

Using the 'Three Houses' Tool

Involving Children and Young People in
Child Protection Assessment and Planning



by Sonja Parker and Andrew Turnell (with Vania da Paz)



This booklet includes a DVD, which contains a
20 minute role-play interview of Sonja Parker
using the 'Three Houses' tool with a 12 year old child.

A Little Background

A considerable body of research indicates that many children and young people involved in the child protection system feel like they are 'pawns in big people's games' and that they have little say in what happens to them (Butler and Williamson 1994; Cashmore 2002; Gilligan 2000; Westcott 1995; Westcott and Davies 1996).

Over the past five years, one of the key growing edges of the Signs of Safety approach has been the development with practitioners of tools and processes designed to more actively involve children in child protection assessments and planning decisions. The 'Three Houses' tool is one of these methods and is a practical tool for having purposeful conversations with children and young people about what they think is happening in their lives and what they want to have happen in the future.

The 'Three Houses' tool was first created by Nicki Weld and Maggie Greening, when they were working with the Department of Child Youth and Famil in New Zealand (Weld, 2008). Weld and Greening had initially developed a two column grid (good things and bad things) for interviewing children and young people, inspired by Nicki's work with resiliency theory and ideas they had learnt from strengths-based practitioners from St Lukes in Bendigo, Australia. In 2004, Nicki Weld showed the two columns to Andrew Turnell who suggested it needed a third column to represent the future. Nicki added the third column (hopes and dreams) and then when reflecting on the tool shortly after, and inspired by the Te Whare Tapa Wha (Maori model of Health) metaphor that a person's house needs strong foundations and strong walls, Nicki amended the three columns into three houses. And so the 'Three Houses' tool was born!



Those familiar with the Signs of Safety approach (Turnell and Edwards 1999) will see that the 'Three Houses' tool incorporates the same three key assessment questions of the Signs of Safety framework ('What are we worried about?', 'What's working well?' and 'What needs to happen?') and locates them within three 'houses' to make the issues more accessible for children and young people. Children respond to these three questions by drawing or writing, or a combination of both, within the 'Three Houses' or by having the practitioner record what the child wants to say within each of the 'Three Houses'.

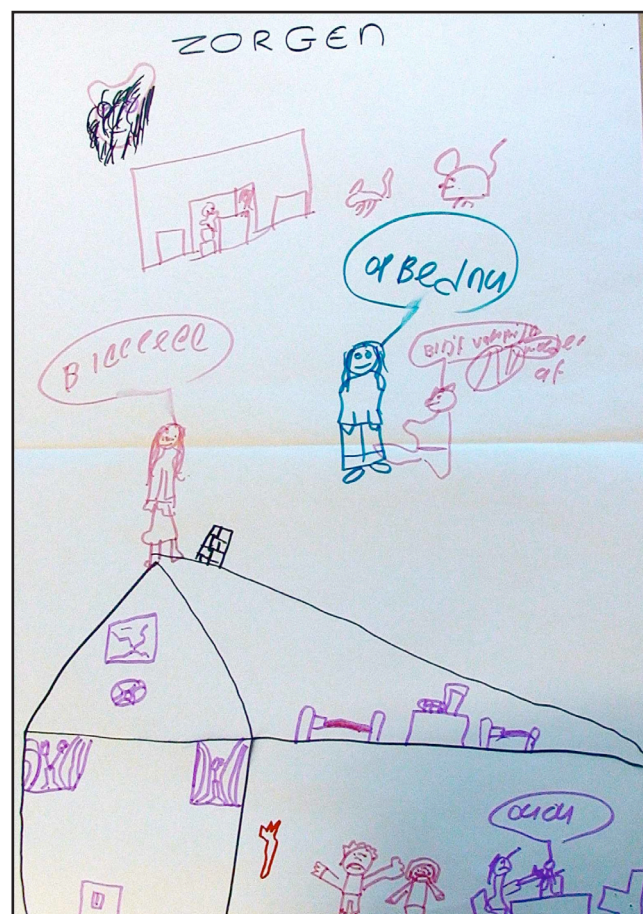
Three Houses Case Examples

1. Dutch Example

Margreet Timmer, a child protection worker from Bureau Jeugdzorg in Drenthe, The Netherlands, was responsible for a case involving a mother, her boyfriend and two children who we will call Ramon (10 years) and Stephanie (7 years). The school that Ramon and Stephanie were attending had contacted Bureau Jeugdzorg, concerned that the children's behaviour had deteriorated over the past six months. Ramon had become very aggressive to students and teachers and Stephanie was constantly having arguments with the teacher and not accepting their rules. Both children's schoolwork had deteriorated. There were concerns that the children's home life was difficult and that their mother was in a violent relationship, but the information Margreet had was very vague. Margreet had interviewed the mother and gained little information and had also made two attempts to interview the children with little success. The school continued to raise concerns about the children and knowing she needed to do something different, Margreet decided to interview Stephanie and Ramon using the 'Three Houses' tool.

Margreet conducted the interview with both children together, using one piece of paper per house and asking the children to draw pictures in the houses to represent their experiences.

Ramon and Stephanie's 'House of Worries'



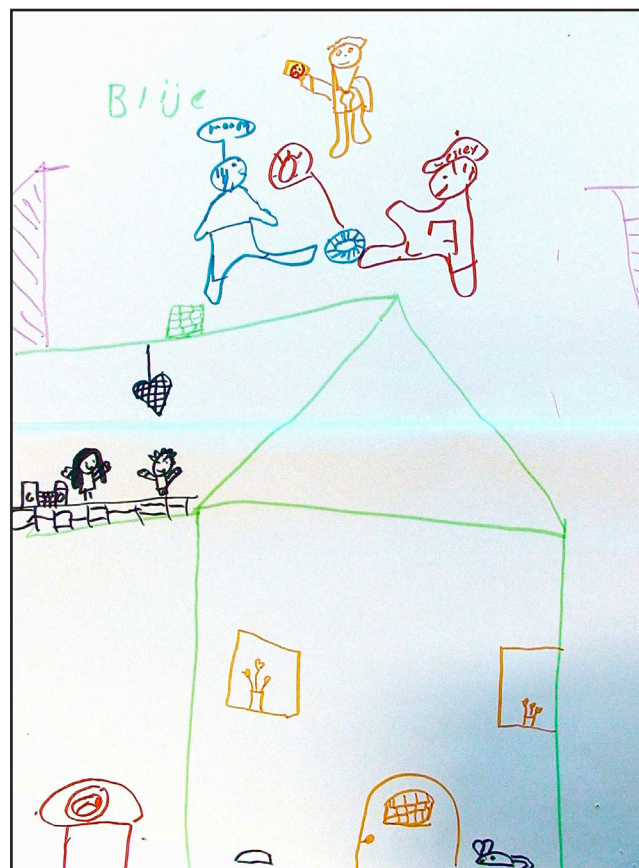
Margreet began by asking Stephanie and Ramon to draw an outline of a house. Margreet wrote the word 'Zorgen', Dutch for worries, at the top of the page. The children then drew the stables outside their house at the top of the page and began to tell the story of how their mother's boyfriend often locked them in the stables all evening as punishment for misbehaviour. They described how they were cold in the drafty stables, and scared because there were lots of mice and because the boyfriend would also lock a big black aggressive dog (drawn at the left above the stables) in the stables with them. Ramon described how he would try to comfort and protect Stephanie during the evening.

Next the children drew the following in the 'House of Worries':

- On the roof they drew their mother crying in distress.
- Ramon drew a picture (in the middle to the right) of him kicking and yelling at the boyfriend – this had never actually happened but it was obvious to Margreet that it was important to let Ramon draw this picture.
- In the roof space they drew Ramon's bedroom (which he said he hated) including a broken window that made the room cold. Stephanie described that she didn't have a bedroom since the boyfriend came to live with them but had her bed in a corridor.
- A picture of the boyfriend yelling at them for not finishing a meal and the fork which he used to stab them with as punishment (One of the children had healing scars on their hand which were consistent with being stabbed with a fork).

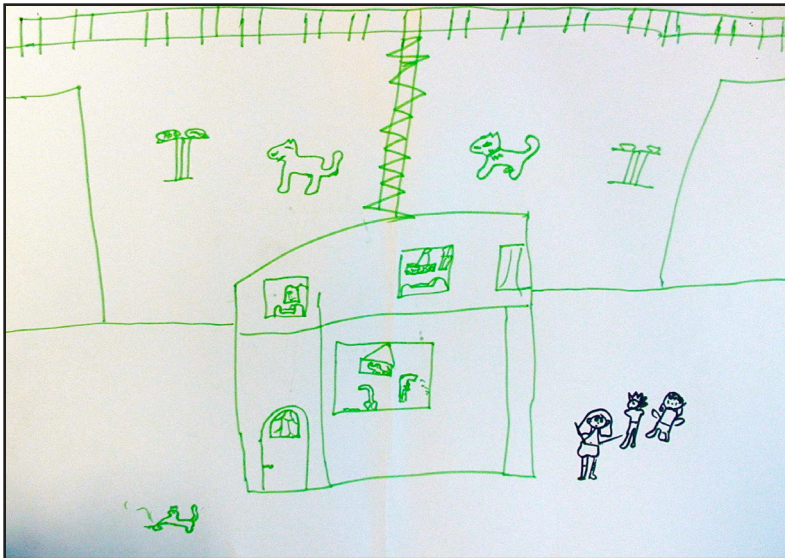
By the time the children had completed this drawing, Margreet was both distressed by what the children were describing but also pleased that she had been able to find a way in which the children could tell her what was happening to them.

Ramon and Stephanie's 'House of Good Things'



In their 'House of Good Things', Stephanie and Ramon made drawings of spending time with their biological father, who they visited every second weekend. The drawing shows the father and Ramon kicking a soccer ball and Stephanie holding up a yellow card. Inside the house they have a bedroom in the attic, complete with a disco ball, which they share and both like. They told Margreet that there are good things to do at their father's house. Interestingly, Stephanie and Ramon also added mice to this drawing and to both of their 'House of Dreams' drawings.

Stephanie and Ramon's 'Houses of Dreams'



Stephanie and Ramon drew separate 'Houses of Dreams'; Ramon's drawing is on the left, Stephanie's on the right. Both drawings involved the children living together with their mother on their own, with each having their own bedrooms and lots of activities to do and toys (this is more evident in Stephanie's drawing). In Ramon's drawing he wanted to have two big aggressive dogs and he decided they were so aggressive that they had to be kept apart by a large fence in the back yard. Stephanie drew her house with two very strong front doors, lots of animals to play with, and lots of clothes, toys and activities.

What Happened Next

After completing the 'Three Houses' drawings with Stephanie and Ramon, Margreet met with their mother (the boyfriend was invited but chose not to attend). Seeing the visual representation of her children's experiences created a context for the mother where she admitted that her boyfriend was violent and that she knew she needed to leave him. In the discussions that followed, the mother said she would try to leave her boyfriend within a month and that prior to this time, she would make sure the children were no longer forced to stay in the stables and that she would protect the children from the boyfriend, particularly at meal times. Unfortunately the mother was not able to leave the boyfriend within this time frame and Stephanie and Ramon were taken into care based on the information that Margreet had gathered in the 'Three Houses' assessment. However, nine months later the mother was able to leave the boyfriend and she immediately came back to Margreet asking for her children to be returned to her. It took some time for the mother to get herself established in a house and then the children were returned to her care. For Margreet, the 'Three Houses' process with the children provided the turning point in this case.

2. Australian Example

Sonja Parker from Perth, Western Australia, used the 'Three Houses' tool to undertake an assessment with an eight year-old girl, who we will call Tia. Tia was brought to the hospital where Sonja worked by her maternal grandparents, who were caring for Tia and her three year-old brother, Michael, while their mother was in hospital following a psychotic episode. Tia and Michael's grandparents brought Tia to the hospital because they were concerned that during the few days they had been caring for the children, Tia and Michael were crying frequently, were experiencing difficulty falling asleep and were having nightmares. When the grandparents asked Tia what was upsetting her, Tia told them that she was feeling frightened about having to go home and live with her mum. Not knowing what else to do, Tia's grandparents brought her to the hospital child protection unit.

After Sonja had talked to Tia and her grandparents about why they had brought Tia to the hospital, Sonja described the 'Three Houses' tool to them and explained that she would like to use the 'Three Houses' to understand how Tia was feeling. Tia agreed with the idea and when offered the choice by Sonja of talking with her grandparents present or on her own, Tia said that she wanted to talk to Sonja on her own. Before the grandparents left the room, Sonja explained that after she and Tia had completed the 'Three Houses', they would invite Tia's grandparents back into the room so that they could talk together.

Sonja then got three A4 pieces of paper and some coloured pencils and together she and Tia sat at a desk to work together. Sonja asked Tia to draw three big houses, one on each sheet of paper, with the name of the house on the top of each page. As Tia did this, Sonja explained again what each of the houses represented. Sonja offered Tia the choice of which 'house' she would like to start with and Tia chose the 'House of Worries'. Sonja then asked Tia whether she wanted to draw or write to explain her worries. Tia chose to use words and asked that Sonja do the writing for her.

Tia's 'House of Worries'

HOUSE OF WORRIES

- Mum's health. *(She has been sick. She sometimes goes to hospital).*
- She talks to herself and the walls and looks at herself in the mirror.
- She sometimes yells at night.
- She wakes us up and Michael starts crying – I get scared.
- Michael – he is sometimes alone with mum.
- Sometimes mum wakes us up and drives us at night – she goes to all sorts of places.
- Sometimes people break into the house and steal our clothes, like on her birthday night.
- One man got drunk and came to the house when we were there and smashed the window.
- Sometimes I worry that the windows are going to get smashed again.
- Sometimes mum gets really mad and hits Michael and me on the arms and legs and bottom.
- Sometimes when mum drives us late at night and she doesn't get up and I have to do my hair and make my uniform look okay and get breakfast.
- Sometimes other people come around and our things get stolen like my PSP and then I get a smack.
- Sometimes when my mum comes to my Nana's house and she demands that I go with her and I feel scared – I'm sometimes scared to go with her.
- One night Mum held some tablets to her mouth and she told Michael and I that she was going to take them.
- Sometimes I have to lie to my Nana when my Mum is around.
- Sometimes my Mum swears and spits in my uncle's face at my Nana's house. I have to lock myself in my room.
- Sometimes Mum and her friends hit each other. Once Melissa punched Mum on the nose and Mum had a blood nose.
- Sometimes Mum goes out and leaves me and Michael alone at night. Our phone is broken.
- Takeaway 3-4 times a week *(I miss the yummy food).*

When Sonja asked Tia what she was worried about, Tia immediately began talking rapidly, saying "Mum's health. She has been sick. She sometimes goes to hospital". Sonja had to write quickly and was careful to use Tia's exact words, and then read back to Tia what she had said. As soon as Sonja had finished writing and reading back the first statement, Tia began talking about her next worry, saying "She talks to herself and the walls and looks at herself in the mirror". Again, Sonja wrote the statement down and read back what Tia has said. This enabled Sonja to check that she had captured Tia's words accurately and also had the advantage of slowing Tia down a little so Sonja could keep up with her. This process continued until Tia paused, at which time Sonja asked "What else are you worried about?" and then wrote down Tia's next worry, until Tia said that that was all of her worries.

Tia's 'House of Good Things'

With Tia saying she had finished her 'House of Worries', Sonja put that to the side and brought the 'House of Good Things' in front of Tia. Tia's last statement in the 'House of Worries' included her words, "I miss the yummy food Mummy used to make". This offered a very natural transition for Sonja to ask "What are the good things that are happening in your life?" and not surprisingly, Tia talked about the food mum used to cook. Following the same process as before, Sonja continued to ask "What else is good in your life" and wrote down all the things that Tia said were going well in her life.



When Tia had finished, Sonja and Tia looked over the list together and Sonja asked Tia if there was anything else that needed to be on the list. Tia said that there wasn't, so Sonja put that 'house' to the side and brought the 'House of Dreams' in front of Tia.

Tia's 'House of Dreams'

Moving from the 'Houses of Worries' and "House of Good Things' to the 'House of Dreams' is a shift from the past to thinking about the future. To mark this shift, Sonja explained that this was the house where Tia could write down all the things that she wanted to have happen in her life. Sonja asked Tia, "If you could have your life the way you wanted it to be, what would you like to happen?"

Tia, like most children in her situation, was very clear and specific about what she wanted. All the things Tia said she wanted are presented below in Tia's 'House of Dreams'. In describing what she wanted to have happen in her life, Tia repeated or rephrased a number of things, such as "For Michael and me to be happy" and "Me and Michael to be happy". Sonja made sure she recorded each of Tia's statements, including those that were repeated, as a way of accurately recording what was important to Tia.



What Happened Next

The whole process of creating Tia's 'Three Houses' took about 30 minutes. After they had finished, Sonja thanked Tia and complimented her for her courage in talking so honestly about what was happening in her life. Sonja then asked whether she would like to show her 'Three Houses' to her Nana and Pa. Tia said she wanted them to see the 'Three Houses' but she didn't want to read it to them and asked Sonja to do that for her.

Sonja and Tia invited Tia's grandparents back into the room and Sonja began to read through the 'Three Houses' as Tia had asked. Both grandparents were very affected by Tia's 'House of Worries' and Tia's grandmother began to cry. Tia's grandparents told Tia that they were very proud of her for being able to talk to Sonja about what had been happening. Tia explained that she had been too scared to tell her grandmother in case she got into more trouble with her mum and then wouldn't be allowed to see her grandparents.

After listening to Tia's 'House of Dreams', Tia's grandparents told her that they would do everything they could to make sure that Tia and Michael could stay with them until their mother was well again and able to take care of them properly. Sonja explained to Tia and her grandparents that there were other people (within the statutory child protection agency and the Family Court) who may need to be involved in making the decision that Tia and Michael could stay with their grandparents until their mum was well enough to look after them properly. Sonja briefly described the process for seeking support from the statutory child protection agency and the Family Court and asked Tia if she was willing for Sonja to show Tia's 'Three Houses' to people from both these agencies. Tia said that she didn't mind if other people saw her 'Three Houses' but that she didn't want her mother to see them because she would get angry with Tia for telling people what had been happening at home. Sonja talked through this issue with Tia and her grandparents, explaining to Tia that a lot of children in her position were worried that people might get angry with them. Tia's grandparents told Tia that she had been very brave in talking about the things she was worried about because now people could help her mum to make things better, and reassured her again that they were going to do everything they could to make sure that Tia and Michael weren't left alone with their mum until she was better and able to look after them properly. This seemed to answer Tia's worry.

With Sonja's help, Tia's grandparents put in an application to the Family Court and Sonja made a referral to the statutory child protection agency. Both the court application and the referral were based around the information in Tia's 'Three Houses' and a copy of the 'Three Houses' was sent to both. Based on Tia's 'Three Houses', the statutory agency supported the grandparents' application to the Family Court and the grandparents were awarded custody of Tia and Michael until such time as the children's mother could show the court that she was no longer using drugs and was able to safely care for the children.

Process for Using the 'Three Houses' Tool

The following information describes a suggested process for using the 'Three Houses' tool when interviewing children in child protection casework. This suggested process has been developed by drawing on the experience of professionals using the tool in New Zealand, Australia, The Netherlands, Sweden and USA. Several additional cases examples are referred to and described within the process presented below.

1. Preparing to do the 'Three Houses'

Before meeting with a child or young person, it can be helpful to find out as much background information as you can about them, for example: Who are the significant people in their life? Who do they live with? Where do they go to school? What sort of things do they enjoy doing? If they are in care, do they have regular contact visits with their parents and where are the contact visits held? This information can help you to build rapport with the child and to focus your questions if the child or young person is finding it difficult to talk with you.

The other important part of preparation is working out what materials you will need to take. At a minimum, you will need sheets of paper (preferably one for each house, as well as some spares) and some 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. Some workers have developed a template of the houses, for example with a face at the top to reflect each house. Others have drawn the houses in the dirt and then afterwards have taken a photograph of that child's 'Three Houses'. You can develop your own way of using the 'Three Houses' to suit your working style and the particular circumstances for each child.

2. Deciding where to meet with the child

Being asked to talk with a child protection worker about what is happening in their lives will usually cause children to feel anxious, so it is important to do whatever you can to help the child feel comfortable. Choosing a venue where the child is likely to feel most comfortable is important, particularly for your first meeting. This can be at home, at school, in the hospital ward, outside under a tree, or wherever the child will feel most relaxed. Try to ensure that you have space to spread out your materials, that there is appropriate privacy for the child and family, and that interruptions will be at a minimum.

3. Inform parents and obtain permission to talk with the child

Sometimes, child protection workers have to interview children without advising or seeking the permission of the parents or primary caregivers but wherever possible, it is important that parents be advised/asked in advance about using the 'Three Houses' tool with their child or children. When parents learn that a child protection worker wants to interview their children this often raises the parents' anxiety, so it is good to show the 'Three Houses' tool to parents and explain the questions that the children will be asked. The 'Three Houses' tool demonstrates to the parents that the worker will not just look at problems but also focus on good things and hopes for the future.

Talking this through with the parents beforehand creates transparency and begins to build a context for the worker to be able to come back to the parents to talk about the information provided by the child. It also begins to create a context for the worker to later interview the parents about their worries, strengths and what needs to happen.

4. Make decision to work with child with/without parents present

Wherever possible, it is important that the decision as to whether or not the parents will be present is made by the parents and the child. However, there are circumstances when child protection workers need to insist that they speak with children without a parent or caregiver present and if this is the case, then all efforts should be made to provide an explanation to the parents as to why the worker feels it is necessary to speak to the children on their own.

If the decision is made for the worker to talk with the child without the parent/caregiver present, then it is important beforehand to explain that the worker, or the worker and the child, will bring the 'Three Houses' back to the parent/caregiver to talk it through with them. The process for presenting the 'Three Houses' needs to be explored and agreed upon with the child (this is explored in more detail below).

If you are talking with the child in a location such as a school or within their foster home, the child may want to have their teacher or foster carer present. If another adult is going to be present with you and the child, it is important to establish clearly beforehand that the support person needs to remain quiet and preferably sit off to one side of the room so that the worker can engage as much as possible with the child.

5. Talking with children separately or together

If there is more than one child to interview, the worker needs to decide whether to meet with the children separately or together. Some children may prefer to talk to you without their siblings present, while for others, having a brother or sister with them can help them to feel more comfortable and talk more easily. Often it is a good way to engage a teenager by asking them to help a younger sibling work through the 'Three Houses'.

6. Introducing your role and the 'Three Houses' to the child

Even if the child was present with the adults when the worker explained their role and the 'Three Houses' process, it is important to explain both these things to the child again. This is a context where children will usually be anxious and they may not have heard or understood what was said earlier. Use language that is simple and brief so that the child doesn't become confused by a long explanation. When introducing the 'Three Houses' to children, Sonja usually says something like:

"Hi, my name is Sonja and I am a social worker and I work for (name of agency). I don't know if you know what social workers do but I have a great job that involves talking to lots of children. It's my job to talk with children and their families when there may be some things that people are worried about, and then to help everybody to sort those worries out. I've talked with X (whoever the person is who raised concerns) and they've told me that there are some things that they are worried about, and now I'd like to talk with you to hear your ideas about how things are going? Is that okay?"

I'd like to do something called the 'Three Houses' with you, which is something I do with a lot of children. We draw three houses together and in those houses you can draw or we can write down the things that you are worried about, the things that are going well in your life, and the things that you would like to have happen in the future."

Typically workers use one sheet of paper per house and draw an outline of a house on each sheet of paper (the size can be anything from A4 to flip chart size), often getting the child to draw the outline or drawing with them. This active process, where the worker and child are creating the house outlines together, provides a context where they can get to know each other a little and breaks the ice. The worker can then explain to the child something like: 'In the first house we will write or draw your worries, so that's the 'House of Worries'. In the second house, we'll put all things that you like in your life; that's the 'House of Good Things'. The third house is the 'House of Dreams', where we can write and draw how you'd like things to be in your life if all your worries were solved.' The worker and child can then write 'worries', 'good things' and 'dreams' on each respective house or as some workers do, the child can be offered the choice of suggesting their own name for each house. In this way, one 8 year old girl in Stockholm working with Ophelia McKwashie gave her three houses the following names: 'The house where everybody fights', 'The house where my siblings and I are happy' and 'Cinderella house'.

If you are using the 'Three Houses' tool to gain a child or young person's view as part of developing a case plan or reunification plan, then it is important to explain to them how the 'Three Houses' fits in with the overall assessment and planning process. Hearing from a worker that their views are both valued and will be included in the planning process can be very powerful for a child or young person, particularly if they have previously felt as if no-one is interested in talking with them about what is going on. With some young people, and particularly teenagers, you may encounter their disbelief or despair that what they say will be taken seriously and you may need to talk this through before they will participate in the 'Three Houses'.

Depending upon the age and maturity of the young person, it may also be more appropriate to talk with them using the 'Three Columns' (Signs of Safety framework) rather than the 'Three Houses'.

7. The interview

Offering choices to a child or young person is always a good strategy, so most workers ask the child whether they would like to start with the 'House of Worries' or the 'House of Good Things'. Some children will want to start with the 'House of Worries' as this is what is most on their mind and what they know you are there to talk to them about, whereas other children who are very anxious or uncertain may find it easier to start with the 'House of Good Things'. If the worker is concerned the child may have been told by adults not to speak openly, focusing on good things is also a good place to start as it would be very unusual for a child to be told not to talk about things they are happy with in their life and family.

Another choice you can offer the child is whether they would like to draw or write within the houses. If the child is drawing, the worker can ask open questions to invite the child to talk about the drawings, for example, "Tell me about this part of the drawing? Can you explain that part of the drawing to me?" The worker can then check with the child if it

is okay to write the child's words or short sentences alongside the drawings. If choosing to write, younger children will usually want the worker to write down their words, whereas older children sometimes prefer to do the writing themselves and then show it to the worker afterwards.

With teenagers, it can be useful to offer them the choice of doing the 'Three Houses' (or 'Three Columns') with you or on their own. Some young people will prefer to have time sitting on their own and writing down their thoughts, rather than talking with you. You can then sit with them and discuss what they have written (or drawn) afterwards. Sometimes a child will ask to do the writing but will end up speaking faster than they can write, in which case the worker can offer to take over the writing process.

In using the 'Three Houses' with children, always make sure to use the child's exact words and ideas. If the worker is writing the information, they should read this back to the child at the end of each statement. This gives the worker an opportunity to ensure that they are accurately reflecting the child's views, and it also provides an opportunity to gain further information about an issue the child may have raised, for example by asking "Tell me more about that?"

The 'Three Houses' process should not be thought of as a linear process and there is certainly no need to simply work through one house after the other. The 'Three Houses' tool is most effective when you follow the child's lead in what they want to talk about. If the child talks about some things they are worried about and then what they wish was happening and then something that they like and want to keep happening, the worker can move backwards and forwards between the houses as makes most sense in each particular interview. If, for example, talking about worries becomes too difficult for the child, the worker should be ready to ask the child questions about things that make them happy, or to ask them about how things would be if all the problems were solved.

In situations where a child may be finding it difficult to participate in the discussion, it may be helpful to provide cues to assist the child. For example: "What is good about where you are living at the moment? What is good about school? What is good about the friends you have? What is good about your visits with mum?" Then you can explore what is not so good about these things, and check with the child whether his/her responses should go in their house of worries. Sometimes children will give an answer such as "I wish I wasn't being bullied" and the worker can then amplify this statement by asking "It sounds like you're worried about being bullied at school. Is that something we should we put in your house of worries? How should we write that?"

Children may also take a while or even need until almost the end of a conversation to bring up the thing they are most worried about. This happened for Ophelia McKwashie, when working with the 8 year-old girl mentioned earlier whose family had been refugees from South America. Ophelia was drawing the interview to a close when the girl indicated that there was something else she thought needed to go in the 'House of Worries'. After some moments of silence the girl stated 'all of us (meaning her 4 siblings and father) saw mummy being raped by the soldiers'.

For this reason and simply to give the child every chance to express what they want to say, it's always a good idea before finishing the interview to ask the child if there is anything they want to add to any of the houses. One way to do this is to put each of the houses in

front of the child and together look over what the child has written or drawn. This gives the worker the opportunity to honour the child's openness and courage in talking about what is happening in their life, as well as asking the child if there is anything else that they want to add to each of the houses.

Drawing upon the 'Three Houses' interview, the child can easily be asked to give their judgement about where life is for them on a continuum between a life that is dominated by their worries to a life which is the way they would like it to be. This can be done using a straightforward number scale from 0 to 10 or can also be done using a pathway drawn from the 'House of Worries' to the 'House of Dreams', with the child then invited to locate where they are on that path. If all the 'Three Houses' have been drawn on one large sheet of paper, the path or scale can be drawn at the bottom of these houses, or if separate paper has been used, then the path can be drawn on a separate piece of paper.

8. Explain to and involve the child in planning what will happen next

Once the 'Three Houses' interview is finished, it is important to explain what will happen next to the child or young person, and to obtain their permission to show the 'Three Houses' to others, whether they be parents, extended family, or professionals. Some children will be anxious about revealing their assessment of the situation to their parents or caregivers (as was the case for Tia) and workers can help children to manage this anxiety by offering them choices about how the 'Three Houses' are presented to their parents or caregivers. Some children are happy to be the one who shows their 'Three Houses' to their parents/caregivers; others chose for the worker to read/present the 'Three Houses' with the child sitting alongside, and some children chose not to be present when the worker presents the 'Three Houses'. 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.

For some children, there will be safety issues in presenting to others what they have described. In these situations 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. Sometimes this will mean removing the child into 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.

9. Presenting the child's assessment to parents and others

Child protection workers all over the world report that taking the child's or young person's 'Three Houses' back to the parents/caregivers is often the catalyst that helps the parents to see the situation differently, and be more willing to engage with professionals in talking about the problems.

Jenny Smith, a child protection worker in Western Australia, with the help of her supervisor Jan Wilkinson, undertook a 'Three Houses' assessment with a 10 year old girl in a situation where the mother's boyfriend had been very violent to the girl, her mother and her disabled younger brother. The mother had previously been very hostile toward

the child protection workers when they had tried to talk to her about their concerns after the 5 year old came to school with bruising on his face. Workers had previously also tried to talk with the girl, who had told workers that everything was fine at home.

Jenny and Jan decided to interview the 10 year-old girl using the 'Three Houses'. Jenny started with the 'House of Good Things', which the girl called the 'House of Happiness', and the girl described various things she liked about school and things she did with her mother and brother. Jenny then gave the girl the choice of whether to explore the 'House of Worries' or 'House of Dreams'. After she said she would like lots of new toys in her 'House of Dreams', the girl then added that if she was the boss of her house, Mummy's boyfriend would go away and Mummy would stop crying. This led the worker to be able to ask "What worries you about the boyfriend?" and the girl was able to explain that he scares her because he shouts a lot and that he hits Mummy. The girl went on to say she was worried that the boyfriend would hurt her mother and brother.

When Jenny and Jan showed the girl's 'Three Houses' to the mother, the mother didn't yell at workers as she had previously done, but said "I need your help. What do you think I should do?" The mother was then able to talk with Jan and Jenny and hospital staff about the fact that the boyfriend had grabbed the five year old around the neck and smacked him across the face, and made the decision that she would leave the boyfriend. Jan and Jenny were amazed at the outcome and very pleased that they had been able to work with the mother in this way. Jan felt that what made the difference was bringing the daughter's own words to the mother and that they had started by presenting the 'House of Good Things' to the mother.

When bringing the child's 'Three Houses' to the parents, it often is very useful to begin as Jenny and Jan did with the 'House of Good Things', as this shows the parent that the worker is willing to acknowledge the positives and to see things in a balanced way. A good strategy in bringing the information to the parents is to first ask them what they think the child would have described as good in their life. This same process can be followed with the 'House of Worries' and 'House of Dreams'. This strategy serves to engage the parents more in the process and also gives the worker a greater sense of the parent's insight into their child's perspective.

Presenting the child's 'Three Houses' to other people, whether members of the extended family network or other professionals, needs to be done in consultation with the parents and the child and worked through slowly and carefully as part of the overall safety planning process. It's possible that the parents or the child may feel anxious about others seeing the child's assessment of the situation, and as with other steps in the safety planning process, it is important that this information is shared with the full knowledge of the family and at the pace that they are comfortable with.

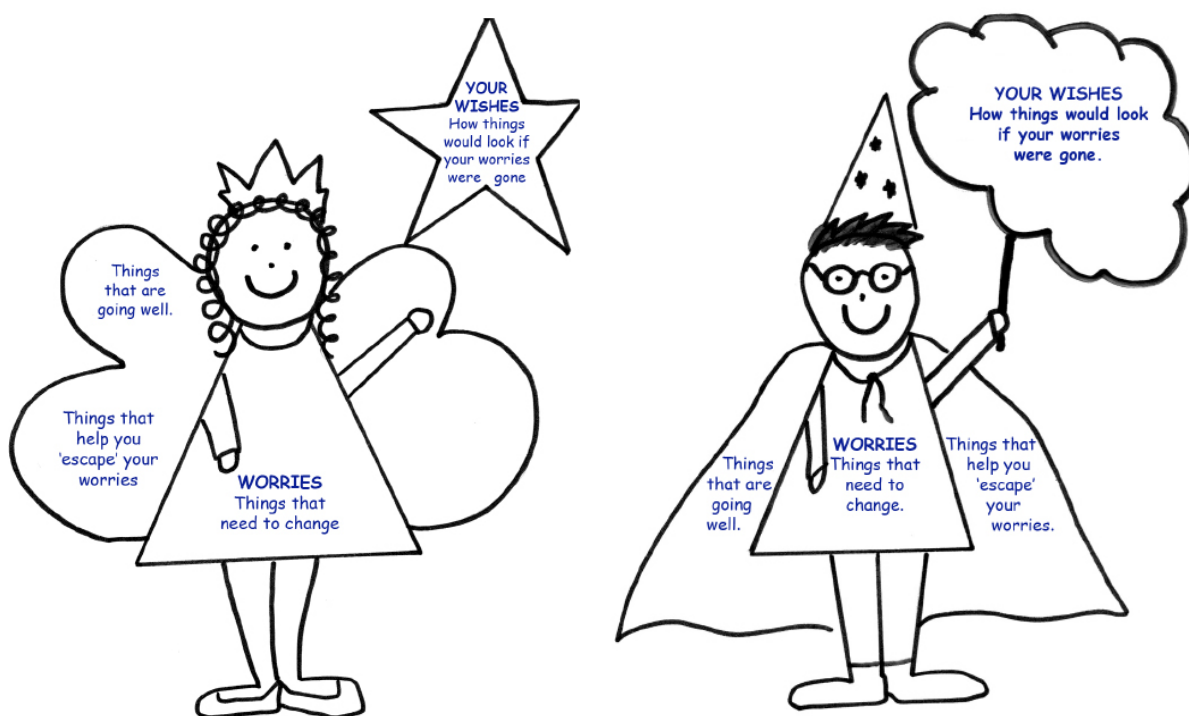
10. Make sure the child's 'Three Houses' is put on the file!

The 'Three Houses' tool, though it may seem very simple, is a mechanism for enabling the child or young person to provide their own assessment of their life. Some workers wonder whether the 'Three Houses' assessment is too child-like to put it on the case file or include in something like a court report. The child's own assessment is very often far more powerful and revealing than a professional assessment of that child and very often has far greater effect on adults involved with the child than professional assessment.

Magistrates receiving court reports and authorities who review the files are consistently impressed to read a 'Three Houses' assessment since it directly communicates the child or young person's perspective and demonstrates that the worker has engaged the child in the casework. It is critical therefore that a child's 'Three Houses' assessment – with the child's permission - is placed on the file and included as a central document toward the development of case plans, reunification plans, etc.

The Fairy/Wizard Tool

Vania Da Paz, a Senior Practice Development Officer currently working in the Rockingham office of the Western Australian Department for Child Protection, was involved in the 1996 Signs of Safety six-month development project (Refer to a practice example in the Signs of Safety book, Turnell and Edwards 1999, p.81). Vania has always been determined to find ways to involve children and young people in her child protection practice and following her initial training in the Signs of Safety approach, she developed a tool that serves the same purpose as the 'Three Houses' but with different graphic representation. Rather than three houses, Vania explores the same three questions using a drawing of a fairy with a magic wand (for girls) or a Wizard figure (for boys) as follows:



Above: Fairy and Wizard Outlines, drawn by Vania Da Paz

The same process described above for using the 'Three Houses' tool applies in using the Wizard/Fairy tool. Vania's method often breaks the ice for preschool and early primary school aged children since young children often engage quickly with the picture of the wizard or fairy. The worker can present the child with a pre-drawn outline or begin with a blank page and draw the wizard or fairy from scratch asking the child to help, depending on what best suits the situation.

Vania uses the Fairy's/Wizard's clothes to represent what can/should be changed (just as we change our clothes) and within the clothes, writes down the problems/worries from the child's perspective or what needs to be changed. The Fairy's wings and the Wizard's cape represent the good things or what's working well in the child's life, since the wings enable the Fairy to 'fly away' or 'escape' her problems, and the cape 'protects' the young Wizard and 'makes his problems invisible for a little while'. On the star of the Fairy's wand, and in the spell bubble at the end of the Wizard's wand, the worker and the child record the child's wishes and vision of their life; the way they would want it to be with all the problems solved. The wands represent wishes coming true and explores hope for the future.

Templates

Blank Three Houses and Wizard and Fairy outlines can be downloaded from the templates menu on the Aspirations Consultancy website at: www.aspirationsconsultancy.com

DVD Interview

The DVD included in this booklet contains a demonstration by Sonja Parker of using the 'Three Houses' tool with a young person. Working with a child actor, Sonja roleplays interviewing a 12 year old girl, who we will call Jo, who has made allegations about her uncle "doing yucky things" to her in the bath. The interview involves Sonja:

- introducing her role to Jo;
- introducing the 'Three Houses' tool to Jo;
- helping Jo to decide which 'house' she would like to start with;
- working through each of the 'houses' with Jo;
- talking with Jo about who else needs to see her 'Three Houses';
- talking with Jo about a further forensic interview based on the information Jo provided in her 'Three Houses'.

The Three Houses Tool and Forensic Interviewing:

This DVD interview was originally commissioned by the Department for Child Protection in Western Australia and the interview is undertaken to fit with the process for using the Three Houses tool that has been agreed upon by DCP and its specialist forensic child interview unit. It is perfectly possible to use the Three Houses tool as a mechanism to explore allegations of child abuse that may lead to criminal charges but in Western Australia the agreed process is to use the Three Houses tool as a general information gathering and engagement process that lays a relational foundation for the forensic interview that will follow. Therefore viewers will notice in the DVD that Sonja does not seek details from Jo about the Uncle 'doing yukky things' to her. The question of how the Three Houses tool will be used in relation to evidence gathering and forensic interviewing processes and protocols is a critical issue. There is no one-size-fits-all answer. It is important therefore that child protection practitioners and supervisors looking to use the tool with cases that are likely to lead to criminal prosecution undertake discussions with the relevant stakeholders involved in the forensic process within their own jurisdiction.

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