



Integrated Casework Practice Model

practiceequidance

Signs of Safety Concepts and Terms

The Signs of Safety framework is a critical thinking process that supports effective decision making in the highly complex and consequential field of child welfare practice. The Signs of Safety approach begins with a conscious and overt effort to generate shared definitions and shared understanding of three critical words in child welfare practice: Safety, Risk and Danger. The definitions of these words in child welfare practice matter a great deal and can help us clarify the information we gather with and about families. The clarity that these definitions seek helps to inform our assessment of the essential connection between a caregiver's action or behavior and the impact this has on the child--**"Caregiver impact on child" is the focus of our attention in child welfare practice.**

To boil it down--When a caregiver's actions are harmful to the child, we define this as "danger". When a caregiver's actions are protective of the child, we define this as "safety". And, when a caregiver has already harmed the child and we are worried it will happen again, we define this as "risk".

The concepts of danger and safety orient and organize our work around the impact that a caregiver's behavior has on a child. Further, this practice challenges us to be clear and specific about the things that worry us about a caregiver's behavior, actions, or lack of actions which, although concerning, do not harm the child. The situations in which a caregiver demonstrates worrisome actions, but there is no clear negative impact on the child are defined as "complicating factors" in the Signs of Safety framework. There are also positive resources, skills and attributes that caregivers have or access which do not necessarily result in protection for their child. These positive things available to caregivers are defined as "supporting strengths" in the Signs of Safety framework.

So, the Signs of Safety framework, particularly the process of Safety Mapping, helps us organize the full sum of information available at the time along the continuum from Danger (acts of past, present or future harm) to Safety (acts of protection)--while holding in close consideration the complicating factors and the supporting strengths. As information is clarified and stated in concrete terms, we generate an emerging map of safety in order to inform a plan on how to enhance protection to specifically mitigate the identified danger (safety planning).

The entire Signs of Safety framework in practice can be nested in three universal questions asked throughout all aspects of our work. These questions are opened-ended, solution focused starting points which lead to more targeted questions to gather detail and context. The three questions are: 1. What are we worried about? 2. What works well? 3. What needs to happen? Using these questions at all times, helps us organize our work specifically on danger as caregiver behavior that harms a child (Worries?), safety as caregiver behavior that protects a child (What works well?) and a plan to enhance safety, permanency and well-being (What needs to happen?).

Key Concepts and Terms of the Signs of Safety Framework

The focus of child welfare practice is first and foremost on the safety of children. Assessment of safety is the constant process of asking questions to promote greater understanding, collaboration and agreements. It is important for DCF staff to share common definitions of the fundamental concepts of child welfare social work:

Safety: "Acts of Protection for a child demonstrated by a caregiver over a period of time."

- Safety represents the presence of actions, patterns of behavior, and skills that are observable and measurable and are protective.
- The process of continuously searching for safety is facilitated through family-centered, strengths-based approaches.
- Strengths are important, but not necessarily "acts of protection".
- Assessing a caregiver's acts of protection and strengths includes the family, community and professional resources that make up the caregiver's "network".

Danger: "Acts of harm to a child, either past or present, by a caregiver."

- Danger is imminent. Danger is something that threatens the child right now or in the very near future.
- Past harm is a significant indicator of present or future harm.
- The connection between a caregiver's behavior and the impact on the child is necessary to conclude that a child is in danger.
- Complicating factors are the presence of problematic, complex or concerning behaviors by the caregiver(s) but there is no clear detrimental impact on the child. (The presence of domestic violence, mental illness, and substance abuse in a family are not necessarily indicators of danger, abuse or neglect.)

Risk: "The likelihood of future child maltreatment."

- Risk has a very specific meaning in child welfare practice. Risk is the probability that a caregiver will harm a child in the future.
- Risk assessment is based on evidence that suggests an increased likelihood of future maltreatment if certain current behaviors exist.
- Risk assessment is conducted at a particular moment of DCF involvement with a family—(In the Integrated Practice Model at the end of an investigation or initial family support response).

Supporting Strengths: are skills, attitudes, resources and networks that do not mitigate the danger but could be built on to do so.

Complicating factors: Indications of a caregiver's behavior or actions that are worrisome or problematic, but there is no clear harmful impact on the child. We often confuse these with risk, but it depends on the impact on the child, i.e., domestic violence, mental health, substance abuse, poverty, institutionalized racism.

Cultural factors within the family system: are our biases influencing our decision-making?

- Have we asked questions in the spirit of curiosity to ensure that we have not misinterpreted a caregiver's actions, etc?
- How does race/ethnicity, culture, class and differences in parenting styles create additional tension between the family and DCF? How can we mitigate them?
- Have we explored their informal support networks and encouraged their involvement to support the safety plan for the family?

Developing shared definitions of the key words in child welfare practice will help us to make more consistent and meaningful decisions. As we strive for greater agreement and partnership in our work, we use these definitions to organize the information that we gather to make decisions. This approach to practice generates:

- A clear and rigorous understanding of the distinction between, past harm, future danger and complicating factors.
- A clear and rigorous distinction between a caregiver's skills and resources that are strengths and their actions that are demonstrated protection based on the working definition that 'safety is regarded as strengths demonstrated as protection (in relation to the danger) over time'.
- Partnerships with families and providers based on language and statements focused on specific, observable behaviors and avoid meaning laden, judgment-loaded terms.
- A skilful use of authority to engage the family to participate in mapping or assessing the concerns.
- An underlying assumption that the assessment is a work in progress rather than a definitive event.

Safety Mapping:

- Safety Mapping is a key practice of the Signs of Safety framework and is a facilitated process of exploring the ***impact of a caregiver's actions on a child***.
- The practice is a continuous effort to gather information and organize it in a way that helps social workers and families better understand the presence of safety in relation to the presence of danger for children, and what actions are necessary to promote child safety.

The practice of Safety Mapping relies on three essential questions asked at all times in each encounter with families, providers, stakeholders and within supervisory responsibilities or case reviews. These questions are open ended, solution focused approaches that allow people to provide information related to safety, danger and risk without having to fully appreciate the child welfare technical definitions of these terms.

The open-ended questions of Safety Mapping engage people in a dialog leading to more specific and probing questions focused on safety, danger and risk. The essential questions of Safety Mapping are:

1. *What are the worries?*

- Asking collaterals or reporters to describe the worries that they have about a particular family is a facilitated process of gathering a broad range of information that may describe the presence of danger, complicating factors and risk.
- This question is also an effective way of engaging caregivers and other family members about the concerns for the children.
- The child welfare staff use the answers to these questions collected over a period of time from a variety of sources to create an understanding of the indicators that a

child is being harmed (danger), or indicators that are concerning, but not directly impacting the child (complicating factors), or the indicators that suggest that the child may be harmed in the future (risk).

2. *What is working well?*

- It is just as important for child welfare professionals to search for the moments of success that caregivers have in their parenting.
- An inquiry approach that focuses on the things that are going well for the family can reveal the strengths (resources, skills, attributes and attitudes) of a caregiver.
- More importantly, asking what works well is a process of unveiling the presence of "acts of protection demonstrated by the caregiver over time."

3. *What needs to happen?*

- During each interaction or at each point of decision making, the child welfare staff explore danger, safety and risk in order to develop and implement a plan of action.
- Asking "what needs to happen?" at all times of all people involved in a case generates a shared commitment and stronger buy-in to the safety or service plan. This approach also encourages a broader, community based perspective on how to best meet a family's needs.

Safety Mapping and Assessment Guide

What are we worried about?	What's going well?
<p>Danger</p> <p>DANGER: Actual experiences of past or current harm to a child by a caregiver and our resulting concerns and worries about what may happen in the future (risk).</p> <p>Key here is to consider the IMPACT the harm is having on the child. Lots of dangerous things happen in and to families that are not child welfare concerns.</p> <p>Try writing these statements in clear, non-judgmental, "just the facts" language. All danger statements should include: CAREGIVER, BEHAVIOR, IMPACT.</p>	<p>Safety</p> <p>SAFETY: Actions of protection by a caregiver, specifically related to the current dangers and concerns, demonstrated over time.</p> <p>If we don't ask about the history of protection AS IT RELATES TO THE CURRENT DANGERS, we only know part of the story. Often caregivers take steps to protect children that are insufficient but could be built upon.</p> <p>Try asking yourself & the families you work with three questions: What steps have you taken in the past to protect your child(ren) from these dangers? What steps are you taking now? What are you willing to do going forward?</p>
<p>Complicating Factors</p> <p>COMPLICATING FACTORS:</p> <p>Warning signs, 'red flags', presenting issues that make the provision of protection more difficult, but in and of themselves have little or no impact on children.</p> <p>Consider caregivers with low IQ, mental illness, even substance use. Not all of these ALWAYS have impact on the child.</p> <p>Ask yourself questions to think through the issue of IMPACT. If you have clear impact on a child, it's a danger. If you don't, it's likely a complicating factor.</p>	<p>Supporting Strengths</p> <p>SUPPORTING STRENGTHS:</p> <p>Positive elements or factors in a child or family's life that are good for that family, that support that family but in and of themselves do not directly address or minimize the current dangers.</p> <p>Consider things like coping strategies, extended family or community, past history of recovery, participation in services.</p> <p>These are all important, things that can be built upon, but if they don't translate into clear actions that protect children from the current dangers they are strengths, not safety.</p>
<p>Caregiver Impact on Child?</p>	
<p>WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT: Family therapist Michael White used to say 'the map is not the destination.' Safety mapping is a process, a guide, a tool for thinking your way through the work. Don't get overly stuck on "which box does this go in?" but instead use this as a way to develop good questions that help you, children, caregivers, others at DCF, and providers think critically about what you are seeing and to come to some clarity about what particular actions will enhance safety for children.</p>	

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Danger

What's going well?

Safety

Caregiver
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Child?

Complicating Factors

Supporting Strengths

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