arrive at a plan for the care and protection of the child. This concept has been experimented with and utilized in many places around the world, with varying degrees of success.
4. U.S. – at least 25 states are now implementing the family group conference model as a mechanism for developing partnership

CONCLUSION:

' the challenge is to create a structure and models of child protection practice that address the seriousness of alleged or substantiated maltreatment while maximizing the possibility of collaboration between families and workers'.

Workers cannot do it on their own, they require organizational backing as well as conceptual frameworks and models of practicing child protection ...

The signs of safety approach offers such a framework

As well, it has a broader applicability than the more narrowly focused conferencing models of partnership.

CHAPTER 2:
PRACTICE PRINCIPLES THAT BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

1. Respect service recipients as people worth doing business with.

Maintaining the position that the family is capable of change can create a sense of hope and possibility. Be as open-minded toward family members as possible, approaching them as potential partners in building safety.

2. Cooperate with the person, not the abuse.

Workers can build a relationship with family members without condoning the abuse in any way. Listen and respond to the service recipient's story. Give the family choices and opportunities to give you input. Learn what they want. The worker must be up front and honest, particularly in the investigation. Treat service recipient as individuals.

3. Recognize that cooperation is possible even where coercion is required.

Workers will almost always have to use some amount of coercion and often have to exercise statutory power to prevent situations of continuing danger, but this should not prevent them from aspiring to build a cooperative partnership with parents. Recognize that coercion and cooperation can exist simultaneously, and utilize skills that foster this.

4. Recognize that all families have signs of safety.

All families have competencies and strengths. They keep their children safe, at least some, and usually most, of the time. Ensure that careful attention is given to these signs of safety.

5. Maintain a focus on safety.

The focus of child protection work is always to increase safety. Maintain this orientation in thinking about the agency and the worker's role as well as the specific details and activities of the casework.

6. Learn what the service recipient wants.

Acknowledge the client's concerns and desires. Use the service recipient's goals in creating a plan for action and motivating family members to change. Whenever compatible, bring client goals together with agency goals.

7. Always search for detail.

Always elicit specific, detailed information, whether exploring negative or positive aspects of the situation. Solutions arise out of details, not generalizations.

8. Focus on creating small change.

Think about, discuss, and work toward small changes. Don't become frustrated when big goals are not immediately achieved. Focus on small, attainable goals and acknowledge when they have been achieved.

9. Don't confuse case details with judgments.

Reserve judgment until as much information as possible has been gathered. Don't confuse these conclusions with the details of the case. Remember that others, particularly the family, will judge the details differently.

10. Offer choices.

Avoid alienating service recipients with unnecessary coercion. Instead, offer choices about as many aspects of the casework as possible. This involves family members in the process and builds cooperation.

11. Treat the interview as a forum for change.

View the interview as the intervention, and therefore recognize the interaction between the worker and the service recipients to be the key vehicle for change.

12. Treat the practice principles as aspirations, not assumptions.

Continually aspire to implement the practice principles, but have the humility to recognize that even the most experienced worker will have to think and act carefully to implement them. Recognize that no one gets it right all the time in child protection work.

CHAPTER THREE THE SIX PRACTICE ELEMENTS

1. Understand the position of each family member.

Seek to identify and understand the values, beliefs and meanings family members perceive in their stories. This assists the worker to respond to the uniqueness of each case and to move toward plans the family will enact.

2. Find exceptions to the maltreatment (abuse/neglect).

Search for exceptions to problem. This creates hope for workers and families by proving that the problem does not always exist. Exceptions may also indicate solutions that have worked in the past. Where no exceptions exist, the worker may be alerted to a more serious problem.

3. Discover family strengths and resources.

Identify and highlight positive aspects of the family. This prevents the problems from overwhelming and discouraging everyone involved.

4. Focus on goals.

Elicit the family's goals to improve the safety of the child and their life in general. Compare these with the agency's own goals. Use the family's ideas wherever possible. Where the family is unable to suggest any constructive goals, danger to the child is probably increased.

5. Scale safety and progress.

Identify the family members' sense of safety and progress throughout the case (0 the worst that something could be, 10, the best things could be). This allows clear comparisons with workers' judgments.

6. Assess willingness, confidence and capacity.

Determine the family's willingness and ability to carry out plans before trying to implement them.

Summary:

The signs of safety approach is not just about discovering constructive elements of family functioning. Using the practice elements can generate information indicative of either safety or danger.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE REFERRAL

Careful, detailed, and thorough work in the intake, investigation and early planning stages will often lead to good, well-informed decisions... The SIGNS OF SAFETY approach focuses on collecting good, detailed information about existing family safety, competencies and goals,... complemented by a strong emphasis on building partnerships and collaboration, not only with family, but also with other professionals, extended family and friends.

USING THE PRACTICE ELEMENTS: AT INTAKE (as prompts, that would generate other questions that might be asked during subsequent investigative interviews)

The intake worker must be mindful of building and maintaining a cooperative relationship with the notifier (e.g. doctor, public health nurse, school teacher, family relative, neighbour). The notifier is not only a rich source of information but may also have a relationship with the family that can be invaluable in the future. The allegations need to be listened to and documented in detail both for the agency's needs and also that the complainant(s) feel that they have been heard.

Above all focus on <i>Who</i> –	those involved and those who know about the problems
<i>What</i> –	what they/others have seen and heard
<i>Where</i> –	where this happened
<i>When</i> -	timeframe and the most recent events
<i>How</i> -	the alleged abuse or neglect occurred

Questions to elicit more information regarding the notifier's position:

- What in your view, are the worst aspects of the behaviour you are talking about?
- What convinced you to take action and call us now?
- How is this behaviour a problem for you?
- Have you done anything (apart from making the notification) to address the problem?
- What do you see as the cause of the problem?
- Have you talked about these matters with anyone who knows the family? Would others agree with your perspective? What would they say?
- Would the parent(s) agree with your assessment of the situation?

Whatever the notifier's position, it is likely that more will be known about the case when their motivation is elicited and understood.

Exceptions and Strengths

Notifiers will think more carefully about the situation they are describing when asked to explore exceptions and family strengths, specially if they recognize that the child protection authorities are seeking to take a more balanced approach.

The following questions may be useful to elicit information about exceptions:

- It sounds like this has happened before. What have you seen the family to do to sort this out?
- You mentioned that it is not always like this. Can you tell me what is happening when the situation is okay? What is different about those times?
- Are there times when the mother/father is attentive rather than neglectful? Can you tell me more about those times? What did the parent and child do instead? What do you think contributed to the parent's responding differently?
- You said that the child always seems miserable and withdrawn. Are there any times when you have seen her come out of her shell? What is she like then?

Strengths and Resources

The following questions might elicit strengths and resources from the notifier:

- How do family members usually solve this problem? What have you seen them doing?
- Are there times when they call on other people to help solve problems? When do they do that? Who do they call on?
- Can you relate anything good about these parents?
- What do you see as positive about the relationship between the parents and the children?
- Are there aspects of your relationship with the family that, in conjunction with your intervention, might help to influence them for the better?

Safety Goals (goals of the notifier, and goals of the family)

The following questions can elicit safety goals:

- The situation sounds serious. What do you think should happen? How would that solve this problem?
- Calling this agency is a big step. In your opinion, what would it take to make the child(ren) safer?
- What do you imagine us doing to make the child(ren) safer?
- Do you think another agency might be able to help with this situation?
- What do you think this family should do? What are they capable of doing?
- I hear you saying things that are not right with this family. To give me a different view of the situation, can you tell me how you will know when the problem is solved?
- If this problem is solved, what difference will that make to you? How will your life be different?
- Are the parents concerned about these problems? How do you think the parents would go about resolving this?
- What do the children say that they want, or what do you think they want?

Research reveals that asking these kinds of questions at intake helps to make the caller (whether a professional, family member, neighbour, etc) think critically about the situation instead of simply dumping the case in the lap of the agency that is responsible for child welfare. In addition, such questions emphasize the fact that child protection issues are a collective responsibility.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CHILD PROTECTION ASSESSMENT WITH SAFETY IN MIND

Risk Assessment process using the SIGNS OF SAFETY sets out to consider danger and safety simultaneously and to achieve a balanced, comprehensive assessment of family competencies, strengths, resources as well as existing and envisioned safety.

Built on the best research available and integrated with practice wisdom, risk assessments should provide assessments that are thorough and consistent regarding the vulnerability of a child and a means of estimating the probable severity of any future instance of abuse or neglect.

However, the authors found that most risk assessment maps are too one-sided, focussing on harm, severity and pattern of maltreatment, vulnerability of the child to future harm, tendency toward violence within the family, substance abuses, mental disorders, history of child abuse in the parents lives, etc. (i.e. the problematic side of family functioning). This practice is likely to limit the options for enhancing and building safety for the child. In addition, optimal information from the family will only be obtained in the context of the best possible relationship between worker and family, and that child protection practice should seek to maximize the chances of building partnership with the family.

Risk Estimation is Professional Knowledge, Not Family Knowledge

The whole endeavor of risk assessment is a professional way of understanding the vulnerability of the child within his/her family. This will probably differ from the family's perception of the situation. Traditional risk assessment processes are built on professional wisdom and research-based knowledge.

Risk assessment must be balanced by the systematic drawing-out and integration of the family's perspective.

BALANCING DANGER AND SAFETY: THE SIGNS OF SAFETY ASSESSMENT

GOALS

I. Agency Goals

What does the agency need to see to close the case, given that the goal in child protection activity is always to ensure enough ongoing and continuing safety for the child?

For example:

- The perpetrator takes responsibility for the abuse
- A detailed safety plan is set in place to protect against any further injury
- The family takes responsibility for implementing the plan
- Implementation of the safety plan is demonstrated to the agency over a reasonable period of time

II. Family Goals

What are the parents goals for their child(ren) how they want to care for them, and how they are already doing this?

If the parents feel that the worker understands and will listen to what they want, the process of partnership between the parents and caseworker will ward off the parents sense of powerlessness and gives the parents a sense that they important input into the direction of the case.

III. Immediate Progress

What are the long-term goals of the agency and the family, as well as the immediate goals?

CHAPTER SIX KNOCKING ON THE DOOR: MORE THAN AN INVESTIGATION

The biggest challenge to good practice during an investigation is for the worker to remain open-minded about the family and the parents. The temptation to make definitive final judgments is considerable.

The initial investigation has three purposes:

- Assess the truth of the allegations
- Assess the likelihood of future harm
- Build as much cooperation as possible so that the best information is gathered and a partnership between the family and agency is achievable should ongoing casework be required.

There is a tendency in the child protection field to reduce the investigation task to the first two purposes and overlook the relationship between the worker and family. Without an emphasis on worker-family relationship, the likelihood of antagonism between the parties increases, as well as the likelihood of greater statutory intervention.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A WELL-HANDLED INVESTIGATION

A well-handled investigation should involve:

- An exploration of the allegation based on the usual agency protocol for examining danger and harm, incorporating full input from family members regarding their perspective on the allegations
- Integrating into the examination of risk an exploration of signs of safety, including past and present protectiveness, family strengths and resources, and the family's own plans for increasing safety
- Listening carefully to the family's experience and letting them know they have been understood
- Sensitivity and empathy for the anxiety that the investigation will provoke within the family
- A very clear and open stance concerning the agency's statutory role and authority
- An up-front and honest attitude about the allegations
- Conducting the interview slowly and flexibly
- Focusing on small steps and making sure each step is understood, while recognizing that not everything has to be accomplished at once
- Providing choice and the chance for family members to provide input wherever possible
- Interviewing for information rather than the solutions. Workers can take some of the pressure off themselves by working to gather the best possible information rather than trying to quickly arrive at decisions and plans. Finding solutions is best left for later in the casework process.

INTEGRATING THE SIGNS OF SAFETY APPROACH INTO THE INVESTIGATION

There is no one right way to use the model or its strategies. Instead, the signs of safety elements provide an increased repertoire for workers, which enhances the possibility of partnership. In addition, the collaborative partnership established at investigation dramatically improves the likelihood of collaboration in subsequent casework.

CHAPTER SEVEN DEVELOPING A COOPERATIVE CASE PLAN

Professional-led case plans that include mandatory parenting or child development courses is usually a recipe for noncompliance or participation based on a sense of obligation. In the end, this will bring about little change in parenting behaviour. The signs of safety approach attempts to involve the service recipients as much as possible in case planning.

Case plans should:

- Clearly articulate the statutory agency's goals for the case in terms of what constitutes enough safety for the case to be closed
- Incorporate the family's strengths and resources as much as possible
- Encourage things the family already does to create a safe environment and draw upon identified exceptions
- Include the family's own safety ideas as much as possible
- Draw on the family's general goals if there is a likelihood that they will increase the child's safety
- Always use those people who are willing (and able) to take action
- Wherever possible, be presented in the context of family members' goals and aspirations and their position regarding the problem
- Incorporate compliments where family members are already moving toward their own goals or goals of the agency

Once a child has been removed from his/her family, the tasks facing the child protection worker escalate. It is rare for partnership to manifest fully in the very early stages of child protection cases if significant statutory power (such as removing a child from home) is used. Regardless, it is vital to listen carefully to the parents, communicate the possibility of choice, and introduce the notion that their input and ideas are important, beginning with the development of a cooperative case plan.

The Issue of Denial

The traditional and dominating view in child protection asserts that cases in which there is denial of responsibility are essentially unworkable and untreatable. Child protection thus becomes organized around the issue of denial, and the worker focuses on trying to get the parents to admit responsibility for the maltreatment. This leads to the stand-off stalemate that occurs between parents and workers the world over. Planning options become limited to one of two extremes: either the case is closed due to the lack of capacity to create change, or removal of the children (permanent or extended) is pursued.

Casework is more productive when professionals organize their thinking around safety, specifically around building sufficient safety for the child to remain in or return home. The safety approach offers the worker greater latitude when acknowledgment of responsibility is not the only avenue through which progress can be made. Acknowledgment, while preferable, is neither a sufficient or necessary condition of safety. It is still an important agency goal, but it must be pursued in such a way that it does not become the dominant agency goal.

At the same time, the authors are not suggesting that an agency cease further investigation into an issue of responsibility simply because it has been denied. When the worker and agency recognize that progress can still be made without acknowledgment of responsibility, workers are less likely to be overtaken by a sense of hopelessness and are better able to deal with the family in an open-minded manner.

Workers should proceed to establish a good balance between investigating the seriousness of the circumstances, building cooperation, and creating a focus on increasing safety.

AGENCY GOALS: THE CORNERSTONE OF CASE PLANNING

Case planning needs to be informed by careful assessment of past maltreatment and the likelihood of future harm. However, this traditional process of risk assessment cannot tell workers how to address the risks. A focus on telling a family *not to do something* is hard to work toward without providing something else to fill the vacuum.

A focus on what the agency expects to see happening is much more positive and gives everyone involved something to work toward. The parents may not like the goals, but they will have something to aim for.

CHECKING THE FAMILY'S PERSPECTIVE: CONFIDENCE, WILLINGNESS, AND CAPACITY REVISITED

When parents and children feel they have no choice but to agree with the professionals, families may go so far as to give their assent to plans they have no intention of implementing. This phenomenon can be dealt with by checking all plans with family members before they are committed to paper to openly clarify the family's willingness, confidence and capacity to implement.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAINTAINING THE FOCUS ON SAFETY : ONGOING CASEWORK AND TREATMENT FOLLOWING UP, ASSUMING NOTHING

When workers restrain their expectations, they are unlikely to be disappointed if the family is unable or unwilling to implement plans. Assuming nothing allows the worker to notice improvements that do occur and to be sensitive to changes that arise from unexpected circumstances. By keeping expectations in check, the worker becomes less invested in a particular outcome, while also allowing for the reality that many families live in vulnerable circumstances and even with the best of intentions, may not be able to achieve what they and the worker hope for, or have committed themselves to.

TREATMENT, NOT THERAPY: AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

In many cases, the ongoing work of dealing with abuse or neglect issues occurs (or is meant to occur) in 'therapy'. The authors however believe that services provided by therapists or counselors to child maltreatment cases should be referred to as 'treatment'. Therapists have an ongoing debate among themselves as to how they should exercise their role with families in which children are at risk. Therapists working with child maltreatment cases have to make judgments, and their involvement cannot focus exclusively on what the client family wants, as would occur if maltreatment had not occurred. The main focus is changed and becomes conditional, or one of assisting family achievement of goals, provided that the safety of the child(ren) is the main consideration.

BOGGED DOWN AND STUCK CASES

Cases often become stuck because the casework lacks a purposive focus.

Suggested resolution:

- If what you're doing doesn't work, don't do it again; do something different
- Once you know what works, do more of it

Admitting That the Case is Not Progressing Well

Examples of the 'something different' strategies:

- consider initiating a service recipient-led review,
- or where appropriate and applicable, have the professionals admit that they have been wrong, admit that they have missed something, or that they feel that what they are doing is not helping the situation.

These strategies change the power differential between worker and family and can serve to rebuild cooperation.

CASE CLOSURE

The authors indicate that their worst fear is that a child protection worker will utilize the signs of safety approach with a family, close the case based on signs of safety that have been created or found and then, subsequently, learn that a child has been significantly injured, abused again, or perhaps killed. At the time of publication, that situation has not occurred. Their conclusion is that case closure is a judgment call but that closure relies on a carefully documented list of Signs of Safety.

CHAPTER NINE

FOCUSING ON GOOD PRACTICE: THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

A training process is required to equip workers to integrate and consistently deliver collaborative practice.

- Assume good practice already exists and work carefully to elicit the Signs of Safety approach
- Good practice in different countries has shown that workers consistently aspire to collaborative practice.
- The practice elements of the Signs of Safety are not new concepts and many countries are already doing these sorts of things.
- What may be new is the structure that makes the material significant and meaningful in their interactions with families and in the assessment and planning processes.
- Workers pursuing collaborative strategies often operate at the periphery of the protocols and conventions established by the agency.

Good Practice Needs Broad Support

Good child protection practice requires good training for field staff, thoughtful supervision and management, and communication and collaboration among all levels of the agency. The notion of partnership and collaboration advocated throughout the book needs to involve the whole context of child protection and relationships between professionals and families, inside and in the broader service network encompassing child protection.

SIGNS OF SAFETY

The field of child welfare has a tumultuous history of searching for definitive solutions.

Various legislation enacted during the 1980's and 1990's was child-centred, focussing on the "best interests of the child". At the time these enactments were a blessing. But their implementation also proved to be a problem, as they were accompanied by strong legal mandates, and imperatives to be child-focussed. Such a manner of implementation lost much of the value that the family had to offer.

In addition, the maltreatment of children is a complex and complicated issue that does not lend itself to simple explanations or solutions.