1. Introduction: A Constantly Evolving Approach

It is with great pride that I have prepared and offer this Signs of Safety Briefing Paper. I believe I can confidently say that the Signs of Safety approach to child protection casework is now recognised internationally as the leading progressive approach to child protection casework currently available.

Although we have been growing the approach since Steve Edwards and I began to collaborate in the late 1980’s, the last few years has seen an explosion of interest and engagement with the approach all around the world. The primary reason for the recent momentum of the approach is that it is completely grounded in and continues to evolve based around what works for the frontline practitioner. There are currently at least 50 jurisdictions in 12 countries undertaking some type of substantive implementation of the Signs of Safety. I am very proud to be able to report that the most substantial and comprehensive system-wide implementation is underway in my own state of Western Australia where the Signs of Safety is the assessment and practice framework for all child protection practice. That implementation is ongoing and began in mid 2008. Beyond Western Australia the most substantial system-wide implementations are occurring (or have occurred) in: Olmsted, Carver, Shurburne and Scott Counties, Minnesota; Gateshead Children’s Services Authority, England; Bureaus Jeugdzorg in Drenthe and Zeeland provinces, The Netherlands; Open Home Foundation, New Zealand; all Copenhagen boroughs in Denmark; Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child and Family Services, British Columbia.

Child protection services need to be structured and systematic in their organisational and casework responses to child maltreatment. Anyone who was influenced by the open, almost-anything-goes field that was social work in the 1970’s, knows that while there was extraordinarily good child protection work happening at that time, there was also correspondingly appalling work happening at the other end of the practice continuum. Since the 1970’s, when the poorest organisational and casework practices began to be exposed through critical case reviews and death inquiries, proceduralisation has become the dominating paradigm for reforming child protection practice in all developed countries around the world (Ferguson 2004; Munro 2004; 2010). Unfortunately, proceduralisation has not created the transformation that was hoped for. The following words of the US government’s 1991 National Commission on Children are probably truer today than they were when they were penned:

> If the nation had deliberately designed a system that would frustrate the professionals who staff it, anger the public who finance it, and abandon the children who depend on it, it could not have not done a better job than the present child welfare system.

(Cited in Thompson, 1995, p. 5)
Framing the child protection task primarily as a procedural and conceptual challenge has lead almost universally to systems across the developed world becoming increasingly expensive and defensive. Child protection systems worldwide are facing increasing numbers of children in care for longer periods, increasing numbers of parents being taken to court and increasing staff turnover, alongside decreasing staff morale. (It is worth stating that this does not mean that rates of actual child abuse have increased in these countries—determining that is a much harder analysis.) In 2009 the Sacramento Grand Jury (2010), inquiring into child protection services in Sacramento County released a report entitled; Child Protective Services: Nothing Ever Changes—Ever. While that title sounds pessimistic it is actually very easy to mount an argument that the title is polly-annerish, since the reality is that almost all child protection jurisdictions everywhere in the developed world have indeed changed—they have all become worse!

Seeking to reform child protection practice, the burgeoning international community of agencies and professionals involved in the Signs of Safety work and I have taken a different route. The strategy for change that animates the Signs of Safety, in its model development as well as its pursuit of improved outcomes, is to ground the evolution of the approach in what actually works for workers and service recipients in everyday practice. The Signs of Safety approach has been created on the shoulders of giants. Those giants are the frontline practitioners from all over the world who have taken up the Signs of Safety approach and then made a conscious commitment to describe what they are doing, what they are struggling with and most importantly, what is working for them. This is the collaborative, appreciative inquiry method that is the driving force behind the ongoing evolution of the Signs of Safety approach.

The recent explosion of agencies and practitioners using and reporting their work around the world means that the Signs of Safety, which has always been a moving target, is evolving daily. This is exciting but the change is now so rapid I am certainly not able to keep up with all of the developments. The following are six of the most notable changes that have occurred within the Signs of Safety practice approach since the release of Turnell and Edwards 1999:

- Creating a second, more widely used three column version of the Signs of Safety risk assessment and planning framework (Turnell, 2009; Turnell, In Press c)
- Evolving and locating rigorous risk assessment process at the heart of the Signs of Safety practice framework (Turnell, 2009; Turnell, In Press c)
- Creating and evolving numerous straightforward tools to place the child’s voice at the centre of Signs of Safety practice which involve children directly in assessment and planning (Turnell and Essex, 2006; Turnell, In Press, a; Turnell, In Press c; Weld 2008)
- Integrating and growing much more rigorous and systematic collaborative safety planning processes (Turnell and Essex, 2006; Turnell, 2010; Turnell, In Press c)
● Evolving and integrating appreciative inquiry processes for learning what works for frontline practitioners (In Press c)

● Distilling the thinking and strategy that best enables organisational implementation of the Signs of Safety.

This briefing paper, which will be constantly updated through our website at www.signsofsafety.net, is designed to give an overview of the current state of play of the ongoing development of the Signs of Safety approach to child protection casework.

The paper begins by locating the Signs of Safety within its values base by exploring three foundational principles. All models and approaches have their genesis in the journey of particular professionals, wrestling with particular issues in particular contexts. These are important stories to tell in understanding any approach, thus the next section offers a brief history of the development of the Signs of Safety. Chapter 5 details the extent and locations of international use and the sorts of changes in data sets and outcomes that these jurisdictions have found in using the Signs of Safety. Chapter 6 goes to the heart of the Signs of Safety practice framework describing how this approach frames and undertakes the core child protection task of risk assessment and planning. Chapter 7 looks at the tools the approach draws upon to locate children in the middle of the practice. The final two chapters focus on system implementation. This briefing paper has evolved and is largely derived from the Background Paper (DCP, 2008) I prepared for the Western Australian Department for Child Protection when we began the state wide implementation in 2008. My thanks go to this department and to its Director General Terry Murphy for permission to rework the original Background Paper into this Briefing Paper.
2. The Goal Is Always Child Safety!

One of the biggest problems that bedevils child protection work, identified in many child death inquiries, is the Tower of Babel problem, where everyone is speaking a different language (Munro, 2002, Reder, Duncan and Gray 1993). The Signs of Safety framework is designed to create a shared focus among all stakeholders in child protection cases, both professional and family, it is designed to help everyone think their way into and through the case from the ‘biggest’ person (often someone like a director general, a judge or child psychiatrist) to the ‘smallest’ person (the child).

However, completing the Signs of Safety framework—even when it is done collaboratively between the parents and children and all the professionals involved in the case—is only a means to an end. Large child protection systems, with their bureaucratic tendencies can often get means and ends confused and thus the completion of assessment frameworks can become a highly prized, over-valued key performance indicator. While consistency of assessment is a critical factor in good outcomes in child protection casework, it does not of itself equate to on-the-ground child safety.

Completing the Signs of Safety assessment framework is, in the end, simply a process of creating a map of the circumstances surrounding a vulnerable child. As with all maps, the Signs of Safety map needs always to be seen as a mechanism to arrive at a destination. That destination is rigorous, sustainable, everyday child safety in the actual home and places in which the child lives.
3. **Three Core Principles of the Signs of Safety Framework and Approach**

Child protection practice and culture tends toward paternalism. This occurs whenever the professional adopts the position that they know what is wrong in the lives of service recipient families and they know what the solutions are to those problems. A culture of paternalism can be seen as the ‘default’ setting of child protection practice. This is a culture that both further disenfranchises the families that child protection organisations work with and exhausts the front-line professionals that staff them.

The Signs of Safety approach seeks to create a more constructive culture around child protection organisation and practice. Central to this is the use of specific practice tools and processes where professionals and families members can engage with each other in partnership to address situations of child abuse and maltreatment. Three principles underpin the Signs of Safety approach.

### 3.1. Working Relationships

Constructive working relationships between professionals and family members, and between professionals themselves, are the heart and soul of effective practice in situations where children suffer abuse. A significant body of thinking and research suggests that best outcomes for vulnerable children arise when constructive relationships exist in both these arenas (Cashmore 2002; Department of Health 1995; MacKinnon 1998; Reder et al. 1993; Trotter 2002 and 2006; Walsh 1998). Research with parents and children who have been through the child protection system assert the same finding (Butler & Williamson 1994; Cashmore 2002; Gilligan 2000; Farmer & Owen 1995; Farmer and Pollock 1998; McCullum 1995; MacKinnon 1998; Teoh et al. 2004; Thoburn, Lewis & Shemmings 1995; Westcott 1995; Westcott & Davies 1996).

It only takes a few moments reflection to grasp the truth of the assertion that relationships are the bedrock of human change and growth but this reality makes many very nervous in the fraught domain of child protection. The concern is that when a professional builds a positive relationship with abusive parents that professional will then begin to overlook or minimise the seriousness of the abuse. The literature describes such relationships as ‘naïve’ (Dingwall, 1983) or ‘dangerous’ (Dale et. al. 1986; Calder 2008).

While concerns about a relationship-focus in child protection practice usually centre on working with parents, relationships between professionals themselves can be equally, if not more problematic. Child death inquiries consistently describe scenarios where professional relationships and communication are dysfunctional. Meta-analyses of child death inquiries such as Department of Health (2002); Munro (1996 and 1998); Hill (1990); Reder, Duncan & Grey (1993) would suggest that poorly functioning professional relationships of this sort are as concerning as any situation in which a worker overlooks or minimizes abusive behaviour in an endeavour to maintain a relationship with a parent.
Any approach to child protection practice that seeks to locate working relationships at the heart of the business needs to do so through a critical examination of what constructive child protection relationships actually look like. Too often, proponents of relationship-grounded, child protection practice have articulated visions of partnership with families and collaboration amongst professionals that are overly simplistic. To be meaningful, it is crucial that descriptions of child protection working relationships closely reflect the typically messy lived experience of the workers, parents, children and other professionals who are doing the difficult business of relating to each other in contested child protection contexts.

3.2. **Munro’s maxim: thinking critically, fostering a stance of inquiry**

In the contested and anxious environment of child protection casework the paternalistic impulse to establish the truth of any given situation is a constant. As Baistow suggests:

> Whether or not we think there are absolute perpetrators and absolute victims in child abuse cases, and whether or not we believe in a single uncontaminated ‘truth’ about ‘what happened’, powerful forces pull us towards enacting a script, which offers us these parts and these endings. (Baistow et. al., 1995: vi).

The difficulty is that as soon as the professional decides they know the truth about a given situation this begins to fracture working relationships with other professionals and family members, all of whom very likely hold different positions. More than this the professional ceases to think critically and tends to exclude or reinterpret any additional information that doesn’t conform to their original position (English 1996).

Eileen Munro, who is internationally recognized for her work in researching typical errors of practice and reasoning in child protection (Munro 1996: 1998), states:

> The single most important factor in minimizing errors (in child protection practice) is to admit that you may be wrong (Munro 2008: 125) 1.

Restraining an individual’s natural urge to be definitive and to colonise one particular view of the truth is the constant challenge of the practice leader in the child protection field. Enacting Munro’s maxim requires that all processes that support and inform practice foster a questioning approach or a spirit of inquiry as the core professional stance of the child protection practitioner.

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1 Italics added for contextual clarity.
3.3. LANDING GRAND ASPIRATIONS IN EVERYDAY PRACTICE

Just about everybody, from taxi drivers to parliamentarians want to tell the child protection worker how to do their job. The problem is most of these people have never knocked on a door to deliver a child abuse allegation to a parent and most of the advice comes off like ’voices from twenty seven thousand feet’.

In an exact parallel to the all-knowing way a paternalistic frontline practitioner approaches a family, supervisors, academics and head office managers have a proclivity to try and impose their views on the front-line practice practitioner. At all levels this is ‘command and control social work’ and it rarely delivers a constructive outcome. This command and control approach alienates those at the front-line and erases the notion and expression of their wisdom and knowledge. Seeking to antidote this problem the Signs of Safety approach to child protection practice has been developed hand-in-hand with practitioners, first in Western Australia and then in USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, New Zealand, Finland and Japan. In every location the approach has developed more rigour, more skilfulness and greater depth of thinking by finding and documenting practitioner and service recipient descriptions of what on-the-ground good practice with complex and challenging cases looks, smells and lives like.

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\(^2\) This is an expression used by Russell Martin, Director of Open Homes Foundation New Zealand.

\(^3\) An expression coined by another New Zealander, former Child Youth and Family Chief Social Worker, Craig Smith.
4. History: How the Signs of Safety Approach Evolved

The Signs of Safety approach to child protection casework was developed through the 1990’s in Western Australia. The approach was created by Steve Edwards and myself in collaboration with over 150 West Australian child protection workers and is now being utilized in jurisdictions in the USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, The Netherlands, New Zealand and Japan.

The impetus to create the Signs of Safety approach arose from Steve Edwards’ experience of 16 years as a frontline child protection practitioner, eight of these working primarily with Aboriginal communities, within the Western Australian statutory child protection agency. Steve was very dissatisfied with most of the models and theory regarding child protection practice that he had encountered. Despite 16 years of frontline practice, Steve felt that most of the policy, guidance and books he read and most of what he learnt at university and in training (essentially the theory) had little correspondence with his experience of actually doing child protection work (undertaking investigations, deciding when and how to remove children, working with wards of the state, dealing with angry parents etc.).
As a result of this, throughout his child protection career, Steve always sought out new ideas that might better describe his experience of practice. In 1989 Steve and I began to collaborate after Steve became interested in the brief therapy work I was doing with families referred to a non-government counselling agency by the then Department of Community Welfare. Each week, for over three years, Steve would observe the brief therapy work from behind a one-way mirror and then began to apply these solution-focused and focused problem resolution brief therapy ideas and techniques (Berg 1994; deShazer 1984; 1985; 1988; 1991; Weakland and Jordan 1990; Watzlawick et.al. 1974 ) into his practice as a child protection worker.

Steve and my collaboration and Steve’ use of the brief therapy ideas in his own child protection practice between 1989 and 1993 were the beginnings of the Signs of Safety approach. In 1993, Steve and I began the process of working with other child protection practitioners, training them in what they had learnt from the previous three years of collaboration. This opportunity was first opened up when then assistant District Director John Hancock invited us to train all practitioners in a rural district then called Eastern Region and work with them for six months to implement the approach in all their casework. Between 1994 and 2000, we undertook eight separate six-month projects with over 150 West Australian practitioners.

During this first seven years the initial formulation of the Signs of Safety approach to child protection practice evolved and was refined. During the first month of each six-month training and action-learning project, Steve and I would provide 5 days training in the Signs of Safety approach, as it had evolved and was able to be articulated at that point in time. The project groups usually comprised between 15 to 20 workers, but sometimes, for example in the first three projects in Eastern and Peel Regions they involved considerably more practitioners. The initial five-day training was always grounded in practice and would always involve other workers who had used the approach describing their experiences to the current group of trainees.

Following this initial training, each six-month project shifted into action learning mode. Steve and I would spend at least one day a month looking closely with the workers at where they had been using the approach and it had made a difference as well as exploring and helping with cases in which they were stuck. By focusing on where workers were using the approach and making progress, we learnt directly from the practitioners themselves about where, when and how they were actually able to use the Signs of Safety approach. Steve had always insisted that only ideas, skills and practices that workers actually used would be included as part of the Signs of Safety model. This collaborative, action learning process used in all follow-up sessions was the basis of what I have come to describe as ‘building a culture of appreciative inquiry around frontline practice’ (Turnell 2006; 2007a; 2007b and In Press). This is the core practice and organisational change strategy underpinning the Signs of Safety approach. Steve and I brought two publications to press, which directly describe the West Australian 1990’s period of the evolution of the Signs of Safety approach (Turnell and Edwards 1997; 1999).
5. International Use and Data

5.1. International Use

Since 2000, I have been working overseas for at least three months each year providing training and consultancy in the Signs of Safety approach and safety-organised child protection practice. By this process tens of thousands of child protection practitioners have been trained in the approach in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands, France, United Kingdom, Canada, USA, Japan and New Zealand. Sustained implementations of the approach have been undertaken or are occurring in: Zeeland and Drenthe Provinces, The Netherlands (both current); Botkyrka Jonkoping, Spanga-Tensta, Umea, Vaggeryd, Malmo, Skåerholmen, Ekerö, Haninge and Upplands Vaesby in Stockholm plus Växjö and Trollhatten Communs, Sweden (all but last mentioned are current); all Copenhagen Boroughs, Denmark (current); Gateshead, Coventry, West Berkshire, Brighton-Hove, Solihull, North Yorkshire and Oxfordshire Boroughs, England (all current); Edinburgh Council, Barnardos Dundee, Scotland; Olmsted, Carver, Isanti, Hubbard, St Louis, Shurburne, Scott, and Stearns Counties, Minnesota, Massachusetts Department of Children and Families; Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services; County of San Diego Child Welfare Services; State of Maine Child and Family Services (all current); Child Youth and Family Services, Open Home Foundation and Family Works Tauranga, New Zealand (all current); many Children’s Aid Societies in the greater Toronto area including Hamilton Brant, Missauga, Toronto, London and Guelph; Ktunaxa Kinbasket Child and Family Services, British Columbia, Xyolhemeylh Child & Family Services British Columbia, Canada (all current); Satima, Yokohama, Osaka and Nagoya Prefectures, Japan (all current).

During this period, the Signs of Safety model has continued to evolve as it has been applied and utilised in many countries, across all aspects of the child protection task and as it has been used consistently in increasingly higher risk cases. Later publications describe the further development of the approach in North America, Europe, Japan and New Zealand (Brennan and Robson, 2010; Chapman and Field 2007; Fleming 1998; Hogg and Wheeler 2004; Gardestrom 2006; Lohrbach and Sawyer 2004; Inoue et. al. 2006a; Inoue et. al. 2006b; Inoue and Inoue, 2008; Jack 2005; Koziolek 2007; Myers 2005; Parker 2009; Shennan 2006; Simmons, Lehman and Duguay 2008; Turnell 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b and In Press a, b and c; Turnell, and Essex 2006; Turnell, Elliott and Hogg 2007; Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran 2008; Weld 2008; Westbrook 2006; Wheeler, Hogg, and Fegan 2006). The Signs of Safety approach has also been used as the organizing framework within collaborative conferencing procedures as an ongoing sustained practice in Western Australia (DCP, 2009) West Berkshire, England, Trollhatten, Sweden and Olmsted County, Minnesota USA (Christianson and Maloney 2006; Lohrbach and Sawyer 2003, 2004; Lohrbach, et. al. 2005; West Berkshire Council 2008). More information is also available at www.signsofsafety.net.
5.2. Evidence Base/Supporting Data

5.2.1. Professional Identity and Job Satisfaction

In the 1990’s Steve Edwards and I undertook two follow-up studies with participants in the six-month Signs of Safety development groups focused on professional identity and job satisfaction. Participants rated their sense of professional identity and job satisfaction as frontline child protection workers at the beginning and end of the six-month project and then again in a follow-up survey 12 months after the completion of the six-month project. These studies involved 31 participants and showed an almost two point increase average (on a ten point scale) in the workers’ sense of professional identity and job satisfaction over the 18 months from project commencement to 12 month follow-up. While this was a low key and informal study of workers’ experiences, the same findings are reflected in all the jurisdictions where the Signs of Safety approach has been applied systematically. Two separate worker and supervisor descriptions of the impact of using the Signs of Safety can be found in Turnell, Elliott and Hogg (2007) and Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran (2008). A video interview of 15 crisis, investigative, long term and treatment child protection staff from Carver County Minnesota in which the staff describe their experience of the approach and its impact on their practice and experience of the role can be found at: http://www.signsofsafety.net/carveraiinterviewmarch2008.

The most substantial survey of practitioner experience of using the Signs of Safety approach was undertaken in Western Australia (DCP 2010) which found high levels of worker satisfaction with the approach, increased sense of role confidence and professional identity and a strong sense that services had improved for service recipients.

5.2.2. Case and System Change Data

The longest running and most complete implementation of the Signs of Safety within a statutory child protection system has occurred in Olmsted County Child and Family Services, Minnesota USA. OCCFS have utilised their version of the Signs of Safety framework to organise all child protection casework since 2000 and all casework is focused around specific family-enacted safety plans. Before presenting the Olmsted data it is important to emphasise that the reform agenda within OCCFS goes beyond Signs of Safety. In 1996 OCCFS were one of the first counties in the USA to implement the use of family group conferencing. OCCFS have maintained this effort and have significantly evolved their use of participatory conferencing processes such that all of their high-risk caseload is managed through the regular (as often as weekly or fortnightly) family and professional conferencing. Almost all child protection cases before Olmsted county courts are diverted into a conferencing process involving all stakeholders, family and professional, and high-risk infant cases are conferenced within 24 hours of presentation at hospital. OCCFS also maintain a rigorous front-end actuarial safety assessment process that clearly distinguishes cases by risk type and thus the county has been able to pioneer one of the USA’s most successful differential response programmes. This reform agenda began in 1994 and has been sustained through the leadership of agency Director, Rob Sawyer.
the 12 years to 2007 during a period in which OCCFS has tripled the number of children the agency works with, the agency has halved the proportion of children taken into care and halved the number of families taken before the courts. It would be possible to suggest that this may be the result of a system that is focused on cost cutting or is lax on child abuse except that in 2006, 2007 and 2008 the county recorded a recidivism rate of less that 2% as measured through state and federal audit. The expected federal standard in the US is 6.7% and very few state or county jurisdictions meet that standard. The Olmsted data set are extraordinary figures as most jurisdictions in most countries have significantly increased the proportion of children in care and families taken to court in that period (for example see UK data during the supposed ‘Refocusing’ era 1992-2002 in McKeigue, and Beckett, 2004). For more information on the OCCFS work see: Christianson and Maloney (2006); Lohrbach and Sawyer (2003, 2004); Lohrbach et. al. (2005); Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran (2008) and go to www.co.olmsted.mn.us.

Following the lead of Olmsted County, a second Minnesota county, Carver County Community Social Services (CCCSS) began implementing the Signs of Safety approach in late 2004. Westbrock (2006) undertook a ‘before and after’ in-depth, qualitative study at Carver with nine randomly chosen cases looking at the impact of the Signs of Safety practice for service recipients in the first year of the County’s implementation. The study found an increase in service recipient satisfaction in most of the cases and the research helped CCCSS practitioners to improve their skills, particularly in providing choice and in involving parents in safety planning. Significant changes in case data are usually not seen in any form of child protection reform agenda until at least the third year of a meaningful implementation but by the end 2007, some trends were emerging in the Carver data set. In 2004 and 2005 the Carver system terminated parental rights in 21 families, through 2006/7/8 only six families experienced the ultimate sanction. Carver’s out of home placements and children in long term care has been trending downwards over the past three years with new placements in 2008 more than half the 2005 rate. Throughout this time recidivism rates have been trending downwards. These figures are figures are very encouraging but drawn from the first four years of full implementation and it is too early to say whether these trends will be maintained. The next two to three years will be critical in ascertaining whether the Signs of Safety implementation at CCCSS is having a significant long-term impact in casework data. More information about the Carver implementation can be found at: http://www.signsofsafety.net/pages/implementations.html that includes video-recorded interviews with 15 staff and a long-term alcoholic mother describing her experience of the Signs of Safety approach and Koziolek (2007).

With the ongoing and sustained system wide implementations in Olmsted and Carver counties the Minnesota State Department for Human Services together with Casey Foundation have funded a process for training and implementing Signs of Safety through

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*For me as an Australian sensitised by the trauma of the stolen generations this five-fold reduction is particularly satisfying.*
19 other counties in Minnesota. Shurburne County have been one of the early adopters in this undertaking and in the years 2007 to 2009 they have halved the use of court in child protection cases and in 2009 reduced the county its placement of children by 19 percent. A substantial independent evaluation has been undertaken by the Wilder Research Group (Wilder 2010) which describes the successes and struggles experienced by the 19 Minnesota counties involved in the statewide project.

Gateshead Children’s Services Authority referral and assessment (investigation) teams have been using the Signs of Safety approach in all their work since 2001. This has had a significant influence on practice and the culture of practice in this local authority—including the fact that Gateshead referral and assessment teams have a very stable workforce with far lower staff turnover than investigative teams in other equivalent authorities. Gateshead local authority consistently scores very highly on the UK’s national government Ofsted audit ratings including being assessed at Grade 4 in both 2007 and 2008. In 2007 Gateshead was one of the 14 top Local Authorities, in 2008 it was in the top three. Gateshead’s standings in the national government’s audit processes cannot be directly correlated to their practitioners’ use of Signs of Safety but professionals in the agency say that this approach has made a significant contribution to the practice culture of the organisation.

Between 2005 and 2008 the Danish Borough of Copenhagen undertook a three-year ‘Families in the Centre’ project to equip the city’s child protection workers with a higher levels of skills to better engage families. This project involved training and ongoing support for 380 workers in three successive, one-year programmes in solution-focused brief therapy, and the Signs of Safety. The Project was independently evaluated (Holmgård Sorensen, 2009). Interviewing 171 practitioners, which found the following data:

- The project provided practitioners with more useful tools and skill set than previously available to them (75%)
- Increased practitioner focus on the family’s resources (72%)
- Increased practitioner’s inclusion of family’s strategies and solutions (55%)
- Practitioners gave families more responsibility (49%)
- Regular use of Signs of Safety at team meetings (79%)
- Used Signs Of Safety framework together with families (69%)
- Used Signs Of Safety framework at network meetings with other professionals (66%)

As part of the study a cohort of 139 families who received intensive services and were assessed as having a high likelihood that the children may need to be placed in care were compared to a control group. The Families in the Centre cohort had a lower proportion of children taken into care – 15% removals compared to 42% in the control group - and the cost/per family serviced was significantly reduced.
The Department for Child Protection Western Australia began a full system wide implementation in mid 2008. This implementation was undertaken following a two year period when the Department struggled to deal with a series of very public child deaths with consequent low staff morale and high turnover and was subject to a major review of its operations called the Ford Review. Lead by the new Director General Terry Murphy, a significant reform agenda was launched following the Ford Review, which had as a centrepiece the Signs of Safety implementation. By 2010 frontline staff turnover in Western Australia had declined to 13.2% almost half the rate of 2006. This compares very favourably with all other Australian jurisdictions, which often face annual frontline staff turnover rates in the order of 25%.

Two recent English reviews of practice (Gardner, 2008 and DSCF, 2009) have identified the problem that the ‘recent emphasis on strengths based approaches and the positive aspects of families (for example in the Common Assessment Framework) arguably discourages workers from making professional judgments about deficits in parents’ behaviour which might be endangering their children’ (DSCF 2009, p.47). Both reviews suggest the Signs of Safety approach is the one approach they are aware of that incorporates a strengths base alongside an exploration of danger and risk.

Gardner’s research focuses on working with neglect and emotional harm and states the following:

In England some children’s departments are adopting this (Signs of Safety) approach to improve decision making in child protection. Police, Social Care with adults and children and Children’s Guardians thought it especially useful with neglect because:

- parents say they are clearer about what is expected of them and receive more relevant support
- the approach is open and encourages transparent decision-making
- the professionals had to be specific about their concerns for the child’s safety
- this encouraged better presentation of evidence
- the degree of protective elements and of actual or apprehended risks could be set out visually on a scale, easier for all to understand than lengthy reports
- once set out, the risks did not have to continually be revisited
- the group could acknowledge strengths and meetings could focus on how to achieve safety. (Gardner, 2008, p 78).

Emily Keddell a PhD student at Otago University, New Zealand undertook an in-depth qualitative study of ten cases with ten families involving 19 children in care. The study looked at the work of Open Home Foundation social workers in building safety to be able to reunify the children into the care of the families of origin. 16 of the 19 children were reunified in 9 families. Keddell’s study (Keddell 2001 and Keddell in preparation) found that the key elements in enabling the successful reunification work were:
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- Strong working relationship between worker and parents
- Strong focus on parental and family strengths
- Sustained and detailed exploration of what exactly safe parenting looked like and how it could be achieved
- Time to build the relationship and do the casework

The Signs of Safety approach draws upon and utilises the pioneering safety planning work of Susie Essex, John Gumbleton and Colin Luger from Bristol within their Resolutions approach to responding to ‘denied’ child abuse. The Resolutions work is described in Essex, et. al., 1996; 1999; Essex, Gumbleton, Luger, and Luske 1997; Turnell and Essex, 2006.

Gumbleton (1997) studied outcomes for 38 children from the first 17 families that had undertaken the resolutions program in the UK. The follow-up data was derived from child protection registers and social service files. The families involved in the study had completed the program between eight and 45 months prior to participating in the study, with an average time since completion of 27 months. The study found that the resolutions program had been successful in helping protect the vast majority of the children in the sample, with only one child known to have experienced further abuse. Depending on whether the re-abuse calculation is made relative to the number of families or number of children in the study this equates to a re-abuse rate of 3 or 7 percent. There are many methodological issues involved in interpreting and comparing child maltreatment re-abuse rates derived from different studies (see Fluke and Hollinshead 2003 for discussion on this matter), however a wide range of studies suggest re-abuse rates for families involved in the child protection system, generally fall in a range between 20 to 40%.

Constructive relationships between professionals and family members, and between professionals themselves, are the heart and soul of effective child protection practice. A significant body of thinking and research tells us that best outcomes for vulnerable children arise when constructive relationships exist in both these arenas (see, Cameron, and Coady 2007; Cashmore, 2002; de Boer and Coady, 2007; Department of Health, 1995; MacKinnon, 1998; Reder, Duncan & Grey, 1993; Trotter, 2002; Walsh, 1998; Yatchmenoff, 2005). By contrast research has also demonstrated that working relationships professional relationships and attitudes toward service recipients are very often negative, judgmental, confrontational and aggressive (Cameron and Coady, 2007; Dale, 2004; Forrester et. al., 2008 a and b). A significant difficulty is that little attention is given within the literature of social work and the broader helping professions about how to build constructive helping relationships when the professional also has a strong coercive role (Healy 2000; Trotter 2006). The Signs of Safety approach to child protection casework seeks to fill this vacuum and there is every likelihood that the success of the approach as described above arises because the model provides specific guidance and structure to assist practitioners to both undertake their statutory role and to do this collaboratively.
5.2.3. Towards practice-based evidence

There is an increasing emphasis being placed on the importance of evidence-based practice in the helping professions and child protection. Quite apart from philosophical debates about the significance and meaning of evidence-based practice there are considerable problems in believing it is possible to apply a strict evidence base to child protection practice. Within the field of psychotherapy for example it is at least sometimes possible to undertake the ‘gold standard’ of randomised trials focused on particular modalities of treatment. Such research is impossible within child protection services, since it is not ethical or professionally responsible to randomly assign cases of child abuse to service and non-service research groups. Further, in child protection services, particularly in high-risk cases (these being the cases that are usually of most significant research interest) there is almost always so much going on (e.g., family involvement with multiple services, court proceedings, police involvement etc., etc.) it is effectively impossible to stake a definitive claim for the causative impact of any particular change in policy, guidance or practice. Usually the best that can be achieved is to track a child protection system’s outcome data and to endeavour to link this to the time periods during which a new initiative was implemented.

A significant problem with most child protection research is that large data sets and key performance indicators hold very limited import for the frontline practitioner and offers them little inspiration about how to change their practice. This has led some child protection thinkers to call for research that has closer ties with the direct experience and ‘smell’ of practice. Thus Professor Harry Ferguson has proposed research focused on ‘critical best practice’ (Ferguson 2001, 2003, 2004; Ferguson et. al. 2008). Ferguson’s work can be interpreted as one expression of the growing movement toward ‘practice-based evidence’.


The Signs of Safety approach has been created and evolved with an acute sensitivity to the lived-experience of those at the sharp end of the child protection business, the service deliverers and service recipients. Building on this sensitivity Turnell has directed all of his research endeavour and writing toward documenting constructive practice as described by frontline practitioners, parents and children. The Signs of Safety model has and continues to evolve through the application of practice-based evidence, appreciative inquiry into practitioner and recipient-defined best practice. Building a culture of appreciative inquiry and research around frontline practice will be critical to the successful implementation of the Signs of Safety within the Department for Child Protection. This will be considered further in section eight of this document.
6. **Signs of Safety Assessment and Planning Framework: Reclaiming Risk Assessment as the Heart of Constructive Child Protection Practice**

6.1. **Risk as the defining motif of child protection practice**

Child protection practice is probably the most demanding, contested and scrutinised of work within the helping professions, primarily because the endeavour focuses on our society’s most vulnerable children. Professionals must constantly consider and decide whether the family’s care of a child is safe enough for the 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 constantly review whether there is enough safety for the child to return home.

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

6.2. **Reclaiming and re-visioning 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 seriously engage 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 (for example, see Ryburn 1991). This usually leaves the frontline practitioner who hopes to practice collaboratively caught between strengths-based, support-focused aspirations and the harsh, problem-saturated, forensic reality that they have ultimate responsibility for child safety. In this situation 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 crucial issue in all this is that risk is almost always seen negatively, as something that must be avoided. Put simply, everyone is worried about being blamed and sued for something. Thus our 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 sport it’s easier to see things differently (sport being such a core part of the Australian psyche). Usain Bolt doesn’t hide from the world championships, Roger Federer doesn’t run from Wimbledon, Dawn Fraser didn’t run from Tokyo in 1964. These players champ at the bit to get themselves into these contexts because while they may fail spectacularly, on the biggest stage, in front of millions, it is also very possible they will succeed gloriously. The analogy isn’t exact, particularly because no one dies at Augusta, Wimbledon or the Tokyo Olympics 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 maxim, known to child protection workers around the world, ‘above everything, protect your own backside’.

The Signs of Safety approach to risk assessment seeks to revision 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. The Signs of Safety approach does not set problems in opposition to a strengths and solution-focus, nor does it frame forensic, rigorous professional inquiry as something that diminishes or erases the possibility of collaborative practice. Quite simply, the best child protection practice is always both forensic and collaborative and demands that professionals are sensitised to and draw upon every scintilla of strength, hope and human capacity they can find within the ugly circumstances where children are abused.

6.3. Comprehensive Risk Assessment and the Signs of Safety Framework

The Signs of Safety approach 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 in exploring harm and danger while at the same time eliciting and inquiring into strengths and safety.
- Brings forward clearly articulated professional knowledge while also equally eliciting and drawing upon family knowledge and wisdom.
- Is designed to always undertake 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.
- Is naturally holistic (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 then swamps the assessment process and everyone involved with too much information) since it brings everyone, (both professional and family member) to the assessment table.
The Signs of Safety approach grounds these aspirations in a one-page assessment and planning protocol that maps the harm, danger, complicating factors, strengths, existing and required safety and a safety judgment in situations where children are vulnerable or have been maltreated. 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)
4. 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)\(^5\).

\(^5\) Zero on this safety scale is often also described as meaning the situation is so dangerous the child must be permanently removed.
In 2004/5 while working with Child Youth and Family New Zealand, the questions of the practitioners there prompted Turnell to more clearly identify the four domains operating in the Signs of Safety assessment and planning framework. This in turn led to the creation of a ‘simpler’ version of the framework, as follows:

**Safety and Context Scale**
Rate this case on a scale of 0-10, where 10 means this is not a situation where any action would be taken and 0 means this is the worst case of child abuse/neglect that the agency has seen.

**Safety Scale**
Given the danger and safety information, rate the situation on a scale of 0-10, where 0 means recurrence of similar or worse abuse/neglect is certain and 10 means there is sufficient safety for the child to close the case.

On a scale of 0 to 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 they can’t live at home, where do we rate this situation? (If different judgements place different people’s number on the continuum).
This second, ‘three columns’ alternative should not be seen as a different framework to the earlier one – it is simply a different version of the same framework. The first provides a more formal structure and is more suited to court and more formal contexts. It is also more appropriate when making a careful assessment of high-risk cases since it immediately points workers and supervisors toward a careful exploration of danger and harm. The three columns variation is usually easier to use at initial investigation with parents and with whole families. The three column version has the added advantage that it functions well as a strategic planning tool providing a very clear and focused map for reviewing case practice in case crises or child deaths. Alongside these two versions of the Signs of Safety framework, several additional versions of the same framework have been created that are specifically designed for use with children and young people (see section 6).

6.4 CASE EXAMPLE

The following is an example of a completed Signs of Safety ‘map’ involving a 19 year-old mother ‘Mary’ and her 18-month-old son ‘John’. The Signs of Safety assessment and plan for this example is an amalgamation of two fairly equivalent West Australian cases. In both cases the assessment was completed together with the mother while the infant was in hospital following an assault by the mother.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DANGER/HARM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• We know of 5 times where Mary (19) has hit and hurt John (18 months) in the past 8 weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• John needed hospital treatment for a fractured cheek and bruising to head and shoulders after Mary hit him so hard he was knocked into a wall yesterday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• DCP are worried because the doctor says it is possible John could be badly hurt in the future suffering brain damage, or death from a future incident of this type.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CPS are worried because the doctor says the 19 year old Mary is not recognising this danger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary doesn’t want contact with her family or Gary’s and she can think of no friends to help her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary has a history of ‘depression’ which she calls being sad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary is not taking prescribed medications or attending appointment with psychiatrist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To make John safe 1x Mary had to leave him unsupervised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary describes a history of violence in her family.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAFETY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Mary open in talking to DCP social worker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary clearly loves John, SWKr has seen that he goes to her, they cuddle, she responds to him being upset.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary admits hitting John at least 4–5 times in 8 weeks and that she caused the current injuries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary is most concerned about her anger and violence making her John afraid of her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary describes one incident where she did not hit John when easily could have ‘lost it’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• John meets developmental milestones for size, weight, he’s talking and active.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• John’s immediate safety is assured though hospitalisation and imminent alternative placement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary wants someone to talk to re sadness/anger sees this as a cause of the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mary has separated from violent ex-partner Gary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safety and Context Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>2 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agency Goals  What will the agency need to see occur to be willing to close this case?

• DCP wants to return John to Mary based on seeing that Mary has alternative strategies she uses when could ‘lose it’ with John and does this every time over 6 months.

Family Goals  What does the family want generally and regarding safety?

• Mary wants to meet with someone she can talk to about her problems.
• Mary wants this for herself and because she says that talking/counselling will make it less likely she will hit John.

Immediate Progress  What would indicate to the agency that some small progress had been made?

• Establish John in foster placement
• Contact visits established for Mary and John and focused on Mary doing something different under stress.
• Mary starts seeing someone she can talk to.
6.5 DISCIPLINES FOR USING THE SIGNS OF SAFETY
FRAMEWORK

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

These disciplines include:

- **A clear and rigorous understanding of the distinction between, past harm (these are shaded yellow in the above example), future danger (shaded red) and complicating factors.**
  
  This way of analysing the danger information is informed by significant research regarding the factors that best predict the abuse and re-abuse of children (Boffa and Podesta 2004; Brearley 1992; Child, Youth and Family 2000; Dalgleish 2003; Department of Human Services 2000; English 1996; English and Pecora 1994; Fluke et al. 2001; Johnson 1996; Meddin 1985; 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 is described in greater detail in Turnell and Essex (2006). In the example presented above, drawing upon this definition to interpret the constructive risk factors captured in this assessment, it can be seen that there is only one known instance of existing safety (shaded blue), related to the danger statements.

- **Rendering all statements in straight-forward rather than professionalised language that can be readily understood by service recipients.**
  
  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) can readily understand each other.

- **As much as possible all statements focus on specific, observable behaviours (e.g. ‘Mary is not taking prescribed medication or attending appointments with the psychiatrist’) and avoid meaning laden, judgment-loaded terms (e.g., ‘she is controlling’, ‘he is in denial’, ‘she’s an alcoholic’).**
  
  The process of judgment is held over, to be brought forward in a straight-forward fashion within the safety scale.
• Skilful use of authority.
Mapping or assessing child protection cases together with family members almost always involves some level of coercion, which needs to be exercised skilfully. In both the cases the assessment example draws from, each worker offered the mother a choice between working with them on the assessment against the alternative of the worker doing it with her supervisor back at the office. This is a concrete demonstration of the sort of skilful use of authority that is necessary in using the Signs of Safety approach.

• An underlying assumption that the assessment is a work in progress rather than a definitive set piece.
The Signs of Safety approach always seeks to create assessments drawing from a professional stance of inquiry and humility about what the professionals think they know rather than a paternalistic professional stance that asserts, ‘this is the way it is’. (The principles underlying the use of the Signs of Safety framework are more fully described in Turnell and Edwards 1999, and Turnell and Essex 2006).
7. INVOLVING CHILDREN

A considerable body of research indicates that many children and young people caught up in the child protection system feel like they are ‘pawns in big people’s games’ and that they have little say or contribution in what happens to them (Butler and Williamson 1994; Cashmore 2002; Gilligan 2000; Westcott 1995; Westcott and Davies 1996). Particularly disturbing is the fact that many looked-after children tell researchers that they do not understand why they are in care. Visiting CREATE’s website www.create.org.au or listening to any of the young people who speak publicly through this organisation about their living in care experience tells the same message.

There is considerable talk in the child protection field about privileging the voice of the child, but this is more often talked about than operationalised. A primary reason practitioners fail to involve children is the fact that they are rarely provided with straightforward tools and practical guidance that equips them to involve children in a context where they fear that involving children can create more problems than it solves.

Since 2004, one of the key growing edges of the Signs of Safety approach has been the development with practitioners of tools and processes designed to more actively involve children in child protection assessment, in understanding why professional intervention has happened, and in safety planning. These include:

- Three Houses Tool
- Fairy/Wizard Tool
- Safety House Tool
- Words and Pictures Explanations
- Child Relevant Safety Plans

7.1. THREE HOUSES TOOL AND THE FAIRY/WIZARD TOOL

7.1.1 Three Houses Tool

The Three Houses tool was first created by Nicki Weld and Maggie Greening from Child Youth and Family, New Zealand and is a practical method of undertaking child protection assessments with children and young people (Weld, 2008). The Three Houses method takes the three key assessment questions of the Signs of Safety framework: What are we worried about, what’s working well and what needs to happen, and locates them in three houses to make the issues more accessible for children.

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CREATE is a uniquely Australian organization, which provides support and a direct voice for young people in the Australian care system so they can influence governments and professionals.
Steps for using the Three Houses Tool include:

1. Wherever possible, inform the parents or carers of the need to interview the children, explain the three houses process to them and obtain permission to interview the children.
2. Make a decision whether to work with the child with/without parents or carers present.
3. Explain the three houses to the child using one sheet of paper per house.
4. Use words and drawings as appropriate and anything else useful to engage child in the process.
5. Often start with ‘house of good things’ particularly where child is anxious or uncertain.
6. Once finished, obtain permission of the child to show to others—parents, extended family and professionals. Address safety issues for child in presenting to others.
7. Present the finished three houses assessment to the parents/caregivers, usually beginning with ‘house of good things’.
The following is an anonymous example of the Three Houses tool used by Sue Robson Gateshead Referral and Access social worker (Brennan and Robson, 2010) in a case of emotional abuse, with boys ‘Craig’ and ‘Martin’ and their mother ‘Carol’.

This case came into the Gateshead service because a health worker reported concerns about Carol’s deteriorating mental health saying she was shouting at the children, smacking them and no longer wanted to play with them. During and following a meeting attended by Carol and workers from several agencies, the professionals expressed concerns about the mother’s mental health and the impact of this on her children. Carol was very agitated and angry and said she wouldn’t work with the professionals anymore.

Craig

House of good things
I don’t get shouted at when I am with dad.
I like living with daddy because I get lots of hugs.
When I’m with daddy I can play with my toys.

House of worries
I was not happy at my mam’s house because she shouted at me a lot.
Mam locked all of my toys away and I didn’t get all of my Christmas presents they were put in mam’s wardrobe.

House of wishes
My wish has come true.
I’m living with my daddy and brothers.
I wish we had a big house so we had our own room and didn’t have to share our beds.
Professionals reported that Carol's children Martin (5), Craig (7) and Timmy (2) all appeared frightened of Carol and when the health visitor and family support workers visited the home, Timmy was always in the playpen and there were no toys in the home. Sue decided to use the Three Houses with Craig and Martin and completed two sets of drawings with the boys. With the boys' permission these were then shown to Carol and the boys' assessments of their own situation changed Carol's response entirely. Looking at the boys experience meant Carol was willing to face the problems and work with the professionals to put things right for her children.
7.1.2. The Fairy/Wizard Tool

Child protection professionals around the world have found that the Three Houses tool, because it focuses directly on the child’s experience and voice, time and again creates this sort of breakthrough opportunity with parents who are ‘resisting’ professional perspectives and interventions. More information and guidance on the Three Houses tool and its use is available in Brennan and Robson 2010 and Turnell In Press a)

Vania Da Paz, a child protection practitioner working for the Department for Child Protection in Rockingham, Western Australia was involved in the 1996 Signs of Safety six-month development project. (Refer to a practice example in the Signs of Safety book, Turnell and Edwards 1999, p.81). Vania has always been determined to find ways to involve children and young people in her child protection practice and following the initial training in Signs of Safety she developed a very similar tool that serves the same purpose as the Three Houses tool but with different graphic representation. Rather than Three Houses, Vania explores the same three questions using a drawing of a fairy with a magic wand (for girls) or a Wizard figure (for boys) as follows:

Vania uses the Fairy’s/Wizard’s clothes (which represent what can/should be changed—just as we change our clothes) to explore and write down, together with the child, the problems/worries from the child’s perspective—or ‘what needs to be changed’. The Fairy’s wings and the Wizard’s cape represent the good things in the child’s life, since the wings enable the Fairy to ‘fly away’ or ‘escape’ her problems; and the cape ‘protects’ the
young Wizard and ‘makes his problems invisible for a little while’. On the star of the Fairy’s wand, and in the spell bubble at the end of the Wizard’s wand, the worker and the child record the child’s wishes, and vision of their life, the way they would want it to be with all the problems solved; the wands represent ‘wishes coming true’ and explores hope for the future.

A comprehensive exploration of the Three Houses and Wizard and Fairy tools is available in Brennan and Robson 2010 and Turnell, In Press a.

7.1.3 Safety House

Sonja Parker from Perth has developed a Safety House tool (Parker, 2009) that extends the Three Houses process and visually engages children in creating the safety plan.

The Safety House explores five key elements with the child:

1. What life will look like in the child’s safety house and the people who will live there.
2. People who the child thinks should visit and how they should be involved.
3. People the child sees as unsafe.
5. Safety Path: using the path to the house as a scaling device for the child to express their readiness to reunite or safety in the family.

Undertaking the Safety House process with children should be done with full knowledge of the adults and with the children fully aware the parents are working with ‘safety people’ to create a new set of rules for their family so everyone knows the children are happy and safe. This creates a context where the child’s safety house can readily be brought to the parents and network and their ideas contribute directly to growing the plan. This also underlines for the parents and network that the people they are ultimately most accountable to is not the statutory authorities but the children themselves.
The Signs of Safety
A Comprehensive Briefing Paper

No fighting.
No biting - if your veins crack you will die.
Stay sitting in the bath in case you slip.
No pushing when cooking, you may get burnt.
Windows need to be locked so no-one climbs out.
No killing people or frightening them.
Mam to ring the police if any fighting, Janet to ring police too.

Daddy would be looking after me.
Mam would make sure I go to sleep and that I'm safe in school.

Mam and dad will take me to the park.
Daddy will cook for me when he comes back.

Mam cooks now. If I'm not well I will stay off school.

On my birthday, mam and dad get me presents.

My mam makes sure I see Auntie Janet, Nanna, Grandad and Jessie often.

Auntie Janet visits.

Safety House Created by Sarah (aged seven) with Laura Brennan from Gateshead England.
7.2. Words and Pictures Explanation and Child Relevant Safety Plans

Turnell and Essex (2006) describe a ‘Words and Pictures’ explanation process for informing children and young people about serious child protection concerns and a safety planning method that both involves and directly speaks to children. The following illustrations are one example of each (both excerpted from Turnell and Essex, 2006). The examples are presented to give a feel for age-appropriate explanations and safety plans that locate children in the middle of the practice picture and do this without trivialising or minimising the seriousness of the child protection concerns.

The ‘Words and Pictures’ method also offers a powerful method of creating a meaningful explanation for looked-after children and young people who are typically very confused or uncertain why they have come into the care system. One example of this adaptation of the words and pictures method can found in Turnell and Essex, 2006, pp 94-101.

Straightforward Access Safety Plan in Case Where Sexual Abuse was Substantiated Against Father

1. Daddy is never to be alone with Amelia & Alexandra.

2. When you visit Daddy, there will always be someone else there like Rebecca, Daddy’s neighbours, Dan & Carol, or Daddy’s friends. Mary & Fred.

3. When Alexandra & Amelia go to the beach or pool with Daddy, he won’t come into the water with them.

4. If Alexandra or Amelia need help with personal things, Dad so everyone knows they’re safe. Rebecca will.
**Words and Pictures Story in an Injured Infant Case**

**Who's Worried?**

We're all worried about Sharon and we must make sure it's safe for Sharon to come home.

**What Are They Worried About?**

Sharon was sick and very badly hurt and had to go to hospital. Sharon had very big hurts all over her body. The doctors were very worried, they said Sharon had been hurt while Mummy and Daddy were looking after her. Mummy and Daddy said they didn’t hurt Sharon but the doctors and the social worker were still worried and said they had to make sure Sharon would be safe before she could come home.

**What Happened Then?**

After this the social worker said Sharon couldn’t live with Mummy and Daddy. Nan and Pop wanted to help so Sharon went to live with them after she got out of hospital. Sharon has lived with Nan and Pop for more than two years since then.

**What Are We Doing?**

Mummy and Daddy are working very hard with Andrew and Karen (the social worker) to show everyone that Sharon will be safe when she comes home.
8. **Creating a Culture of Appreciative Inquiry Around Child Protection Practice**

Competency is quiet; it tends to be overlooked in the noise and clatter of problems. (William Madsen 2007, p.32).

Child protection above all else suffers from a crisis of vision. Many commentators have observed that the defining motif of child protection work is ‘risk’ in the negative sense of risk avoidance or risk aversion. If this is true, then the primary motivation of the field is not what it is seeking to constructively achieve but rather what it is seeking to avoid namely, any hint of public failure. This, in the words of Dr Terry Murphy from Teeside University Middlesborough, is like ‘trying to design a passenger airliner based solely on information gathered from plane wrecks—you do this for long enough you’ll have a plane that will never get off the runway’.

As well as being over-organised by fear of failure, child protection thinking tends to be dominated by the ‘big’ voices of researchers, policy makers, academics and bureaucrats. In this environment, constructive front-line practice tends to be overlooked and practitioners can feel alienated from the views of head office and the academy. Practitioners often experience these views as ‘voices from 27,000 feet’ and academics and policy makers tend to act as if field staff are themselves ‘problems’ to be guided and managed (there is a considerable volume of writing on the burgeoning domination of managerialism within the helping professions e.g. Munro 2004; Parton 2006).

While this is an all too familiar story, there is another story that can be told:

Child protection workers do in fact build constructive relationships, with some of the ‘hardest’ families, in the busiest child protection offices, in the poorest locations, everywhere in the world. This is not to say that oppressive child protection practices do not happen, or that sometimes they are even the norm. However, worker-defined, good practice with ‘difficult’ cases is an invaluable and almost entirely overlooked resource for improving child protection services and building a grounded vision of constructive statutory practice (Turnell 2004, p.15).

As described above, the Signs of Safety approach has progressively evolved through the process of training practitioners in ongoing projects, first in Western Australia and then internationally. Following this initial training the next step in growing the model is to shift from training to action-learning mode by inquiring with the workers into the question: Where have they been using the approach and how it has been useful to them? In this way the writings about the Signs of Safety approach present examples of good practice with difficult cases from statutory practitioners in Europe, North America, Japan and Australasia that not only depict and evolve the use of the approach but also describe good child protection practice more generally.
Steve Edwards and I drew the inspiration to inquire into worker-defined successful practice from solution-focused brief therapy methods of focusing on what works with clients as the key means to energise them in dealing with their problems. This methodology is much more than a process for looking at case practice. It is also a powerful mechanism to engage frontline child protection practitioners in an organisational reform or change agenda. As well, this approach is increasingly being seen in academic circles as a critical method of researching professional theory. As described in section 4.2.3 the literature refers to this as practice-based evidence or critical best practice theory (see for example Ferguson 2001 and 2003; Healy 2006).

This organisational change methodology can also be seen as a form of appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry is an approach to organisational change first developed by David Cooperrider (see for example Cooperrider 1995; Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Cooperrider and Whitney 1999). Cooperrider and his colleagues found that focusing on successful, rather than problematic, organisational behaviour is a powerful mechanism for generating organisational change and one appreciative inquiry author describes the approach as ‘change at the speed of imagination’ (Watkins and Mohr 2001). Perhaps the title would be more accurate framed as ‘change at the speed of grounded, detailed and shared attention to your best practice’.

In my work over the past decade with agencies seeking to implement the Signs of Safety I have drawn together the ideas of solution-focused brief therapy and appreciative inquiry, using the questioning methods and technology of the former and the organisational change agenda of the latter and now often speak of the importance of ‘creating a culture of appreciative inquiry around frontline practice’. This is the most powerful mechanism I know of for child protection agencies to make any implementation of the Signs of Safety land and stick [Heath and Heath (2007) speak about making ideas and practices ‘sticky’ in their recent book, Made to stick: why some ideas survive and others die]. In the child protection context building a culture of appreciative inquiry around front-line practice acts to antidote to the anxiety-driven defensiveness and the obsession with researching failure that bedevils this field.

While in the first instance the process of building a culture of appreciative inquiry around frontline practice will be grounded in the week-in, week-out appreciative inquiry work of practice leaders it will be vital that senior management understand, support and can replicate this process particularly when case crises come to the fore.

In a direct parallel process to what the Signs of Safety approach asks workers to do in their Signs of Safety work with families the process of focusing forensically on the detail of what works, does not, as some fear, minimise problems and dysfunctional behaviour, quite the reverse. Inquiring into and honouring what works (with families and practitioners) creates increased openness and energy to look at behaviours that are problematic, dysfunctional or destructive. Child protection work is too difficult and too challenging to overlook even the smallest scintilla of hope and creativity that can be found in instances of even partial success.
Megan Chapman and Jo Field from the Chief Social Worker’s office in Child Youth and Family, New Zealand recently wrote a paper, in part to articulate the lessons learnt during an eighteen-month implementation of the strengths-based practice and Signs of Safety approach work within the Tauranga and Otara offices between 2003-05 (Chapman and Field 2007). This paper describes some of the organisational and strategic issues in shifting a child protection agency toward relationship-grounded, safety-organised practice and introduces the notion of ‘practice depth’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Understanding practice depth</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conveyor-belt practice (Ferguson, 2004), characterised by:</strong> responsiveness to efficiency drivers; getting cases through the system; meeting targets; speedy casework resolution; and general compliance with policy and practice guidelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pragmatic practice, characterised by:</strong> compliance with policy and practice guidelines; moderate engagement with family and other agencies; efficient throughput of work; case management; and supervision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflective Practice, characterised by:</strong> 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.</td>
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**Practice Depth: This illustration is taken from Chapman and Field (2007).**

Too often child protection organisations fall into perpetuating what Chapman and Field are describing as ‘conveyor-belt’ or ‘pragmatic’ practice. Practice of this form may seem expedient and necessary for all sorts of pragmatic reasons but it rarely makes a sustainable, significant difference in the lives of vulnerable children and it inevitably ignores the experience of the practitioner. When frontline workers and supervisors become solely focused on the immediate case, the anxiety of worst outcomes and the delivery of key performance outcomes their working life in child protection will inevitably be short or their work will be overtaken by a hard-bitten cynicism. The appreciative inquiry developmental processes at the heart of the Signs of Safety approach are designed to directly address this problem by creating a culture of appreciative inquiry around practice and practitioners, and to build ‘practice depth’ within the team, the office and the agency as a whole. It is only the creation of increased practice depth that will genuinely enable child protection staff to reclaim pride and confidence in their work and enable a child protection agency to deliver services that are valued more highly by service recipients (even where intrusive statutory interventions are necessary) and that will deliver transparently safer outcomes for vulnerable children.
8.1 Management Style that Grows Practice Depth and Builds a Culture of Appreciative Inquiry around Frontline Practice

Possibly the most important developments around the Signs of Safety in the past decade has been the distillation of managerial and strategic leadership and process that best enables organisational implementation of the approach. Personally, this has been the greatest learning for me during the past decade. The reality is that models of practice have only limited impact unless organisational procedures, strategies and managerial style compliment the practice approach. A collaborative, strengths-based practice approach that demands rigorous thinking, emotional intelligence and compassion will be undermined in an organisational culture that privileges audit compliance and command and control leadership. I have seen time and again that where an agency’s CEO and senior management have a deep acuity to the realities of front line practice and a strong connection to their field staff this always creates a deeper and more sustained implementation of the Signs of Safety. Conversely, where senior management take and/or communicate the attitude that direct practice and practice theory and frameworks are something for practitioners, supervisors and perhaps middle management to deal with, the organisational ground for growing depth of practice is significantly less fertile.

Child protection practice is always uncertain and this is often a very uncomfortable reality for managers and directors. Tony Morrison penned an excellent recent paper on this issue just before his untimely passing (Morrison 2010), and Eileen Munro speaks to the same issue in the her Part One Report for the Munro Review of English social services (Munro 2010). Probably the biggest challenge of the Signs of Safety approach is that it is a questioning approach. The approach asks professionals to step away from the myth of certainty. This does not mean that anything goes or that professionals know nothing—quite the reverse. Letting go of the ‘cheap grace’ of the easy answer in the face of wicked problems, fraught with complexity and anxiety is a sign of maturity and the ground on which practice depth can grow.

The Signs of Safety asks professionals to adopt Munro’s maxim and rather than try and assert a definitive truth, to ask penetrating, rigorous questions focused on the four domains of worries, strengths, goals and judgment. When cases come to the attention of senior management these will almost inevitably be cases in crisis. In these circumstances, the understandable and usual tendency of senior managers is to make fast judgments and give immediate strong directions about what needs to happen in the case. This is command and control social work taken to the highest organisational level. There are undoubtedly times when senior management need to take control of case practice and case management. As often as not this occurs because of the political realities that are always in play around child protection services. However, when senior managers do this they need also to be mindful that such action easily has an adverse effect on field staff and can leave them feeling disenfranchised and defensive. Fundamentally, the Signs of Safety asks an agency’s executive and its management to use its authority skilfully by adopting a questioning approach to leadership. Over the past five years I, and many of the senior managers I have been working with have come to understand that these four domains
constitute a very powerful strategic management framework. Many child protection services who are implementing this approach are now using these four domains as a primary mechanism for thinking their way into and through all aspects of organisational functioning, whether related directly to case practice or not. Where agencies are able to do this, utilising a risk assessment framework and a questioning practice style that is replicated in a three column strategic planning and questioning management style this creates a very powerful organisational parallel process.

This briefing paper is and will be an ongoing work-in-progress. I will constantly make updated versions available through our website (www.signsofsafety.net) to capture and overview the Signs of Safety approach in its most up-to-date form. The exploration of organisational culture and implementation strategies that most effectively sustain Signs of Safety practice needs clearer articulation. Over the next year this is something I intend to focus on. This organisational thinking and experience will be most fully articulated in my forthcoming book, *Building safety in child protection practice: working with a strengths and solution-focus in an environment of risk* (Turnell, In Press c). However, as I finalise the writing of that book I will provide a précis of that thinking in updated versions of this briefing paper. This is a parallel process that gives tangible demonstration to field staff that their management is genuinely committed to the sorts of values and action learning style, their leaders are asking them to adopt when asking them to use the Signs of Safety in their case practice.

9. IMPLEMENTING SIGNS OF SAFETY: A LEARNING JOURNEY OF MANY YEARS

The concept of the ‘learning organisation’ was first articulated by Peter Senge (1990) in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, in which he describes learning organizations as places ‘where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole reality together’.

While there is a touch of breathlessness in Senge’s writing, which can feel somewhat disconnected from the day-to-day reality in a large bureaucratic organization, Senge’s motif of the learning organisation is important. Senge argues that organisational change is not a product but rather a process of bringing forward peoples’ best thinking and energy that is created relationally within the organisation. Senge invokes the notion of the ‘learning journey’ to suggest that organisational (and individual) change is not an entity that can be bottled, or disbursed in a training programme, rather it is a process of continual inquiry, reflection and learning, that needs to be fostered in the culture, procedures, and everyday habits of the organisation.

Child protection organisations have a tendency to equate the provision of staff training as the beginning and end of implementation, when in fact training staff in new ideas and practices is simply the first step of organisational learning and implementation. For training to make a difference, the ideas and practices must be supported by supervision
and ongoing organisational processes that support and embed the new training and practices. While the first step in implementing the Signs of Safety framework and practices will necessarily involve training for all staff, meaningful implementation across all of an agency’s child protection casework requires sustained organisational commitment to an organisation-wide ‘learning journey’ of at least five years duration. In child protection organisations the team leader or supervisor level are the primary leaders of the practice culture of the organisation. Supervisors all over the world often report that while they seek to do the best they can to supervise the workers they are responsible for, the primary supervision they typically receive is focused on procedural compliance not on case practice. A meaningful system-wide implementation of the Signs of Safety must always involve engaging and supporting practice leaders in undertaking an extended, ongoing learning journey in their understanding and use of the approach.

9.1. Practice Leader Training and Development Learning Journey

The role of supervisor or team leader has many titles in many systems and is often located in different ways across different positions so in the remainder of this document I will use the more generic term ‘practice leader’. The implementation of the Signs of Safety will largely succeed or fail depending on the success in creating and developing strong practice leaders (PLs) who have an in-depth understanding of the approach across all practice contexts and can consistently lead the practitioners they are responsible for in using the approach. A rigorous ongoing developmental process for training and then growing PLs in using and leading the Signs of Safety practice leaders is at the core of any implementation. Within agencies looking to implement I encourage each office, district, or practice unit to have at least two Signs of Safety practice leaders to enable them to work in pairs and help each other grow their leadership skills and to hold each other accountable to consistently using the Signs of Safety framework and undertaking the Appreciative Inquiry work.

All PLs should receive thorough training in the use of Signs of Safety. Within the Western Australian implementation that involves an initial two day introductory training followed by a five-day intensive Practice Leader training on leading and implementing the Signs of Safety. This training enables PLs to:

- ‘Map’ cases using the Signs of Safety framework.
- Undertake Appreciative Inquiry consultations with practitioners to build a constructive culture around frontline practice in their office and teams.
- Have a good beginning understanding of safety planning.

After the initial five-day training, the PLs begin leading regular fortnightly or monthly (but if possible weekly) group sessions with field staff in which they ‘map’ at least one case using the Signs of Safety framework and undertake at least one appreciative inquiry. Wherever possible the PLs do this by working in pairs, with one facilitating, the other adopting an
advisor’s role. Working in pairs provides a ‘feedback loop’ to assist the practice leader to be able to stand back from the direct exercise of the role while still engaged with it.

Once a month PLs gather in small groups of 6 to 10 to review their work with their peers and receive supervision and further guidance and training. These monthly Practice Leader groups are coordinated and led by Practice Leader Facilitators (PLFs). Three times each year PLs gather in a large group of up to 60 to receive specific training, review progress and plan for the future.

These processes:

- Create an ongoing group learning process for establishing, consolidating and refining the Signs of Safety mapping and AI work as the central activities to deepen the practice culture. This prioritises robust collective assessment and decision-making, builds a shared practice culture and breaks down the sense of isolation that so often bedevils child protection practice.

- Locate practice leadership and supervision at the centre of the team leader and supervisor role by providing them with specific tools and techniques to work alongside practitioners and engages the practice leaders in a learning journey that enables them to supportively and quickly grow their practice leadership skills.

Through this sort of process PLs learn and grow their capacity to:

- Undertake their supervisory/practice leading role utilising inquiry and a ‘questioning approach’ as their primary mechanism of guiding practice. This will diminish the more usual ‘command and control’, senior practitioner as expert approach to practice leadership. (It is important to note that utilising a ‘questioning approach’ does not preclude giving specific advice or direction where necessary).

- Understand and lead workers in building rigorous, on-the-ground safety plans, particularly in high-risk cases.

- Understand and lead practitioners in involving and placing children/young people at the centre of case practice.

Having undertaken this sort of process since 2002, with Gateshead Referral and Access (Investigation) teams, Manager Viv Hogg writes:

‘We have weekly team meetings where we use the Signs of Safety as the tool to focus on a case. In this process, the whole team works really hard to know the family and understand what’s going on. Everyone chips in with their worst fears, their best hopes and their optimism. The use of a shared framework that we can also then use with the families is energising. It encourages creativity, it gives us a safe environment to challenge and appreciate practice and it builds cohesion and closeness within the team’.

‘I’ve realised it’s all about being able to evidence what you think and the decisions you make; its about rigour. The conversations we have in our
team make me feel safe because we can evidence our decisions. I know things can still go wrong, but as long as we can evidence what we do, we’re fine. This shares the anxiety and leads to a much better, broader, stronger view. It shares the accountability, the risk. I know at the end of the day it comes down to my responsibility and that’s fine, but it’s the team all working together that gives us confidence to make our decisions’ (Turnell, Elliott and Hogg 2007, pp. 115-116).

9.2. SUSTAINING THE LEARNING JOURNEY

Child protection organisations the world over have a habit of cycling through new policy and practice initiatives on something like a two-year rota. This creates a cynical attitude toward new initiatives among frontline staff where they often take the view that, ‘if we keep our head down, tell the bosses what they want to hear, this will all blow over within twelve to eighteen months’. Child protection agencies are highly complex organisations with complex agendas and there will always be many significant challenges and obstacles to sustaining an extended learning journey with the Signs of Safety. Not the least of these challenges is the habit and allure of moving on to the next new thing when this approach begins to seem like yesterday’s initiative. Embedding the Signs of Safety approach in a system-wide implementation across all child protection services above everything, requires a sustained commitment by everyone, from the CEO to the front-line practitioner. All agency staff need to be involved in maintaining, nourishing and growing the use of the model through an organisational learning journey that will at minimum be at least five years in duration.
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The Signs of Safety
A Comprehensive Briefing Paper

DVD/Workbooks Available from Resolutions Consultancy

The following DVD/workbooks are available from Resolutions Consultancy (www.signsofsafety.net) to assist professionals in using the Signs of Safety approach to child protection casework.

**Signs of Safety DVD and Workbook**

In this DVD, Andrew Turnell:

- Provides a short history describing the development of the Signs of Safety approach
- Presents and explains the two versions of the Signs of Safety assessment and planning framework and the analysis process for using the protocol as a comprehensive child protection risk assessment tool.
- Uses a case example of a suicidal mother and four year-old son to demonstrate the Signs of Safety assessment process as a map that enables both professionals and family members to think themselves into and through the situations of child abuse and neglect.
- Details the questioning skills that bring the Signs of Safety approach to life for professionals and family.

The DVD includes electronic copies of the Signs of Safety assessment forms and the completed assessment example from the DVD case study.

**Safety Planning DVD and Workbook**

Building meaningful safety plans is probably the hardest of all tasks in working with high-risk child protection cases. It is far easier for professionals to send parents to another course or treatment programme than to define what constitutes enough safety to close the case and involve family and professionals in working to realise that goal. Without clear safety goals, cases tend to drag on and child protection systems find they have increasing numbers of children in care for longer time. For parents the process is particularly frustrating because they feel that they don’t know what they need to do to get child protection services out of their lives. In this DVD and workbook Andrew Turnell takes direct aim at these issues presenting a specific vision and process for creating effective safety plans together with families and naturally occurring support network.
Children and young people who are caught up in the child protection system often tell us that they don’t understand why statutory professionals intervened in their lives and in their family. These youngsters also tell us that they commonly feel they have very little say in the decisions that are taken about their lives.

The Words and Pictures approach to working with children provides a concrete, tried-and-tested method for professionals to provide these children and young people with age-appropriate, clear information about the actual or alleged maltreatment that has occurred in their family. The Words and Pictures document then becomes a historical document that the children and their carers can draw upon in the future, and offers a clear foundation to involve the young people in planning for their lives, whether they live with their family or separate from them.

**Of Houses, Wizards and Fairies**  
*DVD and Workbook*  
*(Available early 2011)*

Involving Children in Child Protection Casework

This forthcoming DVD and workbook:

- Introduces the Three Houses, Wizard and Fairy tools, that are designed to directly involve children and young people in child protection assessment and planning
- Provides detailed guidance about how to use the tools with the children and how to use the information generated by the tools in the subsequent work with parents and other professionals
- Is grounded in detailed case examples provided by 15 practitioners from seven different countries.

**Available from:**  
www.signsofsafety.net
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