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Signs of Safety: Information

November 2018

Signs of Safety (SoS)

What is SoS?

Signs of Safety (SoS) is a trade-marked framework for child protection practice developed in 1990s in Western Australia by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards. Turnell and Edwards began working together to apply brief therapy ideas to child protection practice which evolved to become the SoS approach. Consequently, SoS draws heavily on elements of Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). This is evident in terms of working with family strengths and resources, finding exceptions, goal setting and scaling (see Shazer, et al. 1986; Berg, 1994 for further reading on SFBT). Using appreciative inquiry methods, the approach was developed with child and family practitioners who were utilising SoS to refine the conceptual and practice aspects, to develop 'practice based evidence' and to engage practitioners in an organisational reform agenda (Turnell, 2017).

The SoS practice framework is a strengths-based, safety orientated approach to child protection practice that seeks to move beyond narrow conceptions of risk and deficit focused practice. Focusing on strengths and signs of safety within a family, it supports practitioners to work with families to make judgements on safety. The SoS framework aims to enable practitioners to think through and critically analyse information, and to better navigate the tensions in managing risk and ensuring the safety of the children. The primary aim of the specific methods and tools used in SoS is to involve children and families in effective safety planning to improve the everyday safety of children (Turnell, 2012). The founders of SoS are careful to caution against an overly simplistic application of the framework. They contend that there are disciplines that must be adhered to when using the SoS framework and in this sense, seek to guard against a tick box application of the framework by highlighting the importance of *how* it is practiced.

Key questions and tasks

As SoS has evolved as a practice framework, different iterations of the visual depiction of assessment have been developed and continue to be used. SoS assessment is called 'mapping' and is set out in three, or sometimes four columns, detailing 'what we are worried about'; 'what is working well'; and 'what needs to happen' (Baginsky et al. 2017). The SoS Assessment and Planning form, and the questioning processes and stance of critical inquiry that underpin it, is 'designed to be the organising map for child protection intervention from case commencement to closure' (Turnell, 2012: 26). The form is designed to encourage practitioners to think of danger/harm to safety as a continuum, and to ensure clarity about the agency goals and the family goals.

The key questions on the SoS assessment and planning form are answered through the completion of key tasks:

- What are we worried about? (harm, danger statements, complicating factors, and scaling)
- What's working well? (elements contributing to existing strength and safety)
- What needs to happen? (the safety plan)

These key tasks are outlined in detail by the developers in the most recent Signs of Safety Briefing Paper (Turnell, 2012). The safety planning process is of particular importance as it is a tool that can enable improvements in child safety to be achieved and sustained. Safety planning involves all of the significant people in a child or young person's life working together toward a plan to improve their safety. The resulting safety plan describes the day-to-day arrangements that a family, their safety network (and sometimes external agencies) have agreed to put into place to ensure that the child or young person will be safe in relation to dangers or worries identified through mapping. Crucially, the safety plan is not a static document, it is an active plan that requires monitoring and updating to ensure parents have a genuine opportunity to demonstrate that they can safely care for their child.

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