

# The 'Safety House'

A child protection tool for involving  
Children in Safety Planning



by Sonja Parker

# Involving Children in Safety Planning

Working with families and their networks to develop comprehensive and rigorous safety plans that lead to ongoing, demonstrated day-to-day safety for children, is one of the most challenging tasks facing child protection workers. Developing a safety plan that will address all of the child protection concerns requires workers to undertake an extensive safety planning process, which needs to involve all of the key stakeholders (family members, their support network and professionals) working together to determine the specific day-to-day care arrangements within the family that will satisfy everyone that there is enough safety for the children to return home.

Given the complexity of the safety planning process itself, it is not surprising that most child protection systems have not developed ways of meaningfully involving children in the process of defining and creating future safety. A considerable body of research (see for example Cashmore 2002; Gilligan 2000; Westcott 1995; Westcott and Davies 1996) shows that many of the children involved in child protection systems are not aware of how decisions about their future safety are made and do not feel they are given opportunities to meaningfully participate in these decision-making processes. The Safety House is a practical, visual tool, developed by Sonja Parker in Western Australia, that has been designed to address this issue; to create a context for talking with children about the safety planning process and to elicit their views on what would need to happen within their family to ensure that they are safe, in situations where they may have previously been hurt or were at risk of being hurt.

In using the Safety House, the outline of the house is first drawn by the child and the worker and then the worker uses the structure of the Safety House (described in detail below) to talk with the child about the specific safety arrangements that would need to be in place to make sure that these worries did not happen in the future. The child's views are recorded in the Safety House in both pictures and words. The child is then invited to create a 'safety path' leading to their Safety House and to locate themselves on the safety path as a way of representing their assessment (or scaling) of current safety within their family.

By helping the child to create their personal Safety House, child protection professionals are able to:

- Create a context to talk with the child about what the professionals mean by "safety" and "danger" and understand what those concepts mean to the child.
- Gain an understanding of the relationships that are significant to the child and identify who might be important to participate in enhancing safety for the child.
- Understand the child's views on what needs to happen for them to be safe in the care of their family.
- Help the child to understand more about the safety planning process.
- Assist children who are feeling particularly anxious about reunification to imagine what they would need to see to feel safe in the future with their family.
- Record the child's 'safety plan' in a form that the worker can bring to the family/safety network to inform the development of the overall safety plan.

I have developed the Safety House tool guided and influenced by the Signs of Safety and Resolutions approaches to child protection safety planning and casework (see Turnell and Edwards 1999; Turnell and Essex, 2006; Turnell and Parker, 2009 and forthcoming; Turnell forthcoming). My creation of the Safety House tool has also evolved out of using the 'Three Houses' tool (Weld 2008; Parker and Turnell, forthcoming) for involving children and young people in child protection assessment and planning. While the Safety House tool is designed to bring the voice of the child into the middle of the safety planning process, some professionals may well be concerned that this places too much pressure or undue responsibility on the child. It is vital that the Safety House tool and process is undertaken within a broader safety planning process that involves all the key adults, enacted from a clear understanding that it is always the adults' (not the child's) responsibility to make the child safe.

This booklet will cover:

- The elements of the Safety House tool
- Two brief practice examples including the child's safety house drawings
- How the Safety House fits in with the overall safety planning process
- The steps in undertaking the Safety House process
- A practitioners' prompt sheet for using the Safety House tool
- A Safety House template

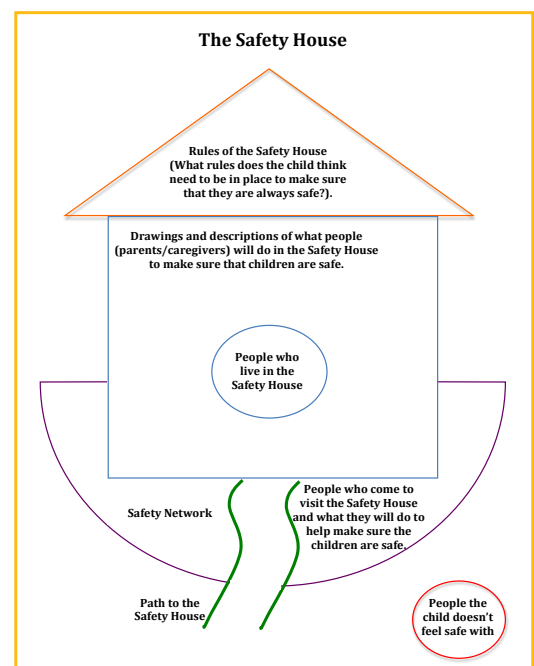
For the sake of grammatical simplicity throughout this paper, I have described the Safety House process in relation to an individual child. The Safety House tool can however be readily undertaken with more than one child at once, though this will inevitably take a little longer and the more children involved, the more care needs to be taken in managing the dynamics between the children.

## Elements of the Safety House

The Safety House is designed to capture a visual representation of everything the child thinks needs to be happening for them to be safe in the care of their family. The Safety House contains five key elements:

1. Inside the Safety House
2. Visiting the Safety House: The outer semi-circle
3. The Red Circle: Unsafe people
4. The Roof: Rules of the Safety House
5. The Safety Path: Scaling the Progress to Safety

Each of the five elements of the Safety House is designed to explore a particular aspect of the child's views about safety.



## **1. Inside the Safety House: The inner circle and inside the four walls**

The child first draws her or himself within the inner circle of the Safety House. Starting by drawing themselves in the house will help the child to engage with the process, and the act of placing themselves right in the centre of the house has the added benefit of reinforcing that it is the child who is at the heart of this process. The child then adds to this inner circle the other people who will be living with them in their Safety House.

Inside the four walls is also where the child records the things that people would be doing inside his or her Safety House. These might be details of the day-to-day activities that the child enjoys such as “Mummy cooking dinner and reading me a story at bedtime” or may directly relate to safety such as “Mummy will always stay with me when Grandpa comes to visit”.

## **2. Visiting the Safety House: The outer semi-circle**

The people who the child wants to visit their safety house to help keep them safe (their safety network; people who are aware of the concerns and are actively involved in ensuring the children are safe) are drawn between the house and the outer semi-circle (the garden fence). Details of what these people would do to help keep the child safe can be drawn or described in words or phrases next to each person.

## **3. The Red Circle**

The people who the child identifies they do not want to have in their Safety House (either living there or visiting) can be placed in the red circle, which is outside and totally separate to the safety house.

## **4. The Roof**

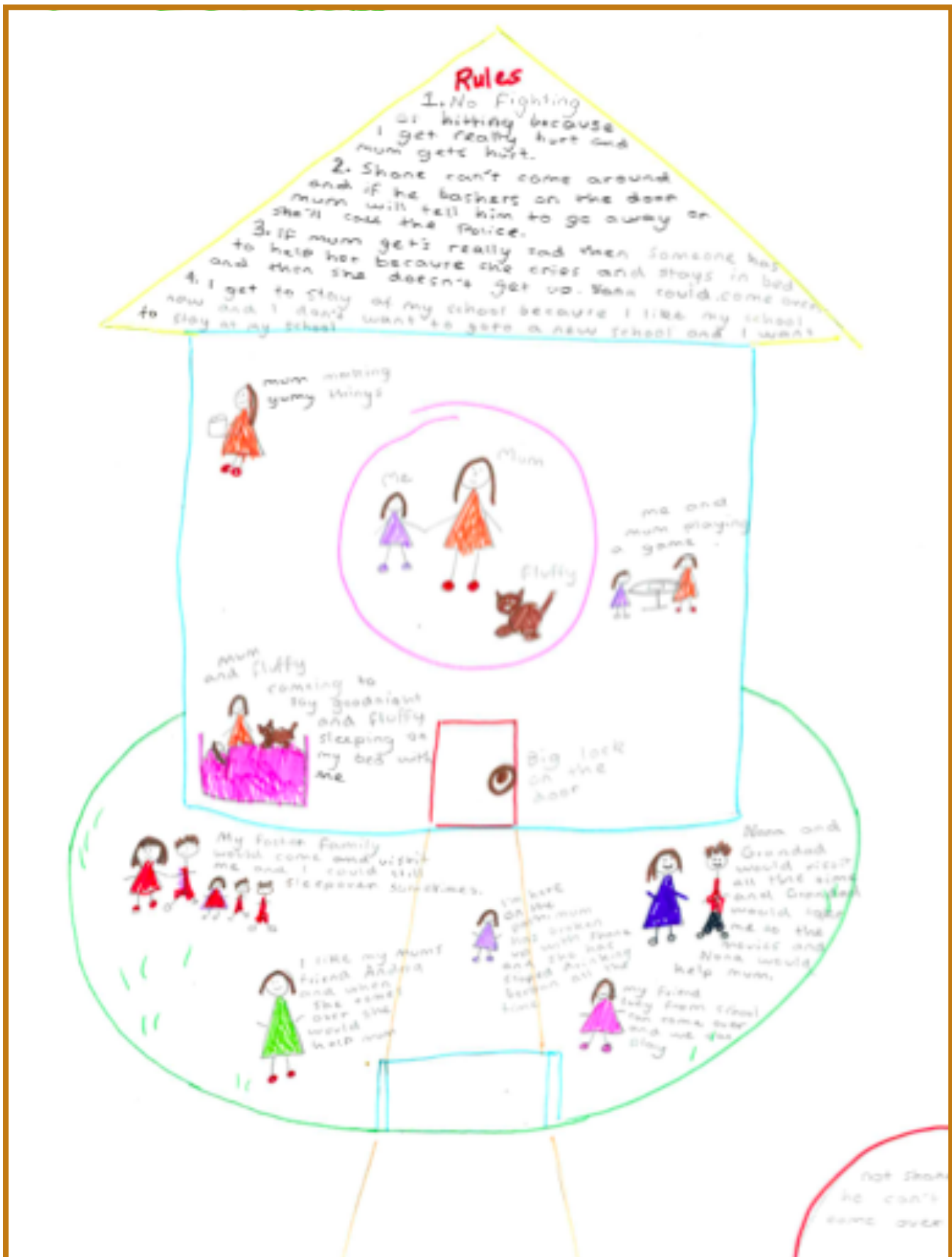
The roof of the Safety House, the top part of the house, is used to record the child’s ‘rules’ for their safety house. These rules describe how everyone must behave in the Safety House to ensure that the children are always safe and cared for. The emphasis here is on rules that ensure everyone is safe, rather than rules about the children needing to be ‘good’ (which is how some children will interpret the idea of rules).

## **5. The Safety Path**

The path that leads to the Safety House represents the connection from the past and the worries that led to the child protection authority being involved with their family, to a future represented by the Safety House, where the child is safe in the care of their family. This safety path enables the child to rate their present safety, from the beginning of the path where they feel very worried about the concerns that led to them being in care/involved with child protection services (which the child might want to write at the beginning of the path), all the way to the door of the Safety House when the child is able to go inside their Safety House because all the worries have been sorted out. Using the path as a scaling device, the child is asked to rate their sense of safety by locating themselves on the safety path, either by drawing themselves on the path, or by colouring the path up to the point where they are, or any other way that best suits the child.

# Safety House Case Examples

## Zoe's Safety House



The Safety House presented above was created with a 10 year old girl, who I will call Zoe. Zoe was taken into statutory care following an incident where her mother's boyfriend punched Zoe in the face. Zoe had also frequently witnessed her mother being hit by Shane, over a period of 12 months. Zoe's mother, who we will call Tanya, acknowledged to the statutory agency that she was drinking heavily and suffering from depression; both of which had stopped her being able to adequately protect Zoe. The Safety House was created with Zoe about six months after she was taken into care. Tanya had ended her relationship with Shane three months after Zoe was taken into care and for the past four months, Tanya had been meeting regularly with the statutory agency to address the child protection concerns.

As part of the initial stages of the reunification process, I undertook a number of child-focused sessions with Zoe, first using the 'Three Houses' tool to explore Zoe's assessment of the situation. I then brought the Signs of Safety assessment (that had been developed collaboratively with her mother and grandmother and key professionals) to Zoe, as a means of talking through everyone else's assessment and to explore how Zoe's assessment fitted into the Signs of Safety form. In the third session, I used the Safety House as a means of explaining the safety planning process and to identify Zoe's ideas about what needed to happen for her to feel safe living back home with her mother.

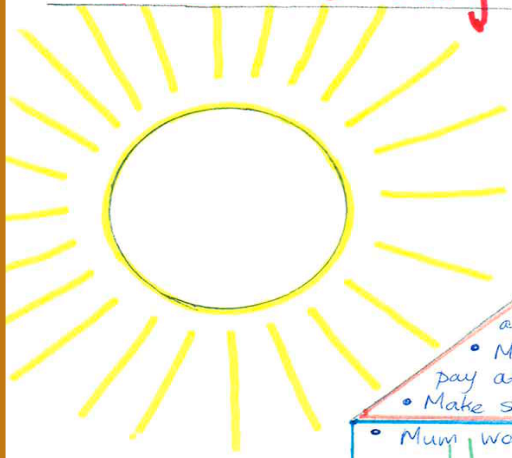
I could write many pages describing the Safety House process with Zoe, but what was most important was how this process helped to reduce the anxiety Zoe was feeling about returning home to live with her mother. Prior to the Safety House session, Zoe told professionals that she wanted to live back home with her mother but she was reluctant to start overnight stays. In Zoe's Safety House, she identified that she wanted locks on the windows and doors and a process for Tanya to call the police if Shane should try to break in. After Zoe and I presented her Safety House to her mother, Tanya told Zoe that she thought these ideas were brilliant and that they should start them straight away. The statutory agency arranged for locks to be installed on the windows, Zoe and her mum drew up the signs together and Zoe had her first overnight stay the following week.

## **Dylan's Safety House**

The second example I want to present is the Safety House of a nine year-old boy who I will call 'Dylan'. Dylan and his two younger brothers were taken into care when Dylan was four years old, as a result of severe ongoing neglect due to their mother's drug use. At the time that I worked with the family, Dylan's mother, 'Megan', had shown clean results on urine tests she undertook for the statutory agency over the previous two years and Megan's new partner, 'Bob', had been assessed by the statutory agency as not posing any risks to the children. The family had been referred to a reunification agency to facilitate the return of the children to their mother's care.

I undertook the Safety House process with Dylan about six weeks into the reunification process, when Dylan and his brothers had begun having overnight stays with Megan and Bob. The reunification agency had begun working with Megan and Bob to develop a safety network and a safety plan that would ensure that the children were safe and well cared for over time and as they were keen to have the boys' input into this safety planning process, they asked me to undertake the Safety House process with each of the boys, starting with Dylan. The process of creating the Safety House with Dylan took about an hour and is described in more detail later in this document.

# Safety house



- Z, J + K are not allowed to wander off and stay where Mum can see us & hear us.
- To listen to instructions.
- Mum & B have to look after ~~you~~ us and teach us stuff that we don't know.
- Mum and B have to follow the law and pay attention to the road.
- Make sure there are no arguments and everything is fair.

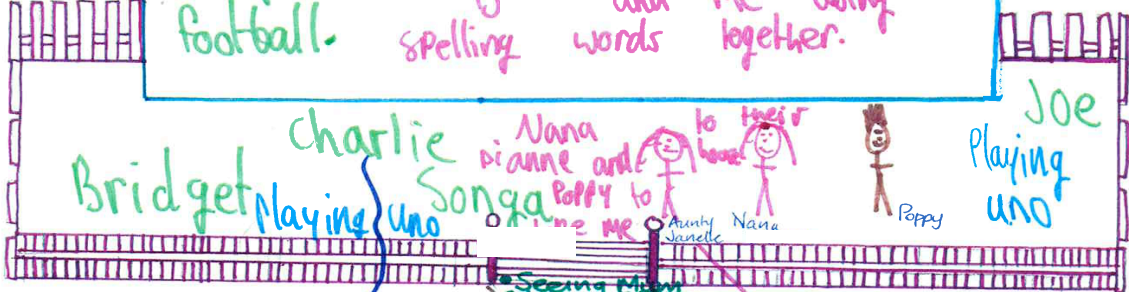
Mum won't use drugs anymore.

Having fun and doing lots of stuff.

of fun laughing telling jokes going to the football.

Spending time with me.

B and me doing spelling words together.



To check on us  
To join in with the fun.  
To play uno.  
To talk and ask about how things are going.

Z used to be here about a year or two

Seeing Mum even

Mum's stopped being on drugs

Mum and B other solving the problems.

Go to the Royal Show with Aunty & Janelle.

# Fitting the Safety House into the overall safety planning process

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The Safety House tool is designed to be undertaken with a child or young person as part of an overall safety planning process, which involves working with the parents, a network of people supporting the parents and children and all the key professionals to develop a detailed safety plan. The safety plan created through this process captures the specific details of the day-to-day arrangements that a family will need to put in place to ensure that everyone, including the child, is confident that the child will be protected over time in situations where they may have previously been hurt or were at risk of being maltreated. As discussed above, the Safety House is a tool that enables children to make sense of and participate in this safety planning process.

For safety planning to be effective, it needs to be built on a foundation where the dangers (what professionals are worried will happen to the children if nothing changes in the family) have been identified in clear, straightforward language that everyone, including the children, can understand. Only when these worries have been expressed in language that the child can understand, is it possible to then use the Safety House tool with the child to explore their views of what would need to happen within their family to ensure that they are safe in relation to these worries.

If the child does not know what the child protection worries are, this should be addressed prior to undertaking the Safety House process. There are a number of tools that can help professionals and family members talk with children about why they are in care or why child protection services are involved with their family. Two such tools are the Three Houses (Weld, 2008; Parker and Turnell, forthcoming) and the Words and Pictures process (Turnell and Essex 2006). Both the Three Houses and the Words and Pictures processes are most effective when used with the involvement of parents and other significant family members and professionals.

The Safety House process is designed to bring the voice and opinions of the child into the broader safety planning process. Professionals and family members are often very moved when seeing the child's views expressed through the Safety House and this helps motivate and focus both the professionals, the parents and their network to create a more robust and detailed safety plan. Whatever perspectives the child's Safety House generates, these will need to be explored and addressed within the safety planning process alongside the views expressed by other family members and professionals. The child's perspectives will almost always deepen the adults' perspectives and deepen the safety planning process, but should never override or minimise the identified dangers or worries.



# Process of using the Safety House tool

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## 1. Preparation

Before meeting with a child or young person to undertake the Safety House process, the practitioner needs to ensure they have the necessary background information about this family and child, which includes:

- A clear straightforward description of the child protection concerns.
- The significant people in this child's life.
- Who the child is living with and what contact arrangements are in place.
- Any changes this family have made since child protection services have been involved.
- A clear commitment from all key professionals that reunification is being genuinely pursued with the parents.
- How the child understands the issues that led to them being in care or to child protection services being involved with their family, including the language the child uses to explain why they are not living with their parents.

The other important part of preparation is working out what materials the practitioner will use in creating the Safety House with the child. Since there is a lot of detail to cover, it is usually best to create the Safety House on a large sheet of blank paper (I like using A3 size paper) and it is always good to have some spares. I like to bring a good array of coloured pencils and textas. Some workers like to use special paper and artists' crayons, pencils or textas so that children feel as if this is something special they are creating. A template for the Safety House is available ([www.signsofsafety.net](http://www.signsofsafety.net)) or the practitioner can design their own or draw up the basic outline of the safety house together with the child, which is a good way of both engaging the child over the initial drawing task and to explain the elements of the Safety House to them.

## 2. Informing Professionals, Parents and Foster Parents/Caregivers before working with the child

Before approaching the child to undertake the Safety House process, it is vital to secure the endorsement of all the key stakeholders involved in the case. Safety planning must always be undertaken with the full support and endorsement of the statutory authorities involved in the case, including the child protection agency and where involved the court (see Turnell and Essex, 2006; Turnell and Parker, forthcoming) and also needs the endorsement of key professionals such as therapists, mental health, health and family service professionals. Before exploring the Safety House process with the parents and carers, it is important to inform and secure the support of these professionals for the idea of using the tool with the children.

One of the primary purposes of the Safety House tool is to bring the child's views and wishes to bear in the creation of a meaningful safety plan. To be able to use the information the Safety House will generate to best effect with the parents, it is therefore vital to explain the process to the parents and wherever possible secure their support for the process. This advance work creates a transparent context for the practitioner to then bring the child's views back to the parents and the family's network.

If the child is in foster care or is in the care of extended family, it is important to explain the Safety House process to the carers so that they can support the process. As with the parents, this creates the context for bringing the child's Safety House back to the foster carer (with the permission of the child and the parents) and will usually significantly help the carer to understand and engage productively in the safety planning process and the anticipated reunification process.

Knowing that their parents' and caregivers understand and support the Safety House process will almost always make the child more comfortable with giving themselves wholeheartedly to the process.

### **3. Introducing the Safety House to the child**

When introducing the Safety House to children, I will usually say something like:

*"Did you know that your mum and dad and nana and pop and \_\_\_\_\_ (other key stakeholders) are meeting together to work out what needs to happen in your family for it to be safe for you to go back and live with Mum and Dad? We want to make a special plan, called a safety plan, to make sure that nothing like what happened in the past (use details as appropriate) is going to happen in the future.*

*All of us are talking together and listening to everyone's ideas and because this is about you, we want to make sure that we're listening to your ideas too. I'd like to do something with you called the Safety House, which is something I do with a lot of children and it will help me to understand your ideas about what needs to happen to make sure that you are always going to be safe. I've explained the Safety House to your Mummy and Daddy and to \_\_\_\_ (carers) and they all think this is a good idea. Is that okay if we do a Safety House together?*

*What we're going to do together is create a picture of what you want in your house when you go home to live with Mummy and Daddy to know you are completely safe and to know nothing like what happened before can happen again. We're going to draw that as your Safety House so we can show Mummy and Daddy what you want to make you feel safe. Are you still happy to do this together with me?"*

### **4. Working with the child to create the Safety House**

#### **Drawing the Safety House outline**

I prefer to start with a blank piece of paper and draw the Safety House outline and the elements of the Safety House together with the child, as a way of both actively explaining the process to the child and engaging them with me and the idea. Drawing the outline in this way also helps to create a sense of ownership for the child. It is always possible to use a pre-drawn template of the Safety House, with the worker explaining the different elements to the child and perhaps even tracing over the outlines in different colours or adding features to the house (such as a sun) that make it more significant for the child. Using a pre-drawn template is particularly useful if time is limited. The shape and structure of the Safety House can be varied to fit the cultural context appropriate for that child. For younger children, workers can draw the house on paper or construct a

house using felt/blocks etc and then use felt figures to depict significant people and felt images or pictures of various household objects to represent objects/activities within the house.

The worker then asks a range of questions to help the child create a detailed picture, usually using both words and drawings, of what would be happening within the child's Safety House. Suggested questions are provided below. The child can draw their answers to these questions within the Safety House and the worker can write words beside those drawings that need some explanation, or the child and worker can draw and write the child's answers together.

### **Putting themselves in their Safety House**

After they have drawn or created the outside of the Safety House together, the worker then asks the child to draw a picture of her or himself in the inner circle of their Safety House (making sure they leave room for other people). Drawing themselves in the centre of the house also helps the child to feel a sense of ownership of their Safety House.

### **Other people who live in their Safety House**

*“Who else would live in your Safety House with you?”*

The worker asks the child to then draw the other people who would live in their Safety House within the inner circle. In Zoe's case, she said that she wanted to live just with her mother and she then drew herself, her mother and her new kitten (that her mother had just bought for her) in the circle. Dylan identified that he would have his mother, his mother's partner and his two brothers living in his Safety House.

If the safety planning process is considering the possibility of someone else living with the family for a period, then workers can seek the child's thoughts on this by asking:

*“Has your family ever had anyone else living with them even for a short time? What was it like to have them living with you? Maybe it's not something you've thought about before but would you want someone else living with you and your family, even just for a little while when you go back home?”*

### **People who come to visit their Safety House**

*“Who would/will come to visit your Safety House to help make sure that you are safe?”*

Here the child is identifying who they think are important people for their safety network (those people who need to be aware of the concerns and are actively involved in ensuring the children are safe). These people are drawn within the outer circle of the Safety House. As the child draws these people, the worker can ask how often the child thinks the people should visit and what these people would do when they visit. These ideas can be written beside each person.

## People the child does not want to live in/visit their Safety House

In the process of identifying the people who would live in and visit their Safety House, some children will naturally start to talk about people who they do not feel safe with and who they do not want to have living in or visiting their Safety House. In Zoe's case, she volunteered that she did not want her mother's ex-boyfriend, Shane, to live in the house with them. Any person who the child identifies in this way is placed in the red circle outside the Safety House.

If the child does not volunteer information about who they might not feel completely safe to have living with them or visiting them, workers can ask:

*"When you go home to live with \_\_\_\_\_ (eg. Mum and Dad), is there anyone who might live with you or come to visit who you would not feel completely safe with?"*

In Dylan's case, he thought carefully about this question and then answered, "No, there isn't anyone that I don't feel safe with". This in itself provided significant information about how Dylan was feeling about returning home, and was positive information that I was able to feed back to his mother and mother's partner.

If the child identifies someone in response to this question, this will usually be a person, such as Shane was in Zoe's case, who professionals already have concerns about in relation to the safety and wellbeing of the child. However, it is possible that this question will elicit new information that raises safety concerns for the child. Together with the parents and network, the worker will need to do whatever is required to ensure the ongoing safety of this child in relation to this new information.

Placing a person in the red circle outside the child's Safety House does not automatically mean this person cannot live with or visit the child, but highlights that this is a person who the child does not feel completely safe with and this will probably need to be addressed in the safety plan and will certainly need to be discussed by the professionals and the parents. This can be delicate territory to navigate since family members and professionals may be anxious that people placed in the red circle may be excluded from having any contact with the child. The critical point is that the child's opinions are listened to and taken seriously by all the adults and if decisions are made about who will have contact with the child that does not concur with what the child wants, this needs to be reconciled with the child. To further inform the adults about the child's perspective on a person they have placed in the red circle, the worker can ask the child to think about what arrangements would need to be in place for the child to feel safe if/when this person is present. The worker might ask a question such as:

*"If \_\_\_\_\_ (Grandpa) was to visit when you are home living with Mummy, what rules do we need to have to make sure that you are always safe?"*

The behaviours that the child describes (e.g., Mummy will always stay with me and not leave me alone with Grandpa) can be recorded in the Safety House using pictures or words and the rules that the child suggests are then written in the Safety House roof.

## What do people do in your Safety House?

*“Imagine that your home/house back with \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g. mummy and daddy) was as safe as safe and you felt as safe and happy as possible, what sorts of things would \_\_\_\_\_ (eg. Mummy, Daddy, big sister) be doing?”*

This question may elicit information from the child about general activities they enjoy doing with their family as well as specific information about what people would be doing to make sure that the child was safe. The child can draw pictures or write words inside their Safety House to show these activities, or the worker can help the child to write words that describe these activities. Hearing specific details of what they do that their child values or that helps their child to feel safe can be very powerful for parents. In the first case example, Zoe drew a picture of her Mum making yummy food for her, after describing how her Mum now makes yummy food for her on contact visits and how she wants this to continue when she goes home to live with Mum. In the second case example, Dylan wrote that he and his family would tell jokes and laugh together and that his Mum and Bob would “spend time with me”. Dylan said that in his Safety House, spending time with him was the most important thing Mum and Bob would be doing with him.

*“What are the important things that \_\_\_\_\_ (eg Mummy and Daddy) would do in your Safety House to make sure that you are safe?”*

If the child hasn't focused on safety in the question above, then this question shifts the focus very specifically to safety, asking the child to identify what people would do to ensure their safety. In the first case example, Zoe told Sonja that her Mum would always check that all the doors and windows were locked every night so that Shane couldn't get into the house. Zoe also said that Mum would call the police as soon as Shane came around and that there would be a big sign on the wall next to the doors to remind her to do that.

The child may already have described what they want to have happen in relation to the specific concerns (when they were exploring who would or wouldn't be living in their Safety House) but if this was not the case, then workers can now ask for the child's ideas in relation to the specific worries. For example, if the concern has been about the mother hitting the children when she was angry, the worker might ask:

*“In your Safety House, when Mummy gets angry with you, what does she need to do to make sure that you are safe even when she is feeling angry?”*

As discussed earlier in this booklet, talking with the child about specific concerns requires earlier exploration with the child about what they know about the worries, and is best done using the language that the child uses to describe the worries.

## What do people do when they visit your Safety House?

*“When \_\_\_\_\_ (each of the safety people identified above) come to visit you in your Safety House, what are the important things they need to do to help you be safe? Should they do things to help your mummy/daddy/siblings?”*

Again, this question can be asked generally (ie. What would \_\_\_\_\_ do when they come to visit?) or can focus specifically on safety (by adding the additional “what do they do to help keep you safe?”). In the first case example, Zoe told me that she wanted a number of people to visit, with the focus for her Nana and her mother’s friend, Andrea, being on helping her Mum (particularly during the times when she was ‘sad’).

In the second case example, Dylan listed a number of people who he wanted to come and visit. Dylan described how his Nana and Pop would take him to their house and how all the other people would join in with playing Uno (a card game that Dylan regularly played with his family and with child protection workers when they came to visit). Asking what each of these people needed to do when they came to visit to ensure that he was safe did not appear to be a meaningful question to Dylan, as he answered that he already felt safe. This led me to ask:

*“If things were not going so well when you’re living back home with Mum and some of the problems from the past were starting to happen, who of all these people who are coming to visit would notice?”*

Dylan immediately identified that Charlie (his long term transport worker for contact visits) would be the first person to notice. I was then able to ask:

*“What would Charlie need to do when he comes to visit to make sure that he notices how things are going?”*

Dylan said that he wanted Charlie to “Check on us. Join in with the fun. To play ‘Uno’ (a card game). To talk and ask about how are things going”. This provides important information to the safety planning process about who Dylan would feel most comfortable talking to if things were not going well at home, and also gives a clear message that Dylan would like Charlie to ask “How are things going?”

*“Are there any important objects or things that need to be in your Safety House to make sure that you are always safe?”*

Asking this question can elicit the child’s ideas about what sort of practical things need to be in place to ensure their safety. In the first case example above, Zoe said that she wanted locks on the doors and the windows so that Shane could not get inside and hurt her or her Mum (there had been a history of Shane breaking into the house). Zoe also said that she wanted a big sign on the wall next to the front and back door that said ‘Ring the police if Shane comes’ and with the phone number for the police.

## **Rules for the Safety House**

The roof of the Safety House is where we record the child’s safety rules, written in the child’s language. These rules describe the child’s thoughts about how everyone must behave, on a day-to-day basis, to ensure that the child is always safe and well cared for. Questions that can be used to elicit the child’s ideas include:

- *“Remember we talked about how all those adults are talking together to make a safety plan for when you go home? One of the things they are trying to decide is what the rules of the safety plan should be. What do you think? What would the rules of the house be so that you and everyone one would know that nothing like \_\_\_\_\_ (use specific worries) would ever happen again?”*
- *“What else and what else?”*
- *“If your \_\_\_\_\_ (sister/brother/Nana etc) was here, what would they say?”*

In Zoe’s case the rules she wanted to see were:

- No fighting or hitting because I get really scared and get hurt and Mum gets hurt.
- Shane can’t come around and if he bashes on the door Mum will tell him to go away or she’ll call the police.
- If Mum gets really sad then someone has to help her because she cries and stays in bed and then she doesn’t get up. Nana could come over.
- I get to stay at my school because I like my school now and I don’t want to go to a new school and I want to stay at my school.

Dylan wanted the following rules written in the roof of his Safety House:

- Z, J & K (his two younger brothers) are not allowed to wander off and stay where Mum can see us and hear us.
- To listen to instructions.
- Mum and Bob have to look after us and teach us stuff that we don’t know.
- Mum and Bob have to follow the law and pay attention to the road.
- Make sure there are no arguments and everything is fair.
- Mum won’t use drugs anymore.

Dylan’s first two rules appeared to be about how he thought he and his brothers needed to behave so I asked Dylan, *“What do Mum and Bob need to do to make sure that you and your brothers are always safe?”* This triggered Dylan to come up with the next three rules. Given that Dylan had not mentioned any rules that related to the primary concern about his Mum’s past drug use and the impact of this on himself and his brothers, I asked: *“Do you think there needs to be a rule to make sure that the things that happened in the past that worried everyone don’t happen again?”* Dylan said that he did think so and offered the final rule.

In a similar manner to how I worked with Dylan, workers can ask specific questions to help children think about the rules that they would like to have in place in relation to specific worries, for example:

*“Something you were worried about was \_\_\_\_\_. Do we need to have a rule to make sure that doesn’t happen when you go home to live with Mum and Dad?”*

Some children may not be able to come up with rules or safety guidelines, but even a simple statement from a child such as “No-one is allowed to hit anyone” can lead to a worker asking “What would people be doing instead?” The child’s answer, however simple, can be written down in the roof of the Safety House and can be a powerful message to a parent about how the child would like things to be in the future.

## Developing a path to the Safety House

Once the child has described, in as much detail as possible, what would be happening in their Safety House, the worker can then elicit the child's perspective on how safe they would feel at this point in time if they were living with their family.

The worker and the child first draw a path that leads from outside of the house to the front door. The worker then explains that this is the safety path, with the beginning of the path being where everyone was worried (eg. that Shane might hit Zoe or that Zoe might get hurt when Mummy and Shane were fighting) and the end of the path (at the front door) is where all the worries have been sorted out and the child is able to go inside their Safety House. I usually explain the safety path by using a question such as:

*"If the beginning of the path is where everyone was very worried and you weren't able to live with Mum and Dad and you had to go and live with \_\_\_\_\_ and the end of the path at the front door is where all those worries have been sorted out and you will be completely safe living with Mum and Dad, where do you think things are right now?"*

As I suggested earlier, the Safety House tool can only effectively be used if and when the child understands what the professionals' concerns are for his or her safety. This is particularly evident when using the scaling device of the safety path. The safety path is only effective following clear and straightforward discussions about what the child's specific worries have been and once the child is aware of what professionals are worried about. Once this is done, the questions can be asked in relation to those specific worries, for example:

*"If the beginning of the path is that you feel very worried that if you go home to live with Mum (or have an overnight stay) that Mum will start using drugs again and then not be able to look after you properly and the end of the path at the door is that everything in your Safety House is happening and you're not worried at all that Mum will use drugs again, where are you right now?"*

The child can identify their safety rating by either colouring the path or drawing themselves on the path or by using a number, counter, etc (how far it is paved?) to place themselves on the safety path.

Workers can then talk to the child about where they have located themselves on their safety path, exploring what has happened that has helped the child get this far along the path and what needs to happen for the child to move a little bit closer to their Safety House. This information can be written beside the safety path.

In Zoe's case, the safety path immediately made sense to her and she drew herself about three quarters of the way along the path. I then asked Zoe what had happened to help her move this far along the path and Zoe replied, "Mum has broken up with Shane and she has stopped drinking berban (bourbon) all the time". Zoe then wrote this next to the drawing of herself on the path.

I then asked Zoe what would need to happen for her to move further along the path and be a little bit closer to her Safety House and Zoe stated "We need to get those locks on the



windows and put those signs next to the doors so that Mum remembers to ring the police if Shane bashes on the door”.

Dylan drew himself almost all of the way along his safety path and when I said to him “So you’re all this way along the safety path?” he replied, “Yes I’m almost at the gate and I’m just about where the middle of my head is” and then he drew a dotted line on either side of his head to show his position. Dylan explained that he was this far along the path because “Mum’s stopped being on drugs” (which I wrote beside the path). Dylan then went on to explain that about a year or two ago he wasn’t so far along the safety path and then he drew himself about half way along the path and used a different colour to show that this was an earlier time. I wrote “Z was here about a year or two ago” to record this information. I then asked Dylan: “What else has happened to help you move from where you were a year or two ago to where you are now?” and Dylan said “Seeing Mum more” (which he wrote beside the path). When I asked Dylan what needed to happen for him to move all the way to the end of the safety path and for him to feel completely safe living back home with Mum and Bob, and Dylan said “Seeing Mum even more”.

As was the case with Dylan, the Safety House and safety path can be used (either in the first or in subsequent sessions) to identify where the child is now on the safety path and to explore what has happened for them to have moved on the path – either forwards or backwards – so that everyone (professionals and family members) can better understand the child’s sense of safety as the safety planning or reunification process progresses.

The worker can also use the safety path to help the child understand how other people view the current level of safety, by talking with the child about where the child thinks other people might be on the path and why they would be located at that place. In Dylan’s case, I asked him where he thought his two brothers would be on the safety path and he drew them just over half way along the path. When I asked Dylan what he thought needed to happen for his two brothers to move closer to the Safety House, he said, “I don’t know”. I then asked, “If J and K were here and I asked them what needed to happen for them to move closer to the Safety House, what do you think they would say?” Dylan thought about this for a long time and then said “Mum and Bob solving the other problems”. Dylan then added “But I don’t know what those problems are”. While this didn’t make sense to me at the time, it was later explained to me by the reunification agency that during the past few days, the statutory agency had decided not to proceed with reunification for the two younger children at this stage as they were showing signs of anxiety. This issue was being explored further between the family, the statutory agency and the reunification agency and was obviously something Dylan was aware of but did not fully understand.

## **5. Talking with the child about what happens next**

Once the worker and the child have finished the Safety House, it is important to explain what will happen next to the child or young person, and to obtain their permission to show their Safety House to others, whether they be parents, extended family, or professionals. Some children may want to present their Safety House or to be there while it is presented, whereas others may feel anxious about this and choose not to be present. Whatever the process that is agreed upon with the child, it is important to talk this through carefully so that the child knows what will happen next.

Zoe was happy for everyone to see her Safety House and wanted to be present when we showed this to her Mum and then later, to her Nana and Grandad. Zoe asked if she could have a copy of her Safety House to keep. Dylan was also happy for everyone to see his Safety House but said that he didn't mind whether or not he was there when we showed it to his Mum and Bob because "they already know all of this stuff".

The Safety House tool, while primarily a safety planning tool, may also elicit new assessment information in working with some children. If this information raises additional safety issues, then it is important to talk to the child or young person about their concerns or your concerns and to develop a plan together about how to ensure they will be safe once this information has been presented to others. Sometimes this will mean removing the child into care (if they are not already in care), at least while the issues are explored with their parents. Involving the children in this process will sometimes slow down the pace at which professionals act, but whenever possible, it is important to go at a pace that the child is comfortable with. If the worker feels compelled to make decisions that go beyond what the child is comfortable with, these decisions need to be explained to the child before any action is taken.

## **6. Showing the child's Safety House to others**

The final step in the Safety House process involves bringing the child's Safety House, and the child's voice and ideas expressed within their Safety House, to everyone involved in the broader safety planning process. As discussed above, workers will need to talk with the child about who will present the Safety House, whether that is the child and the worker or just the worker. Workers will also need to think through whether the Safety House is presented to family members, the family network and key professionals as a group, or whether it is first presented to some people individually (eg. parents) before being presented to the whole group. I will usually bring the child's Safety House to the parents first and explore the Safety House with them fully before taking it to the broader safety planning group.

In Zoe's case, Zoe wanted her mother to see her Safety House first and we sat down together with Tanya during Zoe's next contact visit to show her Zoe's Safety House. Zoe explained her Safety House to her mother, describing each of the pictures and then reading the rules aloud to her mother. Tanya was very moved by Zoe's thoughts and after hearing the second rule about calling the police and Zoe's idea about the signs next to the door, said "That's brilliant. Let's do that". Tanya started to cry when Zoe read her third rule about someone having to help Tanya when she gets really sad and told Zoe that that was an important rule. And after Zoe read her fourth rule about wanting to stay at her school, Tanya acknowledged that Zoe had had to move schools too many times and that she would try to make sure that Zoe could stay at her school.

I then talked to Zoe and Tanya about showing Zoe's Safety House to the family network and professionals who were involved in the safety planning process and Zoe and Tanya decided that Tanya would show Zoe's Safety House to everyone at the next meeting. At this meeting, the statutory agency agreed to pay for locks for the windows of Tanya's house. In discussing Zoe's third rule, I asked Tanya for her ideas about what would help her when she was feeling really sad. Tanya said that it would help her to have Nana and Andrea to talk to and both of them agreed that they would be part of a plan to help

Tanya and Zoe when Tanya was feeling really sad. The group agreed that this needed to be worked out in a lot more detail. Tanya also said that she wanted to have someone she could talk to, like a counsellor, to help her to not feel so sad about things that had happened in the past.

In Dylan's case, the reunification agency worker, Jo, was present when Dylan and I worked on his Safety House and Jo said that Dylan talked more during this one session than in all the weeks she had been working with him. Jo said that the Safety House process helped to confirm that Dylan was feeling very positive about returning to live with his mother and Bob and helped to identify the other family members who were important to Dylan. Jo also said that the information about Charlie's role was important and that she would be highlighting this information with the statutory agency.

Jo and myself met with Megan a few days later to present Dylan's Safety House. Bob was not able to be at the meeting as he was working and Dylan said that he and his Mum would show his Safety House to Bob later in the day when Dylan came for his contact visit. In presenting Dylan's Safety House to Megan, I briefly explained the purpose of the Safety House and then gave Megan a copy of Dylan's Safety House and talked through each part. Megan said that she was not surprised by anything that Dylan had written/drawn in his Safety House and that seeing his Safety House helped her to know that she was on the right track.

## Conclusions

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The Safety House tool has grown out of my desire to include children's voices and ideas much more actively in the process of determining what needs to happen for children to be safely returned to the care of their families. I have developed these ideas over the past six months and am very thankful to the children, families and colleagues who have helped me in this process.

In describing the Safety House and the Safety House process, I am hoping that workers will be able to use this tool and bring their own skills, experience and creativity to using it. I would love to receive any feedback from workers about how they have used the Safety House tool as I'm sure this tool will continue to develop and evolve each time it is used. Please feel free to email me at [sonjapa@iinet.net.au](mailto:sonjapa@iinet.net.au)

## Safety House Template

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A template for the Safety House is provided at the end of this booklet for photocopying purposes. The template can also be downloaded from [www.signsofsafety.net](http://www.signsofsafety.net)

## Safety House Prompt Sheet

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A summary of each of the Safety House elements and suggested questions are provided on a prompt sheet, provided at the end of this booklet, which workers may find useful to photocopy and have alongside them as they begin to use the Safety House tool.

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# Prompt sheet for using the Safety House

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## 1. Inside the Safety House: The inner circle and inside the four walls

Inner circle:

- Child draws her or himself in the inner circle (leaving space to draw others).
- Who else would live in your Safety House with you?

Inside the house:

- Imagine that your home/house back with \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g. mummy and daddy) was as safe as safe and you felt as safe and happy as possible, what sorts of things would \_\_\_\_\_ (eg. Mummy, Daddy, big sister) be doing?
- What are the important things that \_\_\_\_\_ (eg Mummy and Daddy) would do in your Safety House to make sure that you are safe?
- Are there any important objects or things that need to be in your Safety House to make sure that you are always safe?

## 2. Visiting the Safety House: The outer circle

- Who would/will come to visit you in your Safety House to help make sure that you are safe?
- When \_\_\_\_\_ (each of the safety people identified above) come to visit you in your Safety House, what are the important things that they need to do to help you be safe?

## 3. The red circle: Unsafe people

- When you go home to live with \_\_\_\_\_ (eg. Mum and Dad), is there anyone who might live with you or come to visit who you would not feel completely safe with?

## 4. The roof

- “Remember we talked about how all those adults are talking together to make a safety plan for when you go home? One of the things they are trying to decide is what the rules of the safety plan should be. What do you think? What would the rules of the house be so that you and everyone one would know that nothing like \_\_\_\_\_ (use specific worries) would ever happen again?”
- “What else and what else?”
- “If your \_\_\_\_\_ (sister/brother/Nana etc) was here, what would they say?”

## 5. The Safety Path

- If the beginning of the path is where everyone was very worried and you weren't able to live with Mum and Dad and you had to go and live with \_\_\_\_\_ and the end of the path at the front door is where all of those worries have been sorted out and you will be completely safe living with Mum and Dad, where do you think things are right now?
- If the beginning of the path is that you feel very worried that if you go home to live with Mum (or have an overnight stay) that Mum will start using drugs again and then not be able to look after you properly and the end of the path at the door is that everything in your Safety House is happening and you're not worried at all that Mum will use drugs again, where are you right now?

# My Safety House

