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# CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

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## Signs of Safety: Practice Guide

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## Contributors

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## About the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care

The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. Our mission is to foster a culture of evidence-informed practice. We will generate evidence where it is found

to be lacking, improve its accessibility and relevance to the practice community, and support practice leaders (e.g. principal social workers, heads of service, assistant directors and directors) to create the conditions for more evidence-informed practice in their organisations.

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## About CASCADE

CASCADE is concerned with all aspects of community-based responses to social need in children and families, including family support services, children in need services,

child protection, looked after children and adoption. It is the only centre of its kind in Wales and has strong links with policy and practice.

To find out more visit the Centre at: [whatworks-csc.org.uk](http://whatworks-csc.org.uk), or CASCADE at: [sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade](http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade)

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## Practice Guide

### **What are the key elements of Signs of Safety?**

The review of the literature on Signs of Safety allowed the development of a “Programme Theory”. A Programme Theory seeks to identify what the key elements are of Signs of Safety. We believe there is nothing as practical as a good theory. It allows us to understand in depth what we are trying to do when we work in a Signs of Safety consistent manner.

Here we present key findings from the Programme Theory. This guide is primarily intended to help workers think about whether what they are doing with a child and family is consistent with Signs of Safety. It is designed to be used to support reflection on and the development of practice, rather than as a tick list. For practitioners, we offer an overview of the main ways in which SoS can be delivered, listing the 12 main aims they need to achieve to ensure they are delivering SoS according to the programme theory we present. We outline signs of success in achieving each aim to enable progress to be monitored, and outline how the SoS programme theory suggests challenges should be overcome. Practitioners can use this framework to check they are meeting the key aims of SoS, to understand the key issues to monitor in practice, and as a prompt to reflect upon and overcome potential challenges.

We hope it will also be of use to supervisors in thinking through work with practitioners. It can also be used as a basis for thinking about quality assurance and the evaluation of a service.

The overall Programme Theory is broken into two parts. Part one focuses on how to develop a shared understanding of and responsibility for risk. Part two outlines how to build an effective plan to improve the safety of children once a shared understanding has been achieved. For ease of use we present each of these as a separate table. We hope that if you think they are useful you can print out and use the tables to think about your practice with children and their families.

**Table 1: How to develop a shared understanding and responsibility for minimising risk**

What are you aiming to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
<p><b>1</b></p> <p><b>You (family worker) have a holistic understanding of risk so you are able to make informed decisions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You know the child's/young person's, parent's, wider family's and professionals' perspectives.</li> <li>A safety plan is in place and you know everyone's responsibilities within it.</li> <li>You feel supported to seek the perspectives of people in the child and family's network.</li> </ul>	<p>If you are missing the perspective and contribution to the safety plan and network of a relevant person, go back and with the family, consider how to engage them.</p> <p>We found evidence that learning from your colleagues and supervisors can help you feel supported. If you could benefit from support, take this to your supervisor or manager.</p>
<p><b>2</b></p> <p><b>With your support, the child/young person identifies strategies for staying safe, and chooses who can help them to stay safe</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The child/young person openly shares their experiences with you</li> <li>The child/young person works with you to identify strategies to keep themselves safe</li> <li>With your support, the child/young person chooses who amongst their network can help them to stay safe</li> </ul>	<p>If the child/young person is of an age where they can engage with you, but is not, check that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You balance strengths and risks when discussing worries, and you do not blame parents.</li> <li>You treat children and young people as experts in their own lives, and you focus on their understanding and their strengths.</li> <li>You use clear, simple language, and child friendly tools (for example, words and pictures, fairy/wizard, three houses).</li> <li>You spend enough time with the child/young person to build a relationship.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>Parents develop the safety plan and identify people in their support network</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents feel understood by you.</li> <li>Parents feel that their expertise is recognised.</li> <li>Parents feel that they have real choices.</li> <li>Parents feel hopeful about the future.</li> <li>Parents trust you and collaborate with you.</li> </ul>	<p>If these signs are not there, check if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents feel able to collaborate with you. If not, see aim 5.</li> <li>Parents trust you. If not, see aim 4.</li> <li>Parents have experienced a turning point in relation to their behaviour or circumstances. If not, see aim 6.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>Parents trust you</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents feel that you are there to help.</li> <li>Parents do not feel judged.</li> <li>Parents feel respected and listened to.</li> </ul>	<p>If parents do not trust you, check that you spend time with them to develop a relationship and work with them in a way that enables them to trust you. Ensure that you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show genuine care for the family.</li> <li>Focus on child safety by balancing strengths and risks.</li> <li>Focus on observable behaviours, look for exceptions and work with parent's strengths.</li> <li>Are honest about your role, the reason for your involvement and bottom lines (ensure parents understand what will happen if there is no change).</li> <li>Use non blaming, clear, simple language.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5</b></p> <p><b>Parents collaborate with you</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents do not appear continually anxious and defensive when working with you.</li> <li>Parents are open with you.</li> </ul>	<p>If parents do not collaborate with you, check that you spend time with them to develop a relationship and work with them in ways that enable them to collaborate. Ensure that you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>View parents as experts in their own lives.</li> <li>Offer parents real choices.</li> <li>Work together with parents on assessment and planning.</li> <li>Co-construct with parents what good enough parenting looks like.</li> </ul>
<p><b>6</b></p> <p><b>Parents reach a 'turning point', and accept that there are risks to their child</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents understand the child's experiences and the impact of parental behaviour or circumstances on the child.</li> <li>Parents understand the worries held by external agencies.</li> </ul>	<p>If parents have not experienced a 'turning point', check that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You know the child/young person's experiences and perspective well enough, and you can use the child's own words to convey this to the parents.</li> <li>You know the worries held by external agencies and can support external agencies to convey this to the parents.</li> <li>You support parents to explore inconsistencies between their behaviour/circumstances and their vision for the future.</li> <li>You engage with parents in a way that enables them to trust you and collaborate with you.</li> </ul>
<p><b>7</b></p> <p><b>Wider family have clear responsibilities within the safety plan</b></p>	<p>Wider family understand child safety and have clear roles and responsibilities within the safety plan.</p>	<p>There is currently little information to suggest how best to engage wider family.</p> <p>Consider using the ways of working to engage parents outlined above with the wider family. Think about using scaling and mapping to improve the understanding and engagement of wider family.</p>
<p><b>8</b></p> <p><b>External agencies have a clear role in improving child safety</b></p>	<p>External agencies are clear with you and with the parents about their worries and about the support they can offer.</p>	<p>If external agencies struggle to be clear about their worries and offer support, check if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You use strengths based, solution focused language in your interactions with them.</li> <li>You work in partnership and openly discuss how to safely balance risks and strengths.</li> </ul> <p>Can you use scaling as a tool to encourage external agencies to be clear about and take ownership of their worries about child safety?</p>

**Table 2: How to improve child safety**

What are you aiming to achieve?		Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
<b>9</b>	Parents feel confident and able to care for their child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A safety plan and safety network are in place.</li> <li>The safety plan and safety network reflect a shared understanding of and responsibility for minimising risk.</li> <li>You maintain positive working relationships with children, parents and the wider family when monitoring the safety plan and safety network.</li> </ul>	<p>If there is not an established safety plan and safety network, see table 1.</p> <p>If the safety plan and safety network are not working to improve child safety, check if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents experience the support of family members as intrusive and as leading to a loss of autonomy.</li> <li>Parents feel you have time to monitor the success of the safety plan and able to ask you for support.</li> <li>Parents are getting the support they need from external agencies.</li> <li>Wider family members are condoning unsafe parental behaviour.</li> </ul> <p>In light of these points, review the safety plan and network to ensure it enables parents to develop confidence and improve child safety in the long term.</p>
<b>10</b>	Parents feel family ties are strengthened	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents use their safety plan and safety network.</li> <li>Parents report finding it easier to draw on support within the safety network.</li> </ul>	<p>If wider family are not able to offer the support they agreed to provide, check if work can be completed to overcome these potential barriers. Ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The careers of family members are not negatively affected by their participation in the safety network.</li> <li>Responsibilities are shared between wider family, parents and professionals so wider family do not feel that their support is being drawn upon in lieu of support from external agencies as a cost saving exercise.</li> <li>Questions of loyalty are considered with wider family. For example, family members taking sides in divorce cases, or, grandparents feeling conflicted as to whether their primary loyalty and responsibility is towards their child or their grandchild.</li> </ul>
<b>11</b>	<b>You (social workers) monitor the safety plan and network and maintain positive working relationships with the family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You spend enough time with the family.</li> <li>The family feel able to call on you for support when needed.</li> </ul>	<p>No information as to how best to achieve this was available.</p> <p>Consider how to use network meetings, peer support and supervision to review and monitor the plan.</p>
<b>12</b>	<b>You make more informed, less reactive and less risk averse decisions about child safety (Intermediate Outcome, Figure 9).</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You spend enough time with the family to monitor the safety plan and keep it relevant.</li> <li>You ground your worries about child safety in observable behaviours relating to the use of the safety plan, safety network and emerging risks.</li> </ul>	<p>Reunification, parental substance misuse and sexual abuse can heighten anxiety. If you feel particularly worried, reflect on your levels of anxiety about the safety of the child/young person and discuss this with your supervisor. Check if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The safety plan and safety network are working to address emerging and changing risks, and update with the family.</li> <li>The family require input from specialist external agencies.</li> <li>Your worries are based on observable behaviours.</li> </ul>

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