

The Safety Plan must have rules that address whatever the stressors, triggers or issues are, for example:-

- How a couple will deal with arguments to avoid violence;
- How a parent will deal with mental health difficulties to make sure the children are well cared for; and
- How the children will be kept safe if parents want to use drugs/alcohol.

Specific rules for the safety plan should not be stipulated by professionals as it is important the family and their network come up with their own ideas and rules to keep the children safe. There will be times, however, that the statutory agency will have bottom line requirements for the rules. These are likely to be where a person or persons, usually an alleged or convicted perpetrator, can never be left alone with the children; or identifying a parent or specific person who is required to be the primary carer for the children.

Timeline

Providing a clear timeline for parents with detailed requirements should make a difference to them as they usually do not know how long they have to remain involved with Children's Services. Expectations are more specific and give hope to parents who should find it easier to work towards the end goals as they have a clear vision and knowledge of what work they have to complete to be able to progress to the next stage.

Even though the exact safety planning process will be determined by the risk level it is best to keep the timeframe to the minimum. The shorter the timeframe, the easier it is to sustain professional and network/family attention.



Guidance for Family Network Meetings

There is an African adage, "It takes a village to raise a child" and in today's climate of scarce resources, involving family, friends and community networks is becoming increasingly relevant to keeping children safe at home.

Times when the worries have been managed is the existing safety and should describe the actions of the parents or carers when the danger/worry has been present.

It is essential that time and energy is spent in this column searching for even the smallest success as this can be used to build future safety for the children.

The network will not always be in agreement with the content of the Danger Statement. This does not necessarily mean they cannot be part of the safety plan as they can help work out what they can do to keep the children safe in the future.

Danger Statement and Safety Goal

These should be prepared in advance of the meeting together with what is already known to be working well and can be built upon. It is important that anything which is already in the columns should be read out loud by the worker or parent rather than simply allowing people to read through.

Safety Plan

Once the Danger Statement and Safety Goal are agreed then the planning can be progressed.

There will need to be defined Bottom Lines which should describe the minimum expectations of how the safety plan will operate. These include the following:-

- The parent must involve a network of people to assist them in caring for the children to implement the safety plan. This will usually stipulate the number of people required;
- Where a network is required they must be fully informed of the worry/danger.
- A Words and Pictures explanation created by parents and workers to explain to the children why Children's Services have been involved in their lives or why they have been unable to live with their family; and
- The length of time the parents have to show that they have kept to the safety plan before rehabilitation/case closure can take place.

Prior to presenting this option to parents it is important to check with key professionals that they fully understand and agree with providing the parents and network the opportunity to create a safety plan. This makes it less likely that the professionals will pull back or oppose the process once it is underway which, when it happens, leaves the family angry and distrustful. Professionals will usually have the final say in what they consider constitutes safety and it is important they say simply and honestly what they want to see. Safety plans will succeed or fail if this is not clear from the start.

Parents are often reluctant to involve relatives because of the shame and embarrassment they may be feeling about the involvement of Children's Services. There is also the secrecy surrounding issues of, for example, sexual and domestic abuse, mental health as well as drug and alcohol dependence. However, Signs of Safety is based on searching for the strengths and assets already present in the family and build on these to move forward.

It takes skill to help parents understand the value of involving networks in keeping children safe. The Family Circles tool is useful in helping identify the naturally occurring network and bringing them to the centre of the assessment and planning process.

To begin with parents will need time to be able to process the Danger Statement which should be clear, specific and written in plain language. They need to take on board that nothing can be hidden and how the information will be shared with the network. It is imperative that the parents invite as many people as they can to the meeting and should include at least five people. Ideally the parents should be encouraged to read the Danger Statement out to those present.

A Safety Goal should also be constructed stating what things need to look like for the case to be closed to services leaving the network responsible for safety and making the plan work.

Utilising the "What is Working Well" column identifies existing strengths. Those that are most meaningful for safety planning, are the ones that are directly related to the family's everyday life describing how they positively relate to their children.