

# Reaching Out

CURRENT ISSUES FOR CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Fall 2011



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## Northern California's Journey of Learning Signs of Safety

By Susan Brooks, Director, Northern California Training Academy

Three years ago, I was introduced to Signs of Safety and was intrigued with the tools it offered social workers, especially in partnership with Structured Decision Making (SDM), to ensure the safety of children while engaging families and providing a framework for critical thinking to support safety, permanency and well-being. Since that time, the Academy has worked to create a comprehensive implementation plan for Signs of Safety.

Beginning last year, 13 Northern California counties including Inyo, Sacramento, Glenn, Yuba, Shasta, Butte, Siskiyou, Lake, Plumas, Del Norte, El Dorado, Modoc and Sutter embarked on a journey to integrate Signs of Safety into everyday practice. These northern counties, along with San Diego County, are paving the way to build a child welfare system that is based on the tenants of a solution-focused approach, creating partnerships with children and families to not only protect children, but to indeed create healthy families that can thrive on their own.

The integration of Signs of Safety into California child welfare services has been a thoughtful process. Using implementation science research, the Academy is using a multi-tier approach to provide training and support to the 13 counties. Following initial training, counties have been assigned Signs of Safety practice leaders—some of Northern California's finest child welfare advocates and experts, such as Nancy Goodman, Geri Wilson, Tom Taylor, Chellie Gates, Karen Lofts Jarboe, Brad Seiser, Marty Wang and Mike McIver. Practice leaders work closely with counties to trouble shoot and build skills in implementing Signs of Safety. Furthermore, master coaches (national experts in Signs of Safety) are assigned to work with our practice leaders, and

together the coaches and leaders are working with the counties to provide support.

The Northern California Training Academy has been fortunate to build collaborative learning partnerships with Children's Research Center, Casey Family Programs (Dana Blackwell and Peter Pecora) and four national experts (John Vogel, Sophia Chin, Heather Meitner and Phil Decter) who have been instrumental in the implementation of Signs of Safety in the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. These partnerships have supported the learning, skill development, evaluation and implementation of Signs of Safety and SDM in California.

This edition of *Reaching Out* is dedicated to the engagement of families in the safety of their children through a "safety organized practice model" including Signs of Safety (SoS) and Structured Decision Making (SDM). In my practice, I haven't witnessed excitement this high for a practice model. Watching participants learn about the Signs of Safety model is enlivening and feels like child welfare practice is coming full circle. Five years ago, Insoo Kim-Berg, founder of Solutions-Focused Therapy, led workshops for Northern California CWS social workers—at that time generating much excitement for the use of solution-focused practice. Signs of Safety/SDM is serving as the vehicle to integrate the solutions-focused training into a doable, realizable model.

The edition highlights lessons learned from counties and practitioners, principles of SoS, resources and tips. We hope you find our journey of learning and improved practice helpful as you embark on your own efforts to improve the lives of children and families.



# Introduction to Signs of Safety



Developed in Australia in late 1990s by Steve Edwards and Andrew Turnell – a child protection worker and a family therapist — Signs of Safety (SofS) brings the best of Solution-Focused Treatment to child welfare as a clear, rigorous practice model.

SofS was designed to provide skills, techniques and an overarching practice methodology for child welfare work. It offers strategies for creating constructive working partnerships between frontline child welfare practitioners, the families they work with and community resources. It also provides a common language and format (“safety mapping”) for enhanced critical thinking and judgment on the part of all involved with a family. Parts of SofS are now used in multiple states and in more than 15 countries around the world.

## Signs of Safety Objectives

1. **Engagement:** To create a shared focus to guide casework among all stakeholders (child, family, worker, supervisor, etc.)
2. **Critical Thinking:** To help these stakeholders consider complicated and ambiguous case information and sort it into meaningful child welfare categories
3. **Enhancing Safety:** To provide a path for stakeholders to engage in “rigorous, sustainable, on-the-ground child safety” efforts

Each of these objectives is detailed below with the associated practices involved.

## Signs of Safety Objective One: Engagement

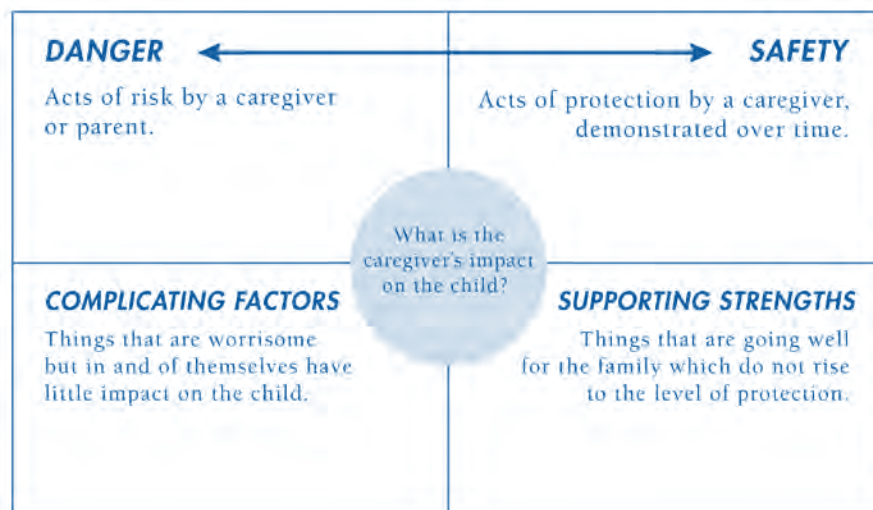
The engagement piece of SofS is fostered by using the following strategies:

- **Solution-Focused Interviewing (SFT)** – Primarily originating with the work of Steve De Shazer and his wife, Insoo Kim Berg, at the Milwaukee Brief Therapy Treatment Center, SFT is a “questioning” approach or interviewing practice based on a simple idea with profound ramifications—that what people pay attention to grows. It highlights the need for child welfare professionals to ask families about “signs of safety” in as rigorous a way as “signs of danger” and provides a series of strategies (“exception questions,” “relationship questions”) to help do this.
- **Strategies for Interviewing Children** – While children are the focus of any child welfare intervention and most professionals agree that obtaining children’s perspectives is vital for child welfare work, how to do this can be daunting for even a seasoned professional. The temptation to make the work with children a superficial part of the process is great. SofS provides a series of practices (“The Three Houses,” “Words and Pictures”) that allows children, in a developmentally appropriate way, to meaningfully contribute to both risk assessment and safety planning.

## Signs of Safety Objective Two: Critical Thinking

Critical thinking involves being able to look at both the external data in any given situation and at our own lenses, assumptions and biases in the service of coming to the greatest clarity possible about what is happening with a family. It is the ability, as noted child welfare scholar Eileen Munro has said, “to admit that we might be wrong.”

- Safety Mapping is a process of organizing all the information known about a family at any given time. It is a process that can be done by a family and a worker, a worker and a supervisor or a worker alone. It provides some simple, easy to use, utilitarian definitions and a process that organizes the information, allowing increased clarity about the purpose for any particular child welfare intervention.



## Signs of Safety Objective Three: Enhancing Safety

- *Danger Statements* – Once a safety map has been completed, it becomes possible to create a detailed, short, behaviorally based statement that in very clear, non-judgmental language states these three things:
  - o What the caregiver actions were
  - o What the impact was/is on the child
  - o What the child welfare professionals are worried could happen in the future

Such statements provide a clear rationale for the involvement of child welfare and are a foundation for making clear goals about the work. These deceptively simple statements take some time to construct but once made can be shared with family members, community partners, legal staff and anyone interested in supporting the safety of the particular children involved in the case.

- *Well-Formed Goals* – Often in child welfare, goals are service driven rather than safety driven. A key element of Signs of Safety practice is the use of simply written goals that clearly and unambiguously address the danger. These goals should achieve the following:
  - o Address the Danger Statement
  - o Be collaboratively created with the family members—and if that's not possible, provide choices for the family
  - o Be written in clear, everyday language
  - o Describe the presence of new, observable behaviors or actions (particularly with the children) rather than simply the absence of old, problematic behavior

- *Building Safety Networks* – The axiom that “it takes a village to raise a child” is never truer than in child welfare work when caregivers have been found to be a danger to their children. Signs of Safety, drawing on much of the wisdom of the Family Group Conferencing (FGC) movement, offers strategies for building a “network” of people around the child, communicating the Danger Statement to those in the network and enlisting their help in keeping the children safe. The network is formed the first day and supports the family through post permanency as defined by SDM.
- *Safety Planning* – In SofS, safety planning is not just for “immediate” safety but actually is the vehicle to promote long-lasting change. SofS makes the distinction between “safety” and “services”, noting that the culture of child welfare has been one of case management and service planning for some time—even while our goal is always the enhanced safety of children. SofS provides techniques and guidance for using the Safety Network to enhance the daily, on-the-ground practice of safety for children as a long-term change-practice of child welfare.

# Tools for Involving Children and Young People in Child Protection Assessment and Planning

*Sonja Parker of Aspirations Consultancy, Burswood, Australia*

The Signs of Safety approach continues to evolve as an approach based on the experiences and feedback from family members and frontline practitioners from around the world. One of the most significant areas in which the Signs of Safety approach has evolved and continues to evolve is in the development of tools and practices that promote the involvement of children and youths in child protection assessment and planning decisions.

A considerable body of research indicates many children and young people who are involved in child protection systems do not understand the processes that are unfolding around them, and they feel that they have little or no say in what happens to them (see for example: Butler and Williamson, 1994; Cashmore and Gilligan, 2000; Westcott, 1995; Westcott and Davies, 1996). Practitioners and children have both voiced frustration that children and youth continue to be excluded from, or are only minimally included in, the processes that are at the core of our efforts to provide those same children and young people with safety and protection.

The following article will introduce two child-centered tools that assist in the elicitation and inclusion of children's and youth's voices in child protection processes and decisions.

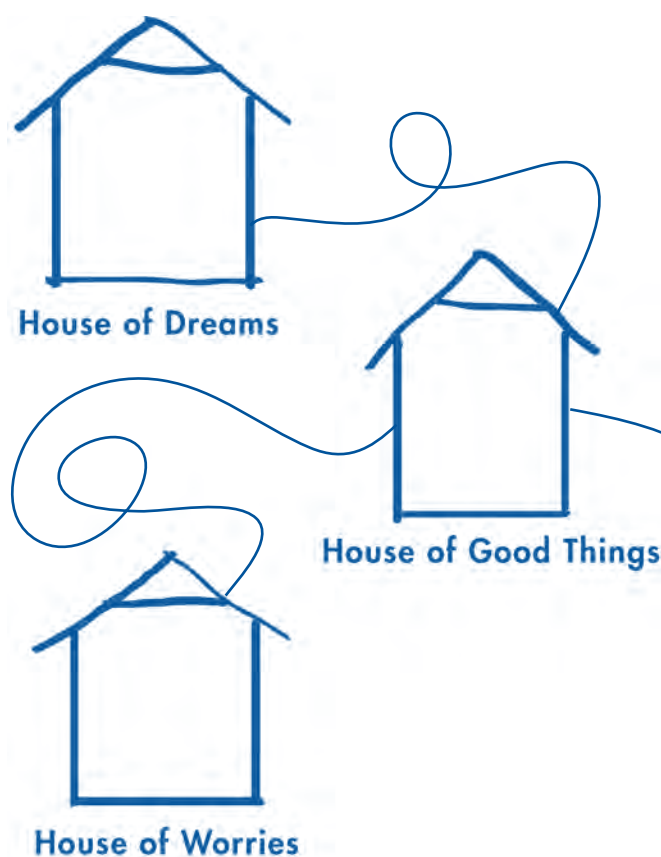
## The "Three Houses" Information Gathering Tool

The Three Houses tool is designed to assist child protection practitioners to elicit children's and youth's views about what is happening in their lives and what they want for their future. The Three Houses tool may also be used to bring children's and youth's views to family members and other professionals to ensure that the child's view is incorporated into all assessment and planning.

The Three Houses information gathering tool was designed in 2003 in the New Zealand child protection setting (Child, Youth and Family Services) and has gone on to be applied in a variety of ways around the world. It originated when Nicki Weld and Maggie Greening, social workers and trainers, received feedback from New Zealand Youth Court judges regarding the exclusion of children's voices in safety plans and about the lack of success in plans for young people.

The Three Houses tool incorporates the three key questions from the Signs of Safety framework—"What are we worried about?", "What's working well?" and "What

needs to happen?"—by placing them in three "houses" to make the issues more accessible for children and young people. Children respond to these three questions by drawing or writing in the Three Houses or by having the practitioner record what the child wants to say in each of the "houses." While "houses" was the metaphor that was developed in New Zealand (based on the "Te Whare Tapa Wha," a Maori model of health developed by Professor Mason Durie), practitioners around the world have modified the Three Houses by using metaphors that are more culturally appropriate or engaging for the children that they are working with, such as teepees, footballs and animals.





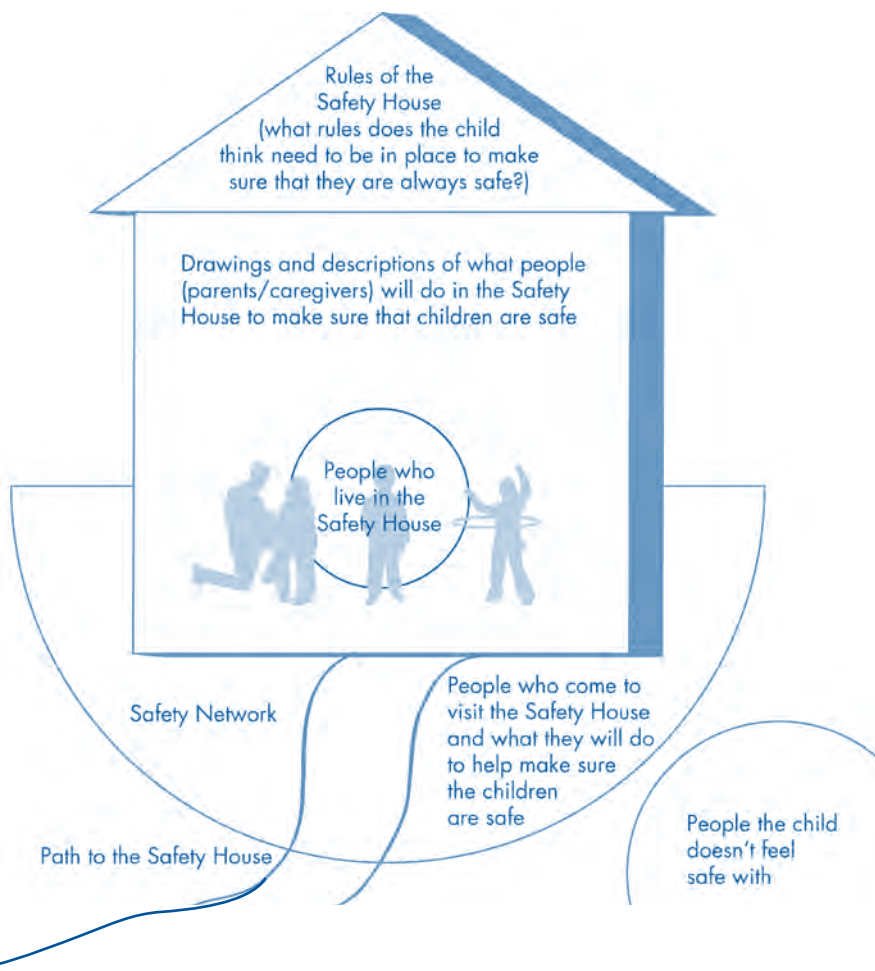
## The “Safety House” information gathering tool

Safety planning with families, which focuses on working collaboratively with families and their networks to determine what needs to happen for children to be safely returned to the care of their families, or to safely remain in the care of their families, is a complex process that involves a large number of stakeholders. See the next article for more information regarding this collaborative model.

The Safety House tool, developed in 2009, grew out of a desire to include children’s voices and ideas in the safety planning process. The Safety House tool is used with a child or youth as part of the overall safety planning process and is designed to help the child or youth make sense of and participate in this safety planning process.

In using the Safety House tool, the outline of the house is first drawn by the child; then, the worker uses the structure of the Safety House to elicit the child or young person’s views about the specific safety arrangements that would need to be in place to make sure that these worries were addressed. The child’s views are recorded in the Safety House in both pictures and words. The child or young person then creates a “safety path” to their Safety House, locating themselves on the safety path as a way of representing his/her assessment (or scaling) of current safety within the family.

The Safety House is primarily a safety planning tool for use with children, but its use is not restricted to formal safety planning. The Safety House can also be used to seek a child’s views as part of the development of a reunification plan or as part of a family preservation program (seeking the child’s views on what would need to happen for him/her to remain in the care of his/her family and continue to be safe in relationship to the worries). It can also be used as part of a rapid-response conferencing process in a situation when a child may have been hospitalized following a significant alleged non-accidental injury. Wherever adults are talking together to explore future safety, the Safety House can assist in bringing this conversation to children in ways that they can make sense of and actively participate in.



### Further information

The Three Houses and Safety House tools are only described briefly in this article. For a comprehensive description of these tools, please see the references listed in the Resources and References section on page 31.



# Family Safety Planning Tool

By Sonja Parker, Aspirations Consultancy, Burswood, Australia

Safety planning is a complex child protection process that involves all the significant people in a child's life working together to develop a detailed safety plan, one that describes the day-to-day arrangements that a family and safety network will put into place to make sure the child is safe in relation to the identified dangers or worries. The safety planning process also involves monitoring and reviewing the safety plan over time so everyone is satisfied that the safety plan is working and will continue to work to provide ongoing safety for the children.

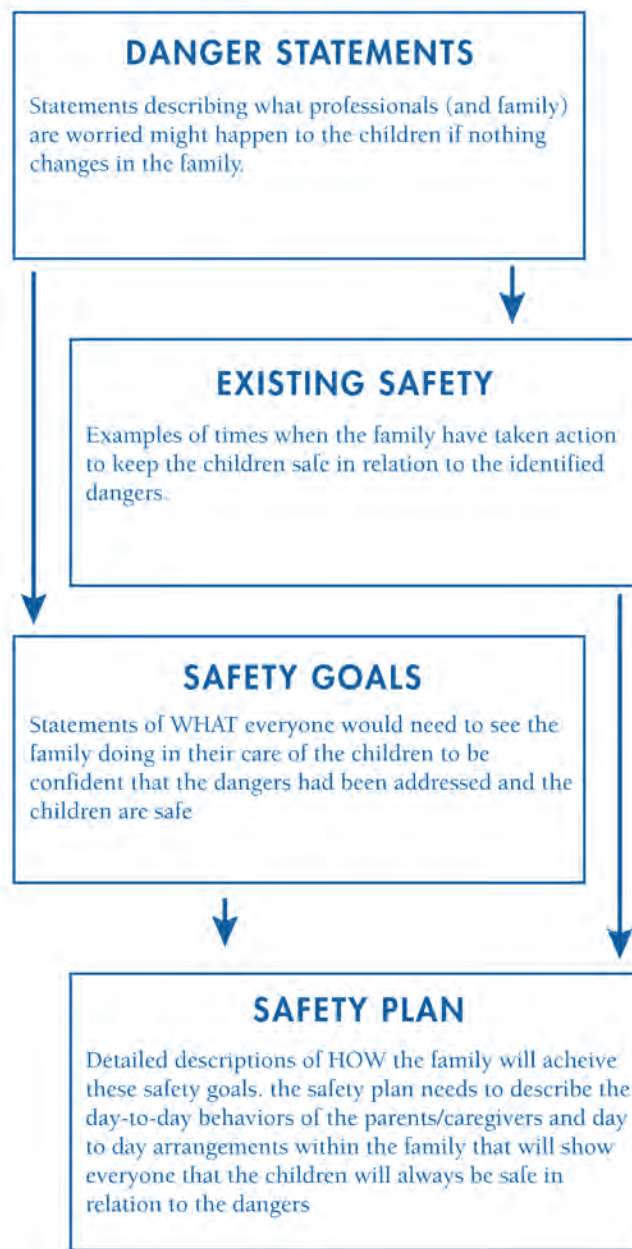
For safety planning to be effective, everyone involved in the process needs to be very clear about the identified dangers to the children that the detailed safety plan must address. So safety planning needs to begin with a comprehensive and balanced assessment that is done collaboratively with the family and significant people in the children's lives. The more the family and their safety network are involved in the assessment process and in thinking through both the worries and the changes required to ensure future safety for the children, the more likely it is that the detailed safety plan will be achievable and relevant to the family.

## Initial assessments for the safety plan

At a minimum, this assessment needs to identify:

- Everyone's worries about what might happen to the children in the parents' care if an effective safety plan is not in place (expressed as "danger statements" in the Signs of Safety approach). These danger statements need to be addressed by the safety goals and then by the detailed safety plan.
- What the family is already doing on some occasions to keep the children safe in relation to these worries or dangers (expressed as "existing safety" in the Signs of Safety approach). The statements of existing safety identify what is already working and can be the starting point for the safety plan.
- What the family needs to do in its future care of the children for everyone to be confident that the children will be safe all of the time (expressed as "safety goals" in the Signs of Safety approach). These safety goals are what the detailed safety plan must achieve.

**These danger statements, existing safety statements and safety goals provide purpose and focus for the safety plan.**



## Creating the detailed safety plan

Once the danger statements, existing safety and safety goals have been identified and understood by everyone, the safety planning process then involves the family, its identified safety network and the professionals working together to come up with a detailed safety plan that will describe how the family will achieve these safety goals on an ongoing and day-to-day basis.

This is a complex and lengthy process, which may involve one or two initial meetings with the parents and then usually involves a number of subsequent meetings with the parents, the children if they are old enough, and the safety network, to come up with the detailed safety plan. The safety planning tool introduced below has been developed to provide structure and focus for these complex and often contentious discussions about what needs to be included in the detailed safety plan that would ensure sufficient safety for the children.

The safety planning tool provides a framework for the safety planning meetings, so everyone is clear about how to proceed from the danger statements and safety goals toward the detailed safety plan. Everyone is provided with a copy of the safety planning forms and the facilitator can either draw the relevant page on a whiteboard, on large sheets of paper on the wall, or on the table for small groups. After using the front page to introduce the safety planning tool, the facilitator then uses a questioning approach to elicit everyone's ideas for each of the subsequent parts of the safety planning tool.

The safety planning tool contains a number of pages:

- The danger statements and the safety goals that have been developed with the family during the assessment phase are recorded on the front page. This information is the starting point for safety planning and provides direction so that everyone knows what needs to be addressed by the detailed safety plan.
- The second and subsequent pages are used to develop the safety plan rules for each of the safety goals, with one page for each safety goal.
- The final page is used to think through how the safety plan will be presented to the children, how the family will show everyone that the safety plan is working, what everyone will do if there are problems, and how the safety plan might need to be changed as the children get older or the family's circumstances change.

The safety rules developed and recorded through this process are then written up as the safety plan and presented to the children.

### For more information

The template for this safety planning tool is available online at: [www.aspirationsconsultancy.com](http://www.aspirationsconsultancy.com)





# Some Important Safety Planning Principles

By Sonja Parker, Aspirations Consultancy, Burswood, Australia

There are some important principles that underlie safety planning and the use of the safety planning tool described in the previous article. Eight principles are described here.

## Involves a family safety network

1

The safety network is a group of people who are willing to support the safety of the children by working with the parents and professionals to create the safety plan and to support the family in keeping to the safety plan over time. Because the safety network will be involved with monitoring and supporting the safety plan, it's important the network is involved as much as possible in creating the detailed safety plan.

## Builds relationships, relationships, relationships

2

The family, professionals and safety network are all involved in the safety planning journey, which means there need to be solid working relationships (between professionals and family members and among all the professionals) to get the job done. The relationships need to be focused on talking openly about the concerns and on eliciting everyone's ideas about meaningful solutions.

## Safety directs the journey

3

Effective safety planning is based on thorough and collaborative risk assessment. To develop a comprehensive and rigorous safety plan, the safety planning process needs to begin with the danger statements and what the family needs to do in terms of their care of the children for everyone to be confident that the children will be safe in relation to the dangers (expressed as safety goals). As discussed above, the more the family and its safety network are involved in the assessment process and are given the opportunity to think through their worries and to identify their ideas for future safety (safety goals), the more likely it is that the detailed safety plan will be meaningful and relevant to the family. Other safety planning tools, such as the "Future House" and the "Safety House", can be used with parents/caregivers/the safety network and with children to elicit their safety goals. Additional use of Structured Decision Making tools inform and enhance assessment skills to determine level of risk and safety.

## Specifies safety guidelines

4

The safety plan must describe specific arrangements and behaviors that directly address the dangers. The safety plan consists of a number of safety rules and guidelines that describe in detail what the family and safety network will do, on a day-to-day basis, to ensure the children's safety over time in relation to the identified dangers.



## Owned by the family

5

The safety rules in the safety plan need to be developed by the parents and the safety network as much as possible so that the plan is relevant and specific to the family and its circumstances. The role of the child protection worker or meeting facilitator is to ask questions about how the family will arrange their lives to address the dangers and achieve the safety goal, and to continue asking questions until all aspects of the dangers and the safety goal have been adequately addressed. If the parents and safety network are unsure about how to arrange some areas of their lives, ideas can be offered by professionals but it is important that these are offered as suggestions that the family and safety network can consider.

## Involves the children

The children are involved as much as possible throughout the safety planning process, including working through the safety planning tool if they are old enough to participate in the meetings. Prior to helping to develop the detailed safety plan, the “Words and Pictures” method can be used to help children understand why child protection services are involved with their family (See [www.signsofsafety.net](http://www.signsofsafety.net) for further information on the Words and Pictures method). The “Safety House” tool can be used to explain the safety planning process to children and gain their views about what needs to change in the family for everyone to agree that they will be safe in the future. And once everyone agrees on the content of the safety plan, it is written in language that the children understand, and the children create pictures for each of the safety rules to help them understand the safety plan.

6

## Is a journey not a product

7

The safety plan might require the family to arrange their daily lives in ways that are very different from their previous living arrangements. These changes cannot be put in place all at once. An effective safety plan requires time to be developed, refined and demonstrated. At a minimum, it usually takes at least two to three months to develop and refine an effective safety plan that stands a realistic chance of being implemented by the family after the professionals withdraw from their lives.

## Involves agreement about future safety– not the past

8

It is very common in child protection work for there to be disagreement between family members and professionals about whether or not the children were harmed and who was responsible for causing the harm. Trying to force an agreed upon view about what happened in the past will usually lead to a breakdown in communication and will get in the way of building a working relationship.

It is necessary that professionals, family members and the safety network understand each other's positions and are prepared to work together to show everyone that the worries held by the child protection agency (danger statements) will not happen to the children in the future. Focusing on future safety in this way fosters working together to develop and implement a detailed safety plan for the children, even when there is little agreement about the past.

# National Learning Collaborative on Risk and Safety

*Contributors: S. Ault, D. Blackwell, Z. Chahine, S. Getman and P. Pecora on behalf of Casey Family Programs*

The issues of safety and risk are central to effective child protection practice. This is the “gateway” of child protection practice upon which all subsequent decisions are predicated. Currently, many states, counties, urban jurisdictions and tribes are redefining how they approach practices involving ongoing safety, risk assessment and planning with families. Public policy and practice leaders are pushing the frontier on assessing “protective capacities” and moving from an “investigation” mentality to an inquiring approach that identifies strengths as well as risks in an assessment process conducted in partnership with families.

Several approaches currently are being used to support child protective services assessment and decision making. The field is developing new practice technologies, and jurisdictions are drawing on several of these approaches, modifying them in some instances and in others, developing their own tools.

## Casey Family Programs gets involved

Casey Family Programs has been asked to assist a number of states and local jurisdictions to continue to innovate in this area. Casey Family Programs is the nation’s largest operating foundation focused entirely on foster care and improving the child welfare system. Founded in 1966, we work to provide and improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care in the United States. As champions for change, we are committed to our 2020 Strategy for America’s Children—a goal to safely reduce the number of children in foster care and improve the lives of those who remain in care.

In the areas of risk and safety, we have, for example, helped design training and coaching approaches to advance the concurrent and complementary use of different tools and practices, evaluate training and conduct impact analyses of child and family outcomes. We have invested in both a National Breakthrough Series and a New England Breakthrough Series on safety and risk assessment, which resulted in many innovations aimed at improving the outcomes of engaging with families around matters of safety and risk.

Across the country, Casey Family Programs has been invited to join in local efforts to improve the ways CPS social workers engage with families.

## Efforts in California

In California, child welfare agencies are seeking to merge safety and risk assessment with effective family engagement strategies. To that end, 14 child welfare jurisdictions are in various stages of implementing the Signs of Safety practice strategies and tools in coordination with their ongoing utilization of Structured Decision Making. Implementation has included a focused and intentional effort to include community and judicial partners in this process so that all parts of the child welfare system are thinking the same about safety and risk and the importance of the family’s voice to more accurately determine their ability to safely care for their children.

Each of the 14 child welfare agencies, the California Department of Social Services and the Northern California Training Academy participate in a California Evaluation Workgroup, led by Casey Family Programs, that helps to support shared learning and outcomes across the state.

## Efforts throughout the United States

In Minnesota, the Safety Focused Family Partnership Learning initiative is, with our help, hosting regional gatherings through workshops, discussions and individual coaching and consultation. The partnership is focusing on “spreading what works” and setting the context for expanding innovation by building on established local work, the Minnesota Practice Model and Signs of Safety. By the end of the year, practice leaders will have demonstrated their skill and ongoing commitment to collaborative learning so that the Department of Human Services will be able to support a continuous improvement process with internal staff and regional practice leaders.

In New England, Casey Family Programs has been asked by child welfare leaders in Massachusetts and Maine to support their efforts in implementing Signs of Safety in ways that align with and complement related tools used to assist staff and families in assessing the safety of children. In Massachusetts, this has involved a professional development strategy that uses practice coaches to support the learning and skill development of supervisors and social workers. Using Structured Decision Making tools with Signs of Safety methods to create a shared understanding with families about “what needs to happen,” social workers report having new clarity about their work and an increased ability to help families create safety plans that prevent the need for placement of their children.

## A national forum for dialog

Jurisdictions have much to share with each other as they develop new approaches to working with families to keep their children safe. Recognizing this, Casey Family Programs has joined with partners from across the country to create the Signs of Safety and Shared Decision Making Learning and Evaluation Collaborative. The Collaborative is a national forum for dialogue about emerging and innovative safety-organized child welfare practices. Since 2009, the Collaborative planning team has facilitated a series of conference calls and webinars to bring together the professionals who are learning and leading this shift in practice. The power of peer learning underscores the value of the Collaborative as child welfare practitioners strive for better ways to engage families in this “gateway” dialogue as the first step to improved outcomes for children.

# SDM and SofS: Making Social Work “Really Work”

*By Raelene Freitag M.S.W., Ph.D., Director, Children's Research Center,  
Madison, Wisconsin*

In the 26 years since I spent my first day as a child protection worker, I've watched a lot of ideas come and go. What is happening today is capturing our field in ways I've not witnessed before. What is happening? Perhaps there are two dimensions.

First, it appears there is a synthesis of good ideas, and we don't have to guess anymore about whether a good idea works. Twenty six years ago, there was almost no research about child abuse and neglect, or effective ways to work with families, or how to make decisions. Nearly three decades later, we owe a debt of gratitude to a host of practitioners, academics, researchers and families who, little by little, like a trickle of water changing the shape of a rock, built up the pieces that can now be fit together in a unified approach to practice. Many of the ideas you will read about in this publication are not new in and of themselves. Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards, through their book, *Signs of Safety*, and the work they have done, are brilliant in the ways they applied the solution-focused work of Insoo Kim Berg and Steve De Shazer to the daily reality of child protection. Turnell and Edwards created ways for frontline staff to easily learn and practice techniques that build critical thinking, and most importantly, create relationships with families. Through this, they kept the focus squarely where it must be for child protection work: on the safety of the child.

At the same time, research on how all of us process information and make decisions is supporting the value of having some standardized tools to balance our more intuitive ways of thought. While tools such as the Structured Decision Making assessments could be misused, the ways workers are using them within a family engagement practice is moving toward an approach to practice that combines the best of assessment tools, family engagement and good interviewing.

Second, the ways we approach the spread of ideas is changing. While there will always be a need for policies and implementation dates, things like practice skills, values and principles can't be “implemented” as a result of a memo and a day in a classroom. Through small, experiential initial exposure to these new ideas, followed by coaching through use of new techniques in actual practice, workers have an opportunity to try something new with support and in a spirit of a community of practice that is learning together.

The future looks brighter for child protection work than ever before thanks to the contribution of many people who are walking side by side to do more of the best of what we've always done and add some new ideas that work. When simultaneously you hear workers say, “I feel like I'm finally getting to do social work,” AND families feel engaged and respected, AND the steps we take are supported by a growing body of research, we know that we are on the right track!





# Evaluating and Implementing a Supported Decision-Making Approach to Child Welfare Practice: Early Indicators of Success

By Holly Hatton, Northern California Training Academy



Enthusiasm continues to persist as various child welfare jurisdictions implement Signs of Safety throughout California. It has been almost a year since workers, referred to as the “early adopters” of SofS, began participating in training in the combined Signs of Safety/SDM supported decision-making practitioner approach. The intent of the supported decision-making approach is to shift the culture in Child Welfare Services by challenging social workers to go beyond the use of professional jargon and labels and, instead, meet with the family and its network to increase safety in the family.

The approach offers a simple yet rigorous assessment format that the practitioner can use to elicit, in common language, the professional’s and family members’ views regarding concerns or dangers, existing strengths and safety and envisioned safety. This approach focuses on the question, “how can the worker actually build partnerships with parents in situations of suspected or substantiated child abuse?” This is a partnership and collaboration-grounded, strengths-based, safety-organized approach to child protection work to stabilize and strengthen the child’s and family’s situation.

In September, 2010, implementation teams from 12 counties attended a three-day training at UC Davis in the supported decision-making practitioner approach and overwhelmingly agreed the training would significantly improve their day-to-day work with families. No one knew, at that time, how

implementation of the approach would look over the next year. Subsequently, in evaluating the implementation of the supported decision-making practitioner approach in Northern California during this past year, the resounding message is that the approach is helping families, keeping children safe and here to stay.

Currently in California, there are 14 child welfare jurisdictions that are implementing the coordination of SofS strategies and tools with SDM: San Diego in Southern California, and in Northern California, Butte, Del Norte, El Dorado, Glenn, Inyo, Lake, Modoc, Plumas, Sacramento, Shasta, Siskiyou, Sutter and Yuba. With common foundational implementation and guidance, each jurisdiction is approaching training and implementation in slightly different ways depending on the goals and mandates of their particular county. The training initiative and evaluation is being conducted by, and in partnership with, the Northern California Training Academy at UC Davis Extension and Casey Family Programs. The Northern Academy is evaluating the supported decision-making practitioner approach to inform the merits of further investments in the practice model and verify the extent to which training and coaching influences worker and family outcomes. At this time, the Northern Academy has examined the process-oriented measures of the evaluation with impact measures to be analyzed later this year. There are three main evaluation foci for this project: in-class training, impact of coaching and birth parent satisfaction with child welfare services.

“The continued support from the coaches has been really, really helpful; it keeps the momentum going.”

~ Shasta County

## Evaluation of in-class training

The in-class training focuses on knowledge attainment and workers’ expected implementation of the supported decision-making practitioner approach as reported by child welfare social workers who are trained in the new approach. Participants receive classroom training in Signs of Safety and information for how Structured Decision Making can be combined with SofS. Six months following the in-class training, participants complete an online survey. Results of the initial in-class training indicate that **1)** there were significant improvements in knowledge of Signs of Safety practices and tools from pre- to post-test overall, **2)** trainees’ generally thought the Signs of Safety tools and practices would improve their work with families, and **3)** trainees indicated they wanted on-the-job support in implementing Signs of Safety practices.

## Impact of coaching

To support transfer of learning, coaching delivered via webinars and in-person group meetings over a period of 12 months was offered to the counties following the in-class training. The coaches, also known as practice leaders, provide follow-up support and ongoing performance feedback to the social workers trained in the approach. One worker from Shasta County stated, “The continued support from the coaches has been really, really helpful; it keeps the momentum going.” While the impact of coaching is currently being analyzed, the initial reports from workers are that having in-the-field support greatly enhances implementation.



## Evaluating Impact on families

The Northern Academy is also evaluating the potential impact of the supported decision-making practitioner approach on families. The overall purpose of this aspect of the evaluation is an attempt to determine birth parents' perspectives regarding case planning experiences and involvement with child welfare services as well as other related issues.

The Northern California Training Academy has begun to form a partnership with the UC Davis Guardian Scholars Program, which is a comprehensive program committed to providing services and support for former foster youth to maximize educational opportunities. The Academy has recently hired a Guardian Scholar to assist with the evaluation efforts of birth parent satisfaction survey.

*“The biggest benefit of using SofS is bringing the child’s voice into the life of the family...to the table. It’s also a way of honoring the family.”*

*“SoS really took off for us when we started doing the mappings with the families...Our experience is that families just love it. Often times they come in angry, confused and resistant, so we go through the process, and they come out smiling, focused; they know what they need to do; they know where we are coming from, they feel a sense of relief when they leave.”*



## Evaluating Impact on families

Some of the key lessons learned over the past year are that counties deem the support of upper-level staff paramount to supporting successful implementation. As noted by a worker in Lake County, “Management being on board is key because I wouldn’t be able to do the trainings if they didn’t trust in my abilities and trust in the process... and having upper management allow me to train others has been huge in our counties.” Many other workers concur that supervisors and managers are essential participants in making SofS practices and tools a success.

Finally, and with great excitement, workers over the past year relate their experiences of using SofS with families as a promising practice.

A social worker in Sutter County explained, “SoS really took off for us when we started doing the mappings with the families...Our experience is that families just love it. Often times they come in angry, confused and resistant, so we go through the process, and they come out smiling, focused; they know what they need to do; they know where we are coming from, they feel a sense of relief when they leave.”

Another social worker comments that, “the biggest benefit of using SofS is bringing the child’s voice into the life of the family...to the table. It’s also a way of honoring the family.”

Finally, workers state that using a supported decision-making practitioner approach fosters greater confidence to work with families. “Now we feel so much better closing our cases when we make sure the family has assembled their safety team,” said a social worker in Sutter County.

While the evaluation is underway, the preliminary results suggest that both social workers and families think the practice is a success and is leading to greater engagement, relationship building and most importantly, keeping children safe.

# Research Framework for Implementing Signs of Safety in Northern California

By Susan Brooks, with content excerpted from “Disseminating Child Welfare Workforce Knowledge and Information to the Field,” A Briefing Paper. National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, January 2010. Full report available at [http://www.ncwwi.org/docs/Dissemination\\_in\\_Child\\_Welfare-A\\_Briefing\\_Paper\\_6-7-10.pdf](http://www.ncwwi.org/docs/Dissemination_in_Child_Welfare-A_Briefing_Paper_6-7-10.pdf)

The Northern California Training Academy—to support the implementation of Signs of Safety—has strategically used key themes from three theoretical models: 1) diffusion of innovations, 2) knowledge transfer and exchange (KTE) and 3) implementation science.

## Diffusion theory

According to Herie and Martin (2002), the field of knowledge diffusion:

“represents a cross-disciplinary body of work that has produced an estimated 10,000 literature citations and is widely used in the public health, education and agricultural fields. Initially conceptualized as a linear process, theories of diffusion...have been modified to reflect the dynamic, interactive nature of knowledge dissemination and applications” (p. 88).

According to Everett Rogers (2003), diffusion is the process by which **1)** an innovation **2)** is communicated through certain channels **3)** over time **4)** among members of a social system (p. 11). Rogers (2003) identifies five stages that constitute the progression from research dissemination to research utilization:

1. Knowledge occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) is exposed to an innovation’s existence and gains understanding of how it functions.
2. Persuasion occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) forms a favorable or an unfavorable attitude toward the innovation.
3. Decision takes place when an individual (or other decision-making unit) engages in activities that lead to a choice to adopt or reject the innovation.
4. Implementation occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) puts a new idea into use.
5. Confirmation takes place when an individual seeks reinforcement of an innovation-decision already made, but he or she may reverse a previous decision if exposed to conflicting messages about the innovation.

## Knowledge transfer and exchange

Knowledge transfer and exchange (KTE) is a relatively new term that is increasing in importance and use. KTE implies an interactive and engaged process between the research community and those engaged in and affected by policy and practice contexts (Jacobson, Butterill & Goering, 2003; NCDDR, 2005):

“[KTE] is a process whereby relevant information is made available and accessible to decision-makers for application in practice, planning, and policy making. It occurs not only at the end of a process, project, or research study, but is active throughout the life of a project, from start to finish. [KTE] refers specifically to the two-way dialogue and exchange of information between those who generate and those who receive and use knowledge, and it is also operational throughout the life of a project or research study. Together, these two elements serve to facilitate the use of research in practice” (Barwick et al, 2005, p. 25).

KTE theorists assert that knowledge is “not an inert object to be ‘sent’ and ‘received,’ but a fluid set of understandings shaped both by those who originate it and by those who use it” (NCDDR, 1996c, p. 8). A KTE framework generally contains an exploration and determination of five important domains: the user group, the issue, the research, the researcher–user relationship and available dissemination strategies (Jacobson et al, 2003). Effective KTE strategies draw upon existing resources, relationships, and networks to the maximum extent possible, while building new resources and channels as needed (Barwick et al, 2005).

## Implementation science

There has been an emerging interest on determining a more focused, active and effective approach to the implementation of evidence-informed practice and programming. As Fixsen and Blase (2009) explain, “implementation is the art and science of incorporating innovations into typical human service settings to benefit children, families, adults, and communities” (p. 1). The literature makes clear that “thoughtful and effective implementation strategies at multiple levels are essential to any systematic attempt to use the products of science to improve the lives of children, families and adults. That is, implementation is synonymous with coordinated change at system, organization, program and practice levels” (Barwick et al, 2005, p. vi).

There are six functional, yet not linear, stages of implementation: exploration and adoption, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, innovation and sustainability (Barwick et al, 2005; Fixsen & Blase, 2009), and three essential implementation outcomes:

1. Changes in adult professional behavior (knowledge and skills of practitioners and other key staff members within an organization or system)
2. Changes in organizational structure and culture (values, philosophies, ethics, policies, procedures, decision making) to bring about and support the changes in adult professional behavior
3. Changes in relationships to consumers, stakeholders and systems partners (Barwick et al, 2005, p. 12)

In addition, in order to implement the changes suggested, the diagram below illustrates the structures that act as drivers in the change process.

## Implications of implementation

As Grol and Grimshaw (1999) point out, transmitting and translating knowledge and information is not “a single action but rather involves a well-designed, comprehensive plan and stepwise process, including a variety of strategies and interventions. Decision makers should use theoretical perspectives and the growing evidence based on the effectiveness of different dissemination and implementation strategies to develop multifaceted interventions.”

Accordingly, diffusion of innovations, KTE and implementation science, when taken together, have a number of implications for dissemination strategies for Signs of Safety. The core components of these three theories make clear that, to be effective, the dissemination plan that counties adopt needs to involve the following:



## Bringing research to practice

Currently, the Northern Academy is organizing a library of webinars, videos and written materials on specific areas of practice of Signs of Safety and Structured Decision Making in an effort to assist counties with the process of implementation.

### The Northern Academy supports county implementation of the elements as follows:



# Group Supervision in Child Welfare

*Adapted from an article from Social Work Now, August 2008  
By Suzanne Lohrbach*

Supervision is a key mechanism through which social work practice can be strengthened, particularly in the context of child protection. Group supervision, based on a variation of the individual model, has been used to supplement this approach. Shulman (1993) describes staff groups as being a more significant resource when effective leadership is employed to help social workers join together to service the group's purpose.

Building competency and practicing confidence and sound critical decision making is a key function of supervision. Group supervision, particularly when it involves the use of a specified framework for organizing and analyzing information in case consultation (Lohrbach and Sawyer, 2004; Turnell and Edwards, 1999) has the potential to build competency and confidence as practitioners share and critique social work pathways, decision making and practice responses. Klein (2000) describes how practitioners move from novice to advanced competency in work environments where there is the opportunity to learn from experience. A practice culture develops which allows for honest discussion and open-mindedness regarding insights gained and lessons learned from previous family case presentations.

Monro (2002) describes the necessity for sound critical thinking and reasoning skills in decision making in child protection and asserts that it is the agency's fundamental responsibility to provide such an environment. Case consultation within the context of group supervision provides a regular and consistent immersion in thinking through the practice experiences and the application of research findings to each case.

## Supervisors set the tone

Supervisors are responsible for setting the culture for the group process. They provide for an environment of respect, shared accountability and risk; facilitate responsible use of authority, reciprocity, thoughtfulness, discipline and mutual aid and ensure that divergent views are presented. The framework provides an opportunity for the supervisor as facilitator to pose questions that elicit detailed information absent of interpretation, embellishment and speculation. For example, a simple line of query might be: How do you know this? Are these the words that the mother used? What specifically was said? Does it make sense to have another conversation with her to clarify whether you got it right? When you say the father has mental health problems, what do you mean? Is there a formal diagnosis? What have you observed? How has the father described his experiences? Every conversation within the group is held in such a way that should a family member walk through the door, nothing would change. Practicing talking in a respectful, straightforward, interested manner seems to assist social workers to have appropriate skills and works in talking with families in their homes and in any meeting or conference forum.

When the supervisor as facilitator encourages dissenting views and members take on the task of looking critically at any decision, the vulnerability and pressure for the group to conform can be minimized and thereby strengthen critical thinking skills and guard against "group think" (Janis, 1982).

## Upcoming training on group supervision

Child protection is often carried out in an anxious and risk-averse environment. Group supervision can provide a sanctuary of sorts where time is allowed for thinking and working through complex practice pathways. It is a place where emotional support is available, questions can be responded to, professional development and leadership skills can be honed and where social work knowledge, research and tools can come alive in the field.

Suzanne Lohrbach, author of the article from which this one is adapted, provided training on group supervision in Davis and Redding in August 2011 as part of the Master Leadership Series for Supervisors and shared the model and process for group case conferencing. Sue will be returning to Northern California to provide additional training this fall 2011/winter 2012. She currently works for American Humane Society but previously was with Olmsted County Child and Family Services in Rochester, Minn., where she made great strides in the area of family group decision-making programs and field services for the protection of high-risk children. She also had clinical consultation responsibilities for the domestic violence response team and helped to lead the implementation of the child protection practice framework, Signs of Safety.

Additionally, Dr. Lawrence Shulman, an internationally known leader in supervision will be in Davis as part of the **Master Leadership Series for Supervisors on October 11 and 12, 2011.**

For more information and to enroll, visit our website at [www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy](http://www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy) or call (530) 757-8725.

## References

Please see the Resources and References section on page 31 for the references listed in this article.

*Every conversation  
within the group is  
held in such a way  
that should a family  
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the door, nothing  
would change.*



# Facilitating Family Meetings: Making Your Child Welfare Practice Inclusive!

By Heather Meitner, LCSW, Massachusetts Action Learning Group

A core strategy of Signs of Safety is family and community engagement. Family Team Meetings are a critical strategy for inclusion, and understanding the basics of facilitated practice can help you get the same shared understanding and agreement among families, their support network and the department. Facilitated process, or structuring a dialogue, makes your job easier. Isn't that why you appreciate it when someone facilitates one of your family team meetings?

## Benefits of Structuring a Dialogue

- Can prevent "shooting ourselves in the foot"
- Decreases misunderstandings
- Gives people a sense of predictability—"I know what's coming next and can allow myself to be really present"

David Straus, renowned master facilitator and founder of San Francisco-based Interaction Associates says, "A well-managed collaborative effort is like a chemical reaction that creates far more energy than it consumes." He calls this phenomenon the interaction effect.

The words we use matter, and when we build shared meaning with youth and families, we increase shared responsibility for successful outcomes. Through collaborative action, we can experience the interaction effect by developing more realistic solutions than we can if we work by ourselves.



## Do you ever wish you could make a referral to the Family Team Conferencing Facilitator for every family on your caseload?

Has a family attended a meeting with you and left unclear why the department is involved despite your valiant efforts to tell them what needs to happen? Being transparent about the purpose and desired outcomes is key to building understanding among the parties at the table.

## Collaboration is not just a noun: It's a series of micro practices!

Paying attention to content (what), process (how) and relationships (mutual respect) simultaneously helps us build true collaboration. Our role as social workers in every conversation is to develop understanding whereby everyone is clear why we are here, what we are trying to accomplish and how we are going to do it. This leads to participation that allows everyone's voice to be heard and allows people to feel a sense of ownership and presence in the process, then we have a stronger likelihood of creating shared commitments to building on what is now working and to change the behaviors that are worrisome. Facilitated process also allows us to get the most out of the Signs of Safety approach by creating a safe container to hold the conversation about worries, what works well and what needs to happen.

## You can start to hone your facilitation skills by trying out the following two practices either within your office or with a family in the field:

1. Explicitly begin each meeting by asking each other, "Why are we here today?" (Write down the shared purpose.)
2. "What do we hope to walk away with at the end of this meeting?" (Write down the product, i.e., increased understanding, a plan, list of options, a decision, etc.)

By taking the first 5-10 minutes of each meeting to get clarification, you will quickly see positive results!

## Two-Day Family Meeting Facilitation Training

This two-day training is for anyone who facilitates family meetings. It will examine research-based skills and knowledge about family meetings, and enhance and develop skills in facilitation of family meetings with an emphasis on the use of Signs of Safety tools and techniques.

**Redding:** October 24-25, 2011

**Davis:** October 26-27, 2011

**Instructors:** Heather Meitner and California Team

For more information or to enroll, email Grace Barajas at [gbarajas@ucde.ucdavis.edu](mailto:gbarajas@ucde.ucdavis.edu).



# Appreciative Inquiry

By Nancy Hafer, Northern California Training Academy

**Appreciate** v., 1. valuing; the art of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes and potentials; to perceive those things that give life to living systems 2. To increase in value. Synonyms: VALUING, PRIZING, ESTEEMING, and HONORING.

**Inquire** v., 1. The act of exploration and discovery. 2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities. Synonyms: DISCOVERY, SEARCH, and SYSTEMATIC EXPLORATION, STUDY

As the human and social service sectors move to implementing strength-based practices, the concept and research of Appreciative Inquiry is often noted as serving as the theoretical underpinnings of the method. This article describes the research and concepts of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and how Signs of Safety was created by building on the AI model.

AI has been defined as an approach based on the premise that “organizations change in the direction in which they inquire.” An organization [or individual] that investigates problems will keep finding problems versus an organization [or individual] that investigates what to appreciate in itself will discover what’s successful. It is the paradigm or philosophy one uses when asking questions and envisioning the future that fosters relationships and builds on the goodness in a person, a situation or an organization. By so doing, a system’s capacity for collaboration and change is enhanced.

AI was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in the 1980s. Beginning as a theoretical model, Cooperrider and Srivastva argued that organizations are not “problems to be solved” but are centers of infinite human capacity—ultimately unpredictable, unknowable or a “mystery alive.”

This rationale provided a paradigm shift that argued for the need to go beyond the deficit or problem focus of the field.

## Three phases for visits

In the early 1990s, Appreciative Inquiry founders developed a practical model to implement the theory—calling it the Four D’s:

- Discover
- Dream
- Design
- Deliver

Inherent and required within this process or paradigm is the “art of asking questions.” Asking questions is something that is done by social service workers all day long, but it is in fact the way in which questions are asked that will elicit the responses that are obtained. The power of the question and how it is posed will impact the answer—reaffirming the quality of our language, how we talk about our work, our relationships and ourselves with others.

The “medical model” of health has been the main operating paradigm under which social services has functioned for more than a century. Under the medical model of health, practitioners focus on illness, problems, disease and disorders that are afflicting the community or individuals. Diagnosis and treatment are the standards of operation.

Appreciative Inquiry, while having the same goals as the medical model of health, operates significantly differently by focusing on the strengths and making changes from that point. Several models in social services have been introduced which are making this shift.

For social services to fully make this shift to a strengths-based model, individual skill sets must be moved to organizational theoretical approaches.

### Problem Solving

“Felt Need”  
Identification of  
problem



Analysis of  
Causes



Analysis and  
Possible Solutions



Action Panning  
(Treatment)



Basic Assumption:  
An Organization  
or Family is a  
Problem to Be  
Solved

### Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciating and  
Valuing the Best  
of “What Is”



Envisioning  
“What Might Be”



Dialoguing  
“What Should Be”



Basic Assumption:  
An Organization  
or Family is a  
Mystery to be  
Embraced

Source: “Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry,” by David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney. <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/whatisai.pdf>

# Solution-Focused Scaling Questions

*Adapted from the article by this title and written by Coert Visser*

Steve De Shazer, an American therapist and co-developer of the solution-focused approach, in the 1970s talked with a client who came for his second session. He asked the client what was better now. The client spontaneously replied, "I've almost reached 10 already!" Subsequently, De Shazer began to play with the idea of using numbers to describe one's situation. This started the development of the scaling question used in solution-focused therapy (Malinen, 2001). The question is generally phrased like this, "On a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 being \_\_\_\_\_ and 10 being \_\_\_\_\_, where would you place yourself?" Currently, many therapists, coaches and managers use this question. Its use is detailed below.

## Different types of scales

There are many ways of using scaling questions. Below are the most frequent uses.

1. **The success scale:** On this scale, 10 is the desired situation and 0 is the situation in which nothing has been accomplished yet. The success to which this scale refers can be about anything that you may find relevant in a particular situation.
2. **The motivation scale:** On this scale, the 10 may be something like, "I am prepared to do a lot to achieve the goal," and 0 may be, "I am not willing to do anything for it." Going through the basic steps of the scaling question, clients often get more of a grip on their own motivation. They learn to regulate their own motivation and become capable of motivating themselves.
3. **The confidence scale:** A 10 may be, "I have much confidence in being able to accomplish this," and a 0 may be, "I have no confidence whatsoever." Just like with the motivation scale, the client learns to regulate his/her own confidence. This can have a strong stimulating effect.
4. **The independence scale:** A 10 may be, "I know how I can proceed with this, and I don't need help anymore," and a 0 may be, "I don't know how to proceed with this, and I need help." The advantage of this scale is that it helps to keep coaching and therapy from taking longer than strictly necessary. While the problem may not be completely solved, this does not have to mean that the professional help has to continue.

## Different types of scales

1. **What to do when the client is at a 0:** In this case, it is obvious that you cannot ask him/her how he/she has been able to go from 0 to the current position because the current position is a 0. When clients say they are now at 0, they often want you to understand how serious their situation is. The coping question can

then be asked; for example, "How do you manage to go on in these tough circumstances?" The coping question often helps people to find new energy to cope with their difficult situation. For instance, when the client says, "I manage to go on because I don't want to disappoint my children," the coach can build on that by asking, "How would you know your children would not be disappointed?"

2. **The importance of effective scale anchors:** When using scales it is important to define your scale anchors carefully, in particular, the 10-position. Scales usually work best when the 10-position is defined in not too idealistic terms (the ideal future) but rather in more realistic terms (the desired situation, the situation you would be satisfied with). Being idealistic in your definition of the 10-position has two disadvantages. The first is that you can be sure that an ideal situation will never be achieved. A second disadvantage is that it will trigger the client to scale the current situation lower. A too idealistic 10 can demotivate.
3. **Playing with scales:** Often it is possible and necessary to be inventive and playful when using scales, if only because clients may do that too. In a team building session, a coach once used the scale walking technique. The exercise went fine, and the coach noticed how the energy in the group grew while they proceeded. It worked like this: At a certain point, the coach invited the members to think about which step forward they could take on the scale. He asked them to physically take a step when they knew what step it was. The team members thought for a moment and then, one after the other, took a step forward. One person thought longer than the others and eventually took a step backward instead of forward. The coach was surprised for a moment and wondered if the participant was joking. However, the coach became curious and asked, "Hey, that is interesting... You're taking a step backward... Would you care to explain that?" The participant responded with a serious look on his face, "I am very perfectionistic, and by taking a step backward, I want to symbolize that I am going to let things loose a bit more." The coach responded: "Sounds good."

The key is in the follow-up questions. After asking the initial scaling question, consider following it up with one or more of the following:

- "What has allowed you to give the rating you did and not one below?"
  - Allows the family members to speak to their strengths
- "What concretely would need to happen to increase your rating by one?"
  - Allows the family members to identify worries or challenges they perceive
- "How would your friends rate you?"
  - Helps identify others in their lives, their level of knowledge, support and perspective

These follow-up questions provide additional understanding and opportunity to discover for both the practitioner and the family member.

*(continued)*

## Using scales with multiple goals

Sometimes people wonder about whether or not scaling questions are too simple to be used in complex real life situations. In complex real life situations, there are often multiple goals instead of only one. Moreover, often these goals are interrelated in one way or the other or they may be competing with each other.

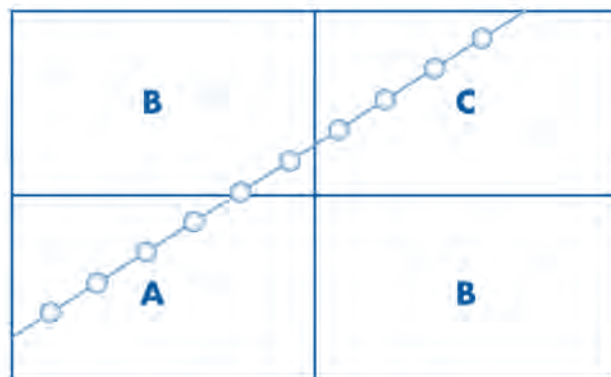
For example, a company in which one group advocated the use of proactive environmental practices and another group objected saying that the focus of the company should be in achieving financial goals. The tension between these two groups grew to rather unpleasant proportions when members of both groups started accusing each other of all kinds of bad intentions and behaviors. A solution-focused coach was hired to solve this matter. The first thing the coach did was to listen carefully to both parties trying to understand their goals. After that, the coach suggested a framework through which the relationship between

both goals was visualized. He asked them what they considered the most desired position in this matrix. They immediately agreed that C was the preferred place to be. The coach then created a 1-10 scale based on the matrix and their choice of the “C” quadrant.

The group started to agree more and more and discovered that there were some interesting opportunities to improve both environmental and financial performance at once. The financial people showed increasing enthusiasm for the environmental goal and vice versa. In this example, the creation of a matrix and subsequent scale allowed both sides to understand that more than one goal (their own) could be realized.



Financial Goals  
Achievement



Environmental Goals  
Achievement

## Conclusion

Experience in using scaling questions has shown that they can function well in solving most issues—either simple or complex. The different types of scales mentioned above can all be used in the same manner and with the same or similar process questions as well as follow the same guidelines for usage. Using this questioning technique while implementing such methods as Signs of Safety and the Three Houses will greatly enhance the interaction with families and children.

### For more information

Doing What Works in Solution-Focused Change (Blog):  
<http://solutionfocusedchange.blogspot.com/2009/04/solution-focused-scaling-questions.html>

Scaling questions with multiple goals (Video): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBlKzOYeG-o>





# Risk and Safety Assessment on Trial

*By David M. Meyers, Senior Attorney, Center for Families, Children and the Courts and the Judicial Council of California - Administrative Office of the Courts*

On April 12 and 13, 2011, the Northern California Training Academy, in partnership with the California Administrative Office of the Courts and the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law, co-sponsored consecutive one-day training events titled, "Putting Risk Assessment and Safety on Trial: Structured Decision Making and Signs of Safety in the Courtroom." In total, 286 people attended the event held in McGeorge's main lecture hall. Attendees included judicial officers, child welfare workers, county counsel, attorneys for parents and children and CASA. Attendees represented 35 counties and 7 state agencies.

The sponsors designed the training to help bridge the disconnect that often occurs between child welfare practice and courtroom culture. Instructors consisted of judicial officers, attorneys and child welfare professionals, each working in interdisciplinary teams to integrate what they were learning from each other and their own individual roles and responsibilities.

Professor John E.B. Myers began each day with an overview of the human decision making process and how courts receive, weigh and interpret scientific evidence and expert testimony. Professor Raelene Freitag and Phillip Decter, LCSW, followed with a brief overview of the Structured Decision Making (SDM) and Signs of Safety (SofS) practice tools.



From there, Commissioner Nancy Williamsen and Randall Harris, J.D., moved the discussion into the courtroom and, with Freitag and Decter playing the role of expert witnesses, began a series of cross-examination questions designed to help attendees distinguish between the validity of the tools and the skill and expertise required to use them.

"We don't necessarily want our pilots building the equipment that flies the planes," Freitag explained during the event. "And no matter how good the tools are, nothing we're presenting is meant to substitute for good social work and sound clinical judgment."

The Northern Academy and its co-sponsors chose to present Structured Decision Making and Signs of Safety in tandem because, as instructors explained, each helps provide a critical piece to working with families.

"Think about a fence representing the life of a case," Freitag and Decter explained. "SofS is like the rails that run the length of the fence. You're always looking to engage the family to generate a comprehensive and balanced assessment. SDM is like the posts that keep the rails up. At key points along the way, you need to stop and assess risk and safety, and SDM is the tool we use to help us do that."

"And remember, all of this is meant to supplement, not supplant, good social work practice," offered Harris.

The training concluded with judicial officers and selected attorneys joining faculty for a facilitated discussion about the issues presented and lessons learned. Topics ranged from discovery; the role of relatives; the importance of good report writing; the shared perspective from bench, bar and child welfare about the value of the work we do; and the critical importance each of us plays in ensuring successful outcomes for the children and families we all serve.



# County Reports and Lessons Learned

## The Journey Toward Organizational Transformation

*By Laura Coulthard, former director of Child Welfare, Sacramento County CPS*

Over the past year, Sacramento County CPS has been undergoing a comprehensive reorganization. Our goal is to create a system in which children and families are at the heart of everything we do. Getting to family and child engagement, and the art of great social work practice, can be challenging in a bureaucracy that is largely compliance based. During the first phase of our reorganization, we were focused on our core values and principles and the design of a new practice model in an effort to build an organizational foundation to achieve our goals of increased safety, improved permanence and greater accountability. As we continue to support our staff in mastering and sustaining the changes made to date, we also acknowledge the need for the next level of change: organizational transformation. The Signs of Safety model provides a structured approach to assessment and case management that will be the cornerstone of our transformation. It brings the heart and soul, the voice of the family, and the child and the family's community directly into practice.

A common theme across all child welfare systems is the critical nature of decision making. In our county, individual social workers have long been responsible for making decisions alone. Decisions regarding safety, regarding placement and regarding services rested squarely on the shoulders of the social worker. We began to see that decisions made based upon one individual's perception may contribute to overlooking important information and can lead to one-dimensional decisions. As we evaluated our practice model, we recognized that if we were to place children and families at the heart of everything we do, we had to expand our decision making process to include our families, communities, agency and court partners, and all those that had impact on helping to improve safety and increase permanency for our children and families. Collaborative decision making is the centerpiece of good decision making.

Sacramento County CPS is early in its adoption of safety. We've begun by using Signs of Safety mapping as a way to deepen the conversation between social worker and supervisor, and between supervisor, manager and county counsel. Adding these perspectives helped us sort through worries versus dangers, always keeping safety at the forefront.

While the internal agency use of safety mapping has been a good start, the real transformation begins when we engage families, children and the community differently. We are rolling out the use of the SofS model in our North Region for all programs. The early implementers, social workers and supervisors willing to take the risk to try something new, actually transform as they think through cases in the mapping process. There is a new energy and engagement in the work. The use of appreciative inquiry supports the social worker in practicing the art of social work, deepens the available information by bringing in many perspectives on a family, builds relationships and takes the social worker out of the isolation and burden of having to know all the answers.

Just as Signs of Safety can engage and bring hope to families, we have a sense of revitalization. The work is beginning to transform our system from compliance based to value based with the support of data, Structured Decision Making and Signs of Safety. We are looking forward to implementation across the agency and the opportunities to learn from other counties and jurisdictions as we make this journey.



# Our Journey Toward Signs of Safety Implementation

By Chelsea Cornell, MSW, Butte County Children's Services

Signs of Safety implementation began in Butte County after five staff, including me, attended a training facilitated by Philip Decter and Heather Meitner of Massachusetts. As I sat and listened to the presentation, I must admit I was hesitant. As the first day came to a close, though, I began to feel excited about the possibilities of Signs of Safety. Not wanting to be naive, I began to analyze and scrutinize every word that was said as well as the material. By the end of the third day, I couldn't wait to get back to Butte County to tell everyone about Signs of Safety.

We rolled out Signs of Safety at a program meeting by demonstrating safety mapping. As we worked through the process, with the input of all the very concerned social workers, I wondered what was going wrong. I looked into the audience and saw one of my fellow Signs of Safety trainees pointing at her watch and mouthing, "too long." I realized that having the input of 50 social workers while trying to "safety map" for the first time might have been a bit ambitious.

After surviving this, and asking the very brave volunteers for forgiveness, we continued on. We made a decision to introduce Signs of Safety as a "grassroots" movement. Believing in the integrity and respectfulness of the model and the tools therein, we began introducing SofS to social workers and allowed interest to build. We introduced the Three Houses at our next program meeting, and two social workers who had been using this tool talked about their experiences. We asked for volunteers for an implementation team.

We began sending our staff to training and offered in-house training. In March 2011, the implementation team introduced the Signs of Safety model with an overview. At each subsequent meeting, we "dig deeper" into various aspects such as solution-focused interviewing and safety mapping. We practice our skills by interviewing and safety mapping for each other. The enthusiasm and excitement in the room is inspiring. The stories of success and empowerment of families is rejuvenating. In addition, we have trained our Team Decision Making facilitators who have begun enthusiastically using Signs of Safety, specifically the three questions, in their meetings.

As I write this article, I think about comments made by families after a safety mapping like, "Wow, that was actually a good meeting!" "I want to be invited to the next meeting." "Maybe alcohol is a problem for me; maybe I should stop." "The process was so easy to understand, and it solved the problem." "I really like this, I sat through so many classes, but I never learned what to do if I needed help." Through tears, "these people show me every day that they support me but to hear them say these good things about me is amazing." "I've been through CPS before but have never seen anything like this. I learned so much."

I also think of the stories from the social worker of unexpected results like, "healed sibling relationships," "...a nine-year custody battle and at the end of the safety mapping they realized for the first time they had the same worries." "I can see what I need to focus on with clarity. I am not so overwhelmed." These are the things that keep us going as we move forward in our commitment to become a Signs of Safety county.



## Safety in Partnership: Bringing Safety Organized Practices into Family Treatment Court

Butte County's Family Treatment Court (FTC), like so many, struggles with the common question, *How can practitioners build partnerships with drug-affected parents in situations of suspected or substantiated child abuse and still deal rigorously with the safety of the child?* In an effort to address this common dilemma, Butte County's FTC is integrating the safety organized practice approach into its program.

Bringing this approach into FTC increases family engagement by involving parents in assessment, planning and decision-making, and by providing hope and the expectation that the family is capable of succeeding. It also maximizes family and kinship resources. The safety organized practices align well with Butte County's FTC goals which include fostering nurturing, permanent and safe environments for children in need of protection or services by using a comprehensive non-adversarial, team approach. As such, Butte County has begun to systematically incorporate safety mapping in its case planning meetings, implementing a framework to aid in organizing information around SAFETY and DANGER and promoting social networks to build both formal and informal family support; all of which is intended to promote child safety.

A unique aspect of infusing the Signs of Safety practices into their FTC program is the inclusion of peer mentors in the safety network planning meetings and enhancing collaborative partnerships between child welfare services, behavioral health and the court.

# Lake County Implementation of SofS

*By Socorro Padilla, M.S.W., Social Worker IV, Child Welfare Division, Lake County Department of Social Services*

Lake County has really gone “out front” with Signs of Safety implementation. Since being appointed the SofS department cheerleader, I have been able to integrate the “SofS language” into the ER and FR/FM case staffing forms used to guide all case staffing discussion. This process assists the workers to personally become more knowledgeable on the initial worries, concerns and complicated factors, to identify strengths and to provide examples of acts of protection.

With the approval from upper management and help from administrative staff, we have made accessible to employees the tools of SofS that include: the Three Houses, Safety House, Safety Circles and instructions. All are available in our department network for easy access. In each unit there are boxes filled with the necessary supplies to conduct the Three Houses in the field for quick and easy access. Each box contains a set of crayons, colored sharpies and pens.

Working as the SofS department cheerleader and as the lead Family Team Meeting (FTM) facilitator, I have conducted several introductory trainings on SofS implementation in the ER, FR/

FM and PP units. In addition, I have been able to restructure the FTMs to match the SofS model that includes utilizing solution-focused interviewing techniques and changing the documents to include an SofS rolling agenda, and the SofS Action Plan/Safety Planning agreement form. As the FTM facilitator, I am able to use the practitioners/social workers field work that includes the Three Houses, Safe House and Safety Circles.

It is important to note that nothing would have occurred without the support of the Lake County upper management team. Our department managers and unit supervisors fully support the process of SofS implementation. Upper management have gone as far as to order a Smart Board allowing the FTM facilitator to instantly make copies of the family’s “What’s Working Well,” “Worries and Concerns” and “What Needs to Happen Next” documents for quick and easy reference. Ultimately, the Smart Board increases the number of FTMs the department can hold per day with minimal distraction and loss of focus.



# LAKE

## A Social Worker’s Experience with Signs of Safety

*By Susan Harrison, Child Welfare Division, Lake County Department of Social Services*

My personal experience with Signs of Safety from a Lake County Emergency Response social worker perspective has been a positive, transitioning process. While I was initially unsure how the implementation of a new philosophy and language would benefit our families or the department, I soon realized that this seemingly simple concept was actually a multidimensional, practical tool that could be utilized in investigations in the field and also in juvenile dependency cases. The benefits quickly became clear as I saw that SofS could be utilized in varied yet cohesive ways throughout the department and throughout the stages in the life of a case. I also observed that it could provide a cathartic exercise for our youth and families, often resulting in a stark reality check for parents in juvenile dependency cases when presented in court or at a family team meeting.

A life-altering moment for me in the use of the Three Houses tool was when I observed a sobbing 12 year-old child as she carefully and meticulously sketched a spoon (used by her mother to heat meth) and a hypodermic needle in her “House of Worries,” and she also wrote a caption about how her dog “went crazy” after ingesting drugs found in the home. The child appeared relieved after pouring out her sadness on paper, and she illustrated her mother in “rehab” attached to the “House of Good Things,” which was actually her “House of Dreams.” These houses became the child’s voice in court and at the family team meeting and were instrumental in creating a bridge in the healing process between the mother and the child.

While it is easy to underestimate the power and impact of Signs of Safety, including the Three Houses tool, it is clear as it becomes more frequently used that it is increasingly relevant and important in broadening awareness and understanding for all those involved in a case.



## Using SofS During Screening

*By Diane Purdy, Social Worker III, Resource and Referral Specialist, Child Welfare Division, Lake County Department of Social Services*

I am the screener for CWS in Lake County. Often, non-mandated reporters are nervous, upset or agitated when contacting CWS. It is my job to help make the reporter feel comfortable enough to explain their concerns honestly and accurately. I have found the SofS model to be an invaluable tool for developing rapport with the reporter and uncovering important information and background.



People reporting concerns regarding family members are usually the least comfortable when reporting to CWS. They usually have a wealth of information but may have trouble verbalizing it. Using a strength-based approach such as the SofS model can help the reporters believe their report can actually cause positive changes in the lives of the children they are concerned for. For example, a simple question such as, “Can you remember a time when things were working well for the family?” can accomplish several screening goals. It can help establish a better rapport with the reporter by changing the tone of the report from negative to positive. This can cause the reporter to relax, remember historical detail and provide important collateral contacts that can be helpful throughout the investigation.

Periodically summarizing what the reporter has said and asking open-ended questions are equally important in not only obtaining accurate information but in gaining the reporter's respect and active participation. When a reporter is engaged, he or she will be more likely to make further calls regarding

updates on the situation or prompt the reporter to have others with more information contact the CWS office. Summarizing can sometimes catch costly mistakes in my note-taking and can also let the reporter know that I am listening and really want to know their opinions. Asking open-ended questions and waiting for a response, rather than offering the reporter multiple choices, tends to make a reporter really think about the questions I ask and will produce unique and appropriate responses.

Asking the reporter, “What positive outcomes would you like to see for this child?” can keep the reporter in a positive and hopeful frame of mind and can help the person believe that a positive outcome is actually tangible. When help is tangible, the reporter will become more cooperative.

Any technique that can help a relationship form between a reporter and a screener is beneficial. That rapport and relationship can make a huge impact on the quality of information a screener receives, thereby impacting the quality of the entire investigation.

# Signs of Safety: In Our Experience

*By Lisa Soto, MFT, Program Manager, Sutter County Social Services*

Sutter County CPS sought out Signs of Safety training in 2010. A team representing a cross section of staff was selected: early adopters, last-to-changers, fledglings and veterans, all of whom were curious enough and committed enough to excellence to agree to my call to become the Core Implementation Team. We planned, we attended training, we planned some more. Led by a motivated and experienced supervisor as project coordinator, the team is now off and running. The following three points have been some of the greatest contributions in the implementation of SofS.

## ORDER

The nature of Structured Decision Making and the use of tools that enhance critical thinking was perhaps the greatest draw of the SofS model. Families' stories mixed with workers' expectations and experiences often leads to complex case presentations that make sorting through the mire unnecessarily time consuming and exhausting while still missing critical information. Signs of Safety offers a framework within which the stories and facts with the essential issues can be quickly brought into focus. Safety Mapping quite literally helps families and workers to get on the same page. Social workers can quickly organize their thoughts to get to what matters most in the myriad details that surround families in crisis. The Three Houses tool and Three Questions technique are invaluable for mining critical information from children, quickly quieting the "noise" that surrounds family crisis.



# SUTTER

## OWNERSHIP

Families leave a safety mapping meeting with greater ownership of their part in resolving the family problems. Strengths are acknowledged and documented, acts of protection over time identified and parents' successes are examined, not just their failings. Social workers report that "the process of mapping what we're worried about is a reality check for people. It helps people 'get it' unlike anything else." Workers using SofS to guide their thinking have seen parents move from defensive posturing to owning their power and their role in keeping their families whole.

## OPENNESS

Meeting with families in a cooperative, open forum has proven essential to engaging families in a real and lasting way. The expectation that support people will be included from the start and not allowed to remain "in the dark" is a powerful tool for families in developing their natural support systems. We meet in an environment where no one has to be right and no one has to be wrong--a key to opening the family to the idea that perhaps CPS truly is, as we claim to be, here to help. Talking frankly with families about "what we're worried about" and asking them what they are worried about opens the door to understanding how families must truly benefit from, rather than merely attend, services on a case plan. The open exchange about worries and strengths leads to a less defensive, more truthful examination of what needs to happen next.

Implementing a model that starts with a family's strengths in a universe where a family's deficits are traditionally the center of the world has not been without its challenges. Signs of Safety is no magic bullet nor miracle elixir, and change can be hard, but we are in the business of change and remain invigorated by helping families achieve and maintain safety.



# Signs of Safety in Shasta County

*By Thelma Giwoff, M.S.W., Program Manager-Children's Services, Health and Human Services Agency, Shasta County*

SofS has been an active presence in Shasta County since April, 2010. Since that time, it has made an impact on our families, our practice and the way we work with each other. We now have five supervisors, two facilitator/SW staff and a program manager trained in SofS/SDM through the Northern California Training Academy at UC Davis Extension. These staff and supervisors have been involved in "cluster calls" and webinars with their coaches and mentors since September, 2010. They have now created an Implementation Work Group to practice and enhance their working knowledge and skills as well as created additional activities to introduce the key elements, values and philosophy of SofS into daily casework practice.

Mock safety mapping has been presented to the supervisor group, to the Systems Improvement Committee and to a unit meeting. These presentations were well received and generated a heightened interest among the participants in learning more about SofS and its impact on practice and positive outcomes for families.

Building on the core foundation developed over the last year, we are taking the opportunity to integrate SofS into various strategic meetings such as Family Team Meetings (FTM), High Risk Team Meetings (HRT), intake staffings, unit meetings and individual supervision with social workers. The use of SofS during our FTMs has resulted in increased awareness and understanding with the family, increased cooperation and better outcomes. Asking the three questions in our support meetings for care providers (HRTs) has opened up opportunity for greater dialog with care providers.

Additionally, the use of SofS mapping during selected intake staffing meetings has provided the opportunity for social workers, staff and community partners to be exposed to and use the SofS tool as well as the common language. In the last couple of intake staffings, community partners including our health nurses, drug and alcohol counselor, school liaison and mental health clinicians started to practice using the safety mapping process. Scaling questions are routinely implemented in the High Risk Team meetings in order to best support caregivers.

We are utilizing SofS safety mapping and scaling questions routinely in our case conferencing to stay focused on safety issues rather than get distracted by complicating factors that may or may not contribute to safety or harm issues. The Three Houses has been well received by the social workers that have utilized this tool during conversation with the children. It has been successful in helping parents understand the point of view that the children have about what is happening.

I think the greatest impact has been the way it has encouraged the discussion between staff, supervisors, program managers, deputy directors and directors about how we do business and how we want to move forward. SofS has provided the opportunity for new focus and priority on having a clear, common language of how, as an agency, we make our decisions. Utilizing SofS in a variety of settings is allowing the agency to look at our practice from all angles. It has reminded us that a universal language helps create consistency and has renewed our energy toward the successful use of SDM. It has helped social workers see how SDM can be utilized in their practice because SofS works so nicely with SDM. SofS/SDM is providing consistency in language that will soon be noticeable in court reports and in the consistency of how families hear information from one social worker to another.

We have found that SofS is starting to spread through the use of the language and the tools. It seems to start with either one worker or a small group of us trying something new and talking about things in a new way and is slowly spreading to the rest of the agency. Utilizing SofS in a variety of settings is allowing the agency to look at and evaluate our practice from a new perspective.



# SHASTA



## Signs of Safety in Siskiyou County

By Connie Lathrop, MSW, Program Manager, Siskiyou County Adult and Children's Services

The implementation of Signs of Safety in Siskiyou County has enhanced the practice of social workers in the field by giving them useful tools. They have been using the Three Houses and scaling questions to bring the child's voice into discussions of risk and safety in the family. Asking what the neighbor or teacher would say is the child's feeling of safety, for example, on a scale of 1-10, is a simple and concrete way of exploring what the child is facing and how he/she might feel about it. Use of Signs of Safety has also added depth to social workers' use of Structured Decision Making and is a concrete way to analyze any given situation. It is also useful in supervision or when discussing other issues than case staffing. A critical analysis of what exactly is a complicating factor and what is a serious threat, or what exactly is the danger statement and what needs to happen next, can be useful in any number of situations encountered in our rural environment.

We are using Signs of Safety prior to staffing proposed petitions with county counsel and at various points in the life of a case such as prior to returning children to their homes, increasing the number and length of visitations or decreasing the supervision required in visits, etc. It gives a good framework for discussion and allows everyone input. The gathering of people who can protect the child for a team meeting can be very powerful. When you get those late Friday afternoon calls and need to make a decision that will impact the child over the weekend, it is helpful to have the framework to guide the discussion and not react out of time pressure or anxiety.

The support of the coaches and other counties' staff has also been very helpful. It is reassuring to hear that other folks are struggling with the same issues that we are. Having practical answers to our questions and having appreciative inquiry modeled for us has been helpful. While we have had some struggles over the effectiveness of the phone calls, when we became more involved and gave input to the agenda, the value for us increased. It is easy to become so pressured in an effort to deal with every crisis that presents itself that it is good to stop and slow down to think about what you are actually doing. We must be sure that our intervention into a family's life does more good than harm. Signs of Safety, in combination with Structured Decision Making, is an excellent way of ensuring this.

The challenge is to keep the practice going and to broaden and deepen our skills. We do not want to lose the enthusiasm that has been generated for this very practical addition to our social work practice. We will continue to bring other workers to fully use Signs of Safety and to find more "cheerleaders" to help us spread the word about this practice. It is truly a welcome addition to Siskiyou County social work practice.

*"It is easy to become so pressured in an effort to deal with every crisis that presents itself that it is good to stop and slow down to think about what you are actually doing."*

# INYO

## Inyo County on SofS implementation

Implementing Signs of Safety has been exciting for us because it is a tool that takes all of the things our social workers do and puts it all together in a way that helps parents understand and engage in the process. SofS provides the social worker and the parent with clear next steps toward reunification.

— Krista Cooper, CWS Supervisor, Inyo County Department of Health and Human Services





# SAN DIEGO

## Coaching in San Diego County Child Welfare

By Karen Martin, LCSW, San Diego County

In October, 2010, Casey Family Programs partnered with the County of San Diego Child Welfare Services to assist with the integration of Signs of Safety and Structured Decision Making tools. The partnership includes coaching sessions for social workers and supervisors that follow ongoing training from Phil Decter of the Family Centered Service Project and Raelene Freitag of the Children's Research Center.

### Questions, questions, questions

As the “coach,” I ask a lot of questions. Scheduled coaching sessions happen in child welfare offices with groups ranging from 3-20 social workers and supervisors. Typically, each office has one to two coaching sessions each month that last for approximately two hours. Coaching sessions usually consist of “mapping sessions” when I ask the assigned social worker the “big three” questions about a particular case: what's working well, what are you worried about and what needs to happen? Then I follow up with a series of solution-focused questions that are designed to increase critical thinking about a family. Social workers are encouraged to answer these questions from the perspective of various family members.

### Critical thinking and sorting

The information gathered from these mapping sessions is then sorted into four quadrants and is integrated with Structured Decision Making tools. Worries are sorted into two groups: harm and complicating factors. Harm is any action or inaction by a parent that impacted a child. Complicating factors are other concerns that are worrisome but have not had direct impact on the children. The factors that go in the “harm” quadrant of the map typically are the same factors that are determined to be “safety threats” on the SDM Safety Tool.

The information gathered from the what's working well question is sorted into two groups: safety and strengths. Safety is defined as, “acts of protection that relate to the harm, demonstrated over time.” Strengths are any other attributes or actions such as attending a parenting class or being willing to get sober. The Protective Capacities questions from SDM can be used at this point to consider additional acts of protection that the parents might be demonstrating.

During mapping sessions, the dialogue is only between the coach and the social worker. The others in the room are observers and only participate in short intervals at key points in the coaching session. This allows the social worker to have the freedom to think through the issues with the family without being distracted by a “peppering” of task-based questions from other people in the room.

### Safety and scaling

After the sorting process, social workers are asked another series of questions designed to assess the current safety in the family. The first is, “If this case were closed today, how would you rank the current safety? 0 = the child would very likely get hurt again; 10 = the child would be very safe with the parents, and it's highly unlikely that the child would be hurt again.” The social worker answers with a number that indicates his/her perceived level of safety in the home, and then the social worker is asked, “What got you to that number? What acts of safety are present?” Finally, they are asked, “What would the parents need to do or demonstrate to move that number up just one point?”

### Work we are proud of

The mapping session is closed with the question, “When you think of the work you have done with this family so far, what are you most proud of?” This question has proven to be very beneficial. Social workers rarely talk about what they do well and tend to spend most of their time talking about what still needs to be done or what could have been done better. This question allows workers to reflect on their good work. After the social worker answers, the other social workers and supervisors who have participated in the mapping session share what they are proud of in the work that the social worker shared.

### Sharpening our focus

At the close of the mapping session, the information that was written on the white board is then typed into the four quadrant safety map and shared with the social worker and all other observers of the mapping session. Social workers have stated that having the worries, what's working well and next steps typed into a clear four quadrant map has really increased their focus on the safety threats facing the child and the acts of protection that are starting to keep the child safer.

Social workers have been able to list the factors from the harm box, along with the SDM safety threats in the Detriment and Prognosis of Returning Children Home section of court reports. Attorneys appreciate the clarity of the court report writing when specific harms and safety threats are listed. Additionally, social workers have been listing the “acts of protection” and the Protective Capacities from SDM in the Services Provided/Family Compliance, Visitation, and Family's Perceptions of their Needs sections of court reports.

Supervisors can use the four quadrant maps in supervision to keep their focus on the harm and safety threats and ask questions about whether or not there is sufficient safety (versus just service compliance) to justify whether or not to return the children home.

### Small but big shifts

Coaching has impacted practice in a few interesting ways. First, the transfer of learning from stand-and-deliver trainings is dramatically increased when there are regular coaching sessions in which social workers and supervisors can “practice” using the tools that were taught in training. Second, social workers really appreciate the protection they receive when talking about their work in facilitated sessions. Social workers know a lot about their families, and when they are given a space to share what they know, rather than responding to rapid-fire questions from a group, better decisions are made about how to help increase safety in families. Last, and most significant, there has been a shift in the culture in child welfare offices. Social workers and supervisors are now talking about their practice and how they can try new things to help children and families rather than how they can complete a list of tasks. There is an increasing sense of pride about the work that social workers and supervisors do with their families.

# A Practice Leader's Perspective: Breakthrough in Family Engagement is Emerging in Child Welfare Practice

By Brad Seiser, Northern California Training Academy

SofS/SDM is spreading like a wildfire within the ranks of social workers and supervisors in Butte, Yuba and Sutter counties. In my 23 years of child welfare experience, I have never seen a practice that has been embraced with such passion and commitment. It has been an evolutionary process beginning with social workers and supervisors being trained in the basics of safety mapping and the Three Houses, and then the excitement and interest to try it with one family or child or one internal case staffing. Word of mouth multiplies the spread of the practice on the floor, in unit meetings and in division meetings. Workers are going out with each other to train on the practice and try it out with a family. Proficiency and confidence builds with each use and refinement.

Program managers have embraced this practice by getting their staff trained, using safety mapping to deal with difficult and complex cases that come to their attention, and just encouraging and not mandating the practice. In each of the counties, social workers have been making the practice their own by designing their own forms and versions of the Three Houses that address how children relate to their world through play and imagination. Workers have tried the Three Houses in a variety of situations with kids—while in cars, homes and offices. Children seem to really gravitate to this innovative engagement tool.

Stories are routinely emerging in which families who had been extremely difficult to work with are now coming around, sensing that CPS is honoring and valuing their ideas for how they can create safety for their children and how they have provided past acts of protection. As a practice leader, it has been inspiring and moving to hear these stories and to observe the courage of staff to try something new that creates a new, possible enhancement for their work.

When we look back from 10 or 20 years in the future, I believe we will see that outcomes in child welfare were dramatically altered through the adoption and widespread use of SofS/SDM. It's a very exciting time to be working in child welfare!



## Three Houses Contest for Del Norte, El Dorado and Lake Counties

By Chellie Gates, Northern California Training Academy

John Vogel, Signs of Safety master coach from Boston, Mass., had the brilliant idea to hold a contest for his three counties, Del Norte, El Dorado and Lake. The contest was for the best "bumper sticker" slogan for Three Houses interviewing tool. Entries began coming in within hours of the contest announcement.

### Our first place winner is:

Melinda Lahr, Lake County ER Unit, for her entry:

*"Sometimes it takes Three Houses to know a home"*

### Second place winner:

Susan Harrison, Lake County ER Unit, for her entry:

*"Three Houses, One Me— Let me tell you about my life and where I need to be."*

We had some wonderful entries and it was so difficult to choose. Thanks to each of you who submitted entries. Prizes will be going out to Melinda and Susan very soon!

# Resources and References

The Northern California Training Academy is building a library of resources to support the implementation and practice of Signs of Safety and Structured Decision Making. We provide ongoing training, webinars and practice leaders coaching support. We have developed an archive of materials including booklets, videos, taped webinars, a coach's toolkit and handouts to support counties and individuals as they build their knowledge and skills. Please see our "Communities of Practice" on our website and feel free to download and use the resources in unit meetings with community partners and in your own development of skills.

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**Interview of Andrew Turnell** by Walter Oppenoorth in July 2003 in Holland:  
<http://www.solution-focused.nl/tools/turnell.htm>  
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The Northern Training Academy is developing a series of DVDs that support various aspects of Signs of Safety. The following are currently available:

**Signs of Safety and Structured Decision Making: How do they Partner Together in Daily Practice?:** 10 minutes in length: good for an overview of SoS and SDM. Can be used as part of a unit meeting, training or community presentation

**Introduction to Practice of Signs of Safety:** 1.5 hours in length: A review or orientation to the practice of Signs of Safety including harm and danger statements, and safety mapping. Can be used in training, unit meetings, community meetings, social worker review or orientation.

**Interview with Heather Meitner about Signs of Safety:** 7 minutes in length: A brief description of Signs of Safety

**Safety Mapping Demonstration:** 2 hour overview of Safety Mapping and a demonstration between supervisor and staff doing a mapping of a family

**Creating Danger and Safety Statements:** 1.5 hours providing an overview of developing danger and safety statements. Can be used in unit meetings, part of training with staff and community partners  
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These resources are available at

<http://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy/>

Under **Resources**, click on "Communities of Practice" to find the information mentioned above.

For more information please contact **Amy Spakosky** at (530) 757-8650 or [aspakosky@ucde.ucdavis.edu](mailto:aspakosky@ucde.ucdavis.edu).

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**We can't publish this  
newsletter without you.**

We received lots of helpful and  
interesting feedback on our last  
issue. Please send your comments  
and any ideas for future issues to me  
at [sbrooks@ucde.ucdavis.edu](mailto:sbrooks@ucde.ucdavis.edu)





## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Upcoming Signs of Safety Training!

Engaging Children and Safety Planning with Sonja Parker and Phil Decter	September 19-20, 2011 Davis
Three-Day introduction to Signs of Safety with Emphasis on Integration with SDM	September 21-23, 2011 Davis
One-day session for guidance and depth of practice for those supporting county practice and implementation with Sonja Parker	September 23, 2011 Davis
Two-Day Family Meeting Facilitation Training with Heather Meitner and CA Team	Two-day training: October 24-25, 2011 Redding October 26-27, 2011 Davis
Training for Trainers for Practice Leaders/Coaches and Trainers	Part I: October 4-6, 2011 Davis Part II: January 10-12, 2012 Davis
California Signs of Safety Convening	November 8, 2011 Davis

### Currently in development...

- Coaching Institute and Toolkit
- Library of Signs of Safety information and resources
- Implementation toolkits to support county implementation
- Practice profiles for areas of Signs of Safety practice

**Visit our new website to see how the Northern Academy can serve your needs**

[www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy](http://www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy)

On the site, you'll find:

- Current information about upcoming Northern California Training Academy courses, core programs, seminar series and webinars
- A resource library with in-depth information on child welfare including training materials, research reports, literature reviews and more
- Current and archived issues of *Reaching Out*
- Web-based learning center

### In Our Next Issue

Look for more articles, research, success stories and resources in our next issue of *Reaching Out*. The next issue will focus on "AB 12- California Fostering Connections to Success Act"

### About the Northern California Training Academy

As part of the Center for Human Services at UC Davis Extension, the Northern California Training Academy provides training, consultation, research and evaluation for 28 Northern California counties. The counties include rural and urban counties with various training challenges for child welfare staff. The focus on integrated training across disciplines is a high priority in the region. This publication is supported by funds from the California Department of Social Services.

### About the Center for Human Services

The Center for Human Services at UC Davis Extension began more than 30 years ago as a partnership between the University of California, Davis, and state government to address the needs of rural counties in developing skills for their social workers. Through professional training, consultation and research, the Center has grown to serve human services organizations and professionals throughout California and across the nation.

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