

Signs of Safety how to guide: Using the Three Houses



Wherever possible, inform parents/carers and obtain permission to interview the child/young person

Sometimes child protection workers must interview children without advising, or seeking the permission of, the parents or primary caregivers. Wherever possible, the parents/carers should be advised or asked in advance.

It is good to show the parents/carers the three houses tool or explain it to them so they know that the worker will not only look at problems but will also focus on good things and hopes for the future.

Introduce the Three Houses to the child/young person

You can draw the houses with the child/young person or use a template. Children/young people can draw or write in the houses.

Explain the three different houses:

- House of Worries – things you are worried about
- House of Good Things – the good things in your life
- House of Dreams – how you'd like things to be in your life if all of your worries were sorted out

Offer the child/young person a choice as to whether they'd like to start with the House of Good Things or the House of Worries.

The worker can write what the child/ young person is saying in the houses but should use **the child/ young person's own words**.

You can move fluidly between the houses. If at any stage talking about worries becomes too difficult for the child/ young person, be ready to ask questions about things that make them happy or to ask about how things would be if all the problems were solved.

Ask questions to find out more about the child/ young person's experiences, for example: 'What is good about where you are living now? What is good about school? What is good about the friends you have? What is good about your visits with Mum?'

The child/ young person can be asked to scale where life is for them between being really worried all the time (0) and that a life that is the way they would like it to be (10).

It is always a good idea before finishing the interview to ask the child/ young person if there is anything they want to add to any of the houses, as sometimes the things they are most worried about can be saved until the end.

“Now that I’ve been using it, I can’t think of any more effective way of getting a conversation going quickly and to get those bits of information from a child in a short space of time.”

(Laura Brennan, Gateshead, in an interview with Andrew Turnell Sept 2010)

Explain to, and involve the child/young person in, what will happen next

Once the Three Houses interview is finished, explain to the child/young person what will happen next and obtain the child/young person’s permission to show the three houses to others, whether they be parents/carers, extended family or professionals. Usually children/young people are happy for others to be shown their Three Houses.

For some children/young people, there will be concerns and safety issues in presenting to others what they have described. In such a situation, it is important to talk to the child/young person about what they are afraid might happen and discuss ways to make them safe.

Present the child/young person’s assessment to parents and others

Workers all over the world report that taking the child/young person’s Three Houses back to the parents or caregivers is often the catalyst that makes the adults see the situation differently and to face the problems more openly.

When bringing a child/young person’s Three Houses to the parents/carers, it is often very useful to begin with the House of Good Things because it shows the parent/carer that the worker is able to see things in a balanced way.

A good strategy in bringing the information to the parents/carers is to ask them what they think the child/young person would have described as good in their life and what the parent/carer might expect the child/young person to say before presenting the child/young person’s house to the parents/carers. This same process can be followed with the House of Worries and the House of Dreams. This strategy serves to engage the parents/carers in the process further and gives the worker a greater sense of the parents/carers’ insight into their child/young person’s perspective.



Save the Three Houses on the child/young person's file

The Three Houses is the child/young person's assessment of their life, so it needs to be saved on their file as evidence of their experiences.

The child/young person's own assessment is very often far more powerful and revealing than a professional assessment of that child/young person, and can have far greater effect on adults involved with the child/young person. Judges receiving court reports on the child and family and authorities who review the files are consistently impressed to read a Three Houses assessment, because it directly communicates the child/young person's voice and perspective and demonstrates the worker has engaged the child/young person in the casework.

Reflect the child/young person's experiences in your assessment

Use the Three Houses to inform your assessment, and remember to include the child/young person's own words in your assessment.

Please share your practice examples with SignsofSafety@northumberland.gov.uk

