

**With John Wheeler**

## **Exploring Self-Directed Support and Signs of Safety**

This is a brief paper that draws together important learning from a workshop run for members of In Control's Children's Programme.

It draws on input from the Signs of Safety approach to child protection, explores the solutions-focused approach and highlights how, together, these approaches can underpin a future offer of support to children and young people in different situations with a wide range of needs.

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JULY 2010

## Introduction

Over the past nine months, In Control<sup>i</sup> has built links with Signs of Safety trainers<sup>ii</sup> in England. John Wheeler, a solutions-focused trainer from Gateshead, has made a number of presentations to In Control Children's Programme<sup>iii</sup> members including one about the Signs of Safety<sup>iv</sup> approach to a one-day workshop for Children's Programme members in March 2010. The ensuing discussion was lively and the case study exercise caused much enthusiastic debate. This paper shares this discussion and the positive outcomes of linking with John and the Signs of Safety community in England.

### In Control Children's Programme

In Control was established in 2003. Its mission was the transformation of social care into a system of Self-Directed Support. During the past seven years, In Control has worked with many partners including over 100 adult services, the national government, health trusts, the NHS, provider services, voluntary organisations and citizens to deliver a transformed offer of support and access.

In 2007, the Children's Programme was set up to develop Self-Directed Support for children and young people. Now working with over 40 Children's Services, this programme is beginning to share its learning and experiences gathered in the past three years. In *Personalisation: Children, Young People and Families*<sup>v</sup>, the Children's Programme has drawn on this learning to set out a definition of personalisation, a foundation of **real wealth** and relationships and a simple pathway that will empower children and families to take more control over how they live and how they get the support they need.

The Children's Programme has worked hard to build relationships with many partners. This paper sets out the early learning of this emerging partnership.

### Signs of Safety

The Signs of Safety approach is grounded in actual, on-the-ground human practice that makes a real difference for professionals and families and creates meaningful safety for children in high-risk cases. This approach recreates a purposive, positive focus for child protection work that is energising and affirming for practitioners who take on this difficult work.

The Signs of Safety was first created in West Australia by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards who worked together with over 150 frontline practitioners during the 1990's. The Signs of Safety continues to evolve as the approach is used and further developed by increasing numbers of child protection professionals in countries across Australasia, North America, and Europe.

In England, Signs of Safety is increasingly used across Children's Services. Since 2005, John Wheeler and Viv Hogg have trained about 800 frontline practitioners from six local authorities. To date, training has included social workers' assessment of risk in the lives of children and young people referred to social services because of concerns for their wellbeing and safety.

Training has also been provided for the managers of practitioners and those in allied professions who often play a significant role in risk assessment and safety planning such as the police, health visitors, midwives, education welfare officers and school nurses. Training of these other professionals has established that, while Signs of Safety was initially developed for use by social workers, the logic of the approach transcends professional boundaries. As a result of their experience with Signs of Safety, John Wheeler and Viv Hogg were asked to provide a chapter for a US-edited text<sup>vi</sup> on the evidence base for a solutions-focused approach in a variety of settings. A number of other local authorities have used other trainers to equip their staff.

## Context

A growing number of children's services are beginning to trial and introduce Self-Directed Support and the use of Individual Budgets for children and young people. Concerns have been expressed about safeguarding in this context. There is a fear that, in giving families more say and control over how they are supported to bring up their son or daughter, children will be exposed to more risky situations and be more exposed to financial, physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

Self-Directed Support and Individual Budgets will not eliminate risk and abuse. Safeguarding our children is the responsibility of the whole community – statutory, voluntary, community and individual families and people in general.

Self-Directed Support looks for support and opportunity in the **real wealth** of the individual. For children and young people this perspective includes the real wealth of the family.

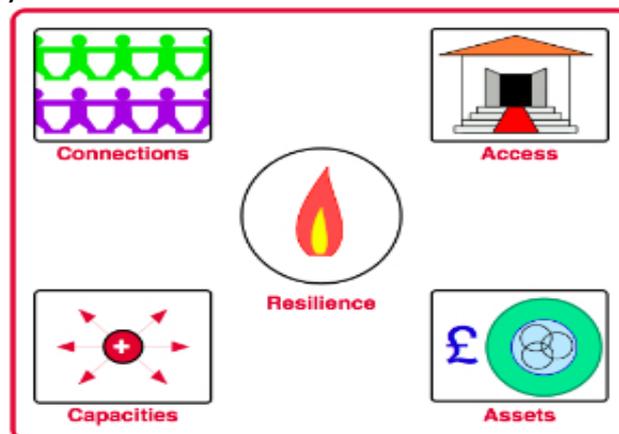


Figure 1: Real Wealth (Crosby, Duffy, Murray 2009)<sup>vii</sup>

### **Real wealth consists of:**

- **connections** – our family networks, social networks, the people we know
- **capacities** – our skills, abilities and capacities
- **access** – to both the physical environment and information
- **assets** – the sum total of our assets, which may include an Individual Budget
- **resilience** – our physical, mental and emotional well-being, our inner strength.

Self-Directed Support's approach, based on the real wealth of the individual, shares many similarities with Signs of Safety.

Signs of Safety takes a simple approach to keeping children safe by identifying solutions within the resources of the child and those caring for the child. In Control, similarly, seeks solutions within the real wealth of the child and the family.

### **In Control and Signs of Safety share:**

- a common, transparent approach to communication
- an approach based on flexible and creative solutions and identifying these solutions within the life and resources surrounding the child
- a child- and family-centred approach to planning and meeting support needs
- an approach that tries to realise social capital within the local community
- the pre-eminence of the child's voice alongside the appropriate involvement of a social worker
- an active and inclusive approach to ongoing risk identification and management.

### **Why In Control is interested in Signs of Safety**

Signs of Safety provides an independent and sizeable evidence base detailing the positive outcomes of a solutions focus when working to keep a child safe.

The pathway set out by Signs of Safety has clear similarities to that of Self-Directed Support. These similarities appear to suggest the basis of a single, common solutions-focused approach to supporting children and young people – whether it be about attendance at school or delivering skilled support to administer oxygen. In Control is only beginning to explore with Signs of Safety how the two pathways can be transformed into a single approach that makes sense across support needs and situations. In bringing together these two independent areas of work, In Control is able to add to the existing evidence

base of Self-Directed Support as a credible and appropriate way of both supporting a child and keeping that child safe.

## **About Signs of Safety**

### **Key characteristic for Signs of Safety are that it:**

- is designed to be used with young people and their families by drawing on their resources and empowering carers to do more to keep their children safe
- focuses on the key current issues
- highlights what is already working well
- can trigger immediate progress
- was developed from practice
- can be described on a single page.

### **Research findings include:**

- Signs of Safety provides child protection workers with a framework that helps them face the challenges of the work.
- When child protection workers are clear about concerns in a non-judgmental manner, their clients are more likely to work to increase the safety of their children. Signs of Safety contributes by explicitly naming the dangers.
- Actively seeking the views of clients improves engagement. Signs of Safety contributes by mapping information and keeping the work on track.
- Signs of Safety is not specifically targeted at eliciting the voice of the child during the course of child protection assessment and intervention. However, practitioners using Signs of Safety have now developed a complementary approach called "The Three Houses"<sup>viii</sup>, to compensate for this.
- When Signs of Safety is used in network meetings, there is a greater likelihood that services are able to work together and in partnership with clients.
- When practitioners using Signs of Safety are supported by managers who have also been training in the approach it is much more likely that workers will develop and sustain the strengths-based practice with confidence and creativity.

## Putting the two pathways together

This paper does not focus on developing a single pathway for all children's services. Rather, it is an exploration of the common elements of two independently generated pathways. By identifying these common elements and the strengths within them we can offer some key aspects of good practice when supporting children and their families/carers.

### Self-Directed Support

The following graphic is a simple illustration of the steps in Self-Directed Support from the initial expression of a need for help or support through to review.



For a more in-depth exploration of all seven steps please see *Personalisation; Children, Young People and families* (In Control, 2010). For the purpose of this paper the key focus is on Step 2 – **Identify My resources**.

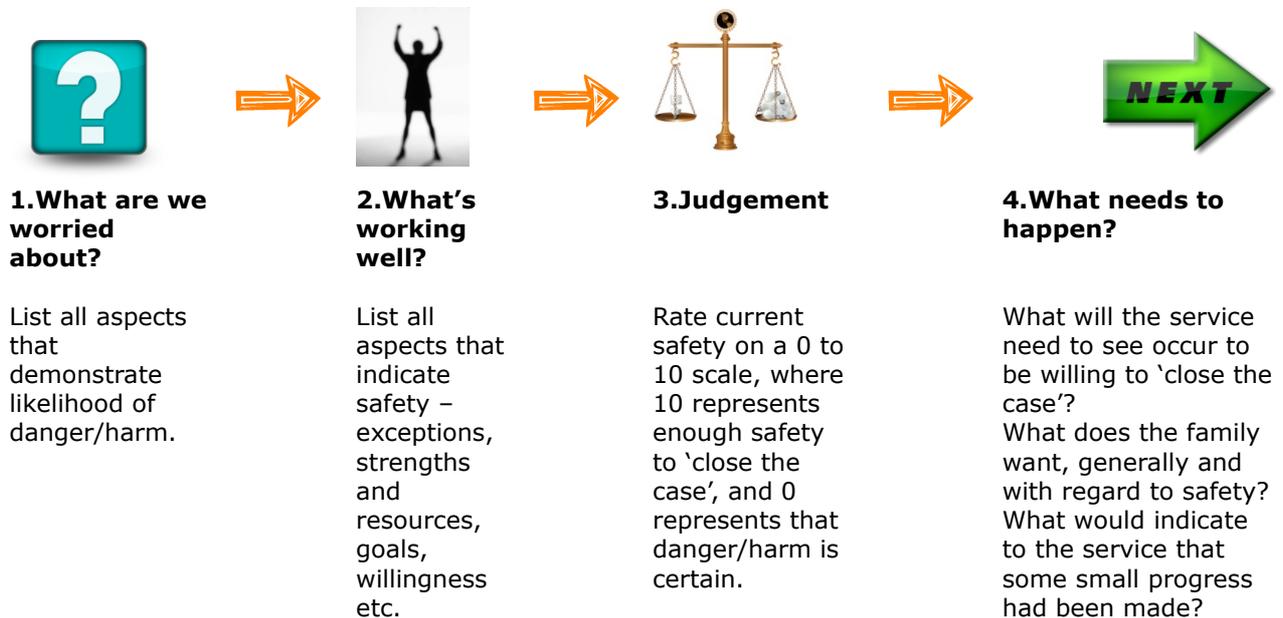
Step 1 – **Need some support** – is the approach to services for support, the referral, the first point of contact.

Step 2 – **Identify my resources** – includes an assessment by a lead professional or social worker. Who completes this assessment tends to be decided based on '*presenting needs*'. Exploring all the child's and family's resources means exploring the real wealth that exists at home and more widely in terms of capacities, connections, assets, access and resilience. This exploration may need to include individual funding and hence would use a resource allocation approach to identify an appropriate and flexible budget – an Individual Budget. Most resources, however, will naturally lie outside of the Individual Budget and within the real wealth surrounding the child or young person.

In moving from Step 2 to Step 3 – **Making my Plan** – all the available wealth, including an Individual Budget (if allocated) are used to design a plan which provides the support, the access to opportunities and the underpinning safeguarding structure needed by the child.

## Signs of Safety

The following graphic shows the Signs of Safety process.



In **Step 1** practitioners and family members identify reasons for concern. This may be incidents of harm that have already happened, or circumstances that increase the likelihood of harm coming about. This provides a chance for family members to let practitioners know about the risks they are already aware of, and a chance for practitioners to name their concerns in a clear and judgement-free manner.

In **Step 2** practitioners and family members identify strengths that reduce the likelihood of harm coming about, or being repeated if it has already happened. This provides a chance for family members to let practitioners know about relevant strengths, resources or ideas they are already aware of, and a chance for practitioners to acknowledge what the family is already doing that reduces the likelihood of risk. In practice practitioners move between these two steps generating a shared understanding of risks and relevant strengths.

In **Step 3** a judgement of the safety of the child is made, based on the information gathered through steps 1 & 2. This step allows for practitioners to invite families to make their own judgement as well as allowing families to know how steps 1 and 2 add up for the practitioner.

In **Step 4** the practitioner and family are now in a richly informed position to work out together what the next steps are to increase safety for the child.

## Joining up Practice

In Control's enthusiasm for working closely with Signs of Safety comes from this common approach to seeking and identifying support and solutions using In Control's Self-Directed Support philosophy, including the real wealth of the child and family. The Individual Budget is not the sole resource. In fact, as set out in *Personalisation: Children, Young and Families, Briefing 1* 'a Self-Directed Support pathway does not simply rely on an Individual Budget', it works with or without an Individual Budget.

## In summary

This is a brief and early summary of the key elements that can be identified in supporting children and young people along the Self-Directed Support pathway.

Drawing on the long-term work of Signs of Safety across the world we can confidently say that a focus on the wealth of a child, with or without an Individual Budget, is the base on which solutions, support and access can be built. There may be some children who are so '*un-wealthy*' that the state needs to invest heavily in that child's life to turn it around and, in some cases, this may mean taking a child in to care.

Both the Signs of Safety community and In Control's Children's Programme continue to evaluate and where necessary improve their approaches to supporting, children, young people and their families. Where possible all findings are published and shared with the wider community. Bringing these two approaches together, exploring the similarities in approaches and committing ourselves to continue to work together are all part of not accepting that it is a 'job done' but a work in progress.

Nic Crosby  
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July 2010

i [www.in-control.org.uk](http://www.in-control.org.uk)

ii [www.johnwheeler.co.uk](http://www.johnwheeler.co.uk) or [www.vivhogg.co.uk](http://www.vivhogg.co.uk)

iii [www.in-control.org.uk/children](http://www.in-control.org.uk/children)

iv [www.signsofsafety.net](http://www.signsofsafety.net)

v *Personalisation: Children, Young People and Families*, N Crosby, In Control, April 2010

vi Wheeler and Hogg Chapter 10 *Child Protection in Solution-focused Brief Therapy* (Tentative Title), Cynthia Franklin, PhD, Terry Trepper, PhD, Wallace J. Gingerich, PhD, & Eric McCollum, PhD (Editors). Oxford University Press

vii *A Whole Life Approach to Personalisation*, N Crosby and S Duffy, In Control, 2008

viii Weld, N. (2008). The three houses tool: building safety and positive change. In M. Calder (Ed.) *Contemporary risk assessment in safeguarding children*, Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing