ASPIRING TO PARTNERSHIP; THE SIGNS OF SAFETY APPROACH TO CHILD PROTECTION
or
Reflections on the road toward a comprehensive partnership practice for child protection casework.

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Since 1992, Steve Edwards and I, in collaboration with more than 80 Western Australian child protection workers have been developing a comprehensive partnership based approach to child protection casework called the Signs of Safety. This paper presents the approach in summary and a case example of its application (part 2). The development of the model has necessitated an ongoing exploration of many issues surrounding partnership and authority, assessment and judgement. The lessons we have learnt and ideas that have formed through our work are also presented herein (part 1). This paper was prepared for the Twelfth International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect in Auckland September 6-9, 1998.

1   FROM PATERNALISM TOWARD PARTNERSHIP

At the time that Henry Kempe and his associates 'rediscovered' child abuse in the early 1960's, paternalism was a dominant and largely unquestioned force in western societies[2]. In Australia we currently have before us what is called the Stolen Generation's Report, prepared for the federal government regarding the forced removal of countless Aboriginal children. Various other reports tell us of the cruel and abusive treatment metered out to child migrants in alternative and institutional care. All this represents the very recent past and in fact we know colleagues still pursuing their careers who early in their working lives were removing children from Aboriginal families and single mothers solely because of the status of the parents. It is impossible to avoid the fact that the history of the child protection and child welfare field is a history of paternalism.

However every profession - legal, educational, medical, political and the list could continue - is struggling with a diminution of its status, and no profession is accorded the unquestioned authority in the late nineties that pertained at the time Henry Kempe's name was becoming known. Paternalism is undoubtedly still a dominant force in our societies, however it seems apparent that its impact is being wound back. We are in an era of 'competing discourses' as the constructivists say and no single voice is able to assert reality, or truth in any professional domain. In child protection professional knowledge is diverse and contested, both inside the field and perhaps more importantly in the broader society; our ideas and especially our practice are scrutinized assiduously by politicians, media, the legal community as well as by service recipients and organizations that represent them.

Within this contested child protection environment of the late nineties, we believe the single most critical issue the field faces is how to position itself on the continuum of paternalism and partnership (Calder 1995, considers this continuum further).

Paternalism

Paternalism can be described as that process whereby I as a professional come to you as a service recipient of child protection services with the attitude that it is my opinions that carry the most import in our interaction. I the professional will assess the nature of the problem, the risk and the harm and I

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[1] Andrew Turnell is the author of this paper, and "I" herein refers to the author. "We" refers to my colleague Steve Edwards and myself, we have collaborated together to create the Signs of safety approach.
[2] Given this is an international congress I wish to state that I do not feel at all qualified and would not pretend to comment on the culture of non western societies in this paper.

will formulate the solutions required to resolve the matter. What you as service recipient think, is secondary. The less the actual or perceived harm the more I may allow your views to influence my practice and thinking. Richard Gelles (in press) has recently stated that he believes 10 - 15% of US families where allegations are substantiated are "untreatable" and indicates that these families must therefore forgo the right to influence the professional practice applied to their situations. Given that professionals are trained to be experts in the problems and solutions of their field it is probably true to say that paternalism remains the dominant paradigm behind professionalism. It also seems to us to be the 'default setting' for most helping professionals.

Unfortunately, this paradigm sees a child protection field that exhausts and alienates many of its workers who in the end feel like so much cannon fodder caught in the machinations of an industry trying to arrive at certainty, for example in 1978, Kempe and Kempe described that US workers had an average working life of eighteen months and recently the NSW Department for Community Services found the average length of service for new workers was just 8 months (Cashmore, 1998). In the upper echelons of the field, the academics, theoreticians and bureaucrats forge ideas and careers that hold little or no significance to the field worker (Thomas 1996). And all this while service recipients, governments and the media become increasingly frustrated. For example, in 1991 the US National Commission on Children (cited in Thompson 1995, p5) concluded that;

> if the nation had deliberately designed a system that would frustrate the professionals who staff it, anger the public who finance it, and abandon the children who depend on it, it could not have not done a better job than the present child welfare system.

Partnership

At the other end of the continuum the field has discovered the concept of partnership, a notion that promotes participation, cooperation and collaboration between worker and family. The descriptor 'partnership' has its origins in the United Kingdom in particular in the Children Act 1989 and it is in this country that this idea has been most fully conceptually explored. However, the impetus toward partnership has expressions all around the globe and it may well be true to contend that service recipients have led professionals to this concept. Consumer groups are becoming increasingly vocal players in the child protection field (e.g. Edward, 1997 and Family Rights Group, 1991 a & b). At the same time professionals have been surveying service recipients, and the field is increasingly listening to the experience of those on the receiving end of the child protection process, Brown (1986), MacKinnon (1992), Family Rights Group (1994), Cleaver and Freeman, (1995), Thoburn, Lewis and Shemmings, (1995), Farmer and Owen (1995) and McCallum (1995).

Probably the most well known exploration of the notion of partnership in the United Kingdom arises in the Department for Health's 1995 "Child Protection; Messages for Research" report, which summarizes 20 major research projects into child abuse and protection. This report has enjoyed international circulation and has had considerable influence on our thinking, in particular the material within the six studies that directly surveyed service recipients. However, we are not comfortable with the manner in which the report defines partnership. "Messages from Research" tells us that partnership is characterized by "choice in entering the partnership" and that there is "equality or near equality between the partners" (1995, p109) and even that "power is shared" (p36). These notions do not square up with our experience of child protection work, nor in fact do they fit with what we understand service recipients say is good child protection practice.

It seems ludicrous to talk about equality or near equality between parents and workers, when the later have the statutory capacity to instigate investigations into the intimacy of family life, remove children and undertake other actions such as placing the parents/family on a child protection register. Further, service recipients do not in the vast majority of cases choose to enter the relationship with a child protection worker and they certainly do not (nor should they in our view) control the decision that determines when the relationship is deemed to be concluded.

This critique is not to dismiss the notion of partnership but rather to assist in more clearly defining what the concept means in the context of child protection practice. We believe partnership can best be

achieved when all professionals (whether academics or field staff), are frank and straightforward in their thinking about power and authority in the child protection relationship.

The professional holds most of the power cards in the relationship between the family and child protection worker (even though it is not unusual for workers to underestimate the power they carry). In this regard the descriptions of partnership found in "Messages from Research" are detrimental to good child protection practice, in that it seems to do a 'soft sell' on the authority role of child protection workers. This is disappointing because there is enough ambivalence about coercion and authority in the helping professions generally, without child protection thinkers themselves escalating the muddle in their own writings and research.

In every study of child protection service recipients that we are familiar with, the service recipient is in no doubt that the statutory worker is the more powerful partner. The service recipient consistently wants to know where they stand vis a vis the authority of the worker (hence the frequently asked question; "are you going to take my child away from me?"), and are looking for frank and straightforward information in this regard. When the worker is both comfortable with and clear about the nature of their authority in the relationship, this lays a solid and honest foundation for partnership between worker and family. On this foundation partnership can be further enhanced by workers who then purposefully and skillfully work to minimize the power differential by building trust, involving the family as much as possible, sharing information, utilizing participatory planning processes, providing choice wherever possible and fostering family input at every possible opportunity.

The core issue and litmus test of partnership in child protection work is that of goals. We have said elsewhere that: "partnership exists when both the statutory agency and the family cooperate and make efforts to achieve specific, mutually understood goals." (1997 p 180). Partnership should not be judged to exist on the basis of whether workers or family "feel good about each other" or anything of that ilk, rather when both family and worker understand what they are trying to achieve and are both taking action to move in that direction then a working partnership can be seen to exist.

Partnership in search of a practice

Ryburn (1996, p16), succinctly states that the notion of partnership is "in many respects an idea still in search of practice". There are exceptions to this assertion the most notable being the partnership model of Family Group Conferencing borne in New Zealand with the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act of 1989. Family Group Conferencing now not only has almost a decade of implementation in New Zealand it has also been used and assessed in many other countries (Ban, 1993, Family Rights Group, 1994, Morris & Tunnard, 1996, Hudson, Morris, Maxwell & Galaway 1996 and Merkel-Holguin, 1998). It is in the area of conferencing that partnership has been most fully explored and there are also several other partnership aspiring conferencing models that we know of (Mayer, 1989, MacCullum, 1992, Keys, 1996 and Graber, Keys, & White, 1996).

Despite this, as Ryburn alludes, the principals of partnership have not found an established practice in the broader activity of statutory child protection, especially in the intake and investigation phases, where some form of risk assessment is the dominant paradigm.

A few others have attempted to offer a partnership model with application from intake through to closure (e.g., Weakland and Jordan, 1990, MacCullum, 1996), though neither of these models have had the benefit of sustained application. Two other models are being implemented in Michigan in the USA (Berg & Kelly, in press) and Malmo in Sweden (Sonderquist and Holmquist, private communication). In Victoria, Australia, the Department for Human Services has drawn upon the partnership principles of Family Group Conferencing to create a broader child protection philosophy which they call "child centred-family focused practice". Out of this philosophy the Department has generated a partnership model for investigative and brief responses with the name Enhanced Client Outcomes or ECO, (D.H.S., June, 1997 and October 1997). ECO has been applied and carefully tested in two state regions and evaluations of this work are currently in hand.

Our own approach, the Signs of Safety (which we will describe shortly) is our attempt to develop a partnership model of child protection that is applicable from case commencement to closure.

There are many difficulties inherent in the application of partnership to the child protection field and Morrison captures the problems well when he says child protection workers are acutely aware; "that any failure to protect children as a result of increased risk taking in the name of 'partnership' will be punished" (1995, p133).

To implement partnership based practice, workers and their agencies must balance and integrate inclinations that are often seen as disjunctive. Most critically, how does the worker respectfully approach parents that may have abused or neglected their children without minimizing the seriousness of the situation? The child protection worker can feel caught between becoming cynical and hardened rather like a police officer who sees everyone as a criminal or overly responsive to the parents and prone to the 'rule of optimism' (Dingwall, Eekelaar and Murray, 1983) and at risk of "professional dangerousness" (Dale, Davies, Morrison and Waters, 1986). This dilemma has also lead us to wrestle with the question; how does the child protection professional make judgements and assessments while simultaneously remaining open to the perspective of the family which is essential to building partnership?

Child protection assessments that recognize "You cannot know the final judgement"

Nigel Parton in his many papers and books (e.g. 1985 & 1996) offers an analysis that in our view is an invaluable launching pad for undertaking child protection assessments and judgements. Parton utilizes what we understand to be an interactional constructivist perspective (de Shazer, 1991) and asserts that what professionals conceive of as child abuse and their judgements regarding risk and safety are not definitive truths but rather professional and social constructions.

While Parton's contributions are often perceived primarily as critique with little immediate relevance for practice, our view is that the constructivist perspective in fact offers a firm ideological/philosophical foundation for the notion and practice of partnership. This is because at its simplest, constructivism is ideologically pluralistic and affirms that there is not one but multiple perspectives. Paternalism on the other hand overtly or covertly asserts there is really only one perspective that matters and that is the judgement of the professional.

Partnership based practice should foster professionals who value their own knowledge and authority and at the same time feel secure enough to make professional knowledge and assessments vulnerable to family knowledge, perspectives and judgements. We have been inspired in this regard by the policy work undertaken by the New Zealand Children and Young Person's Service. Under the guidance of the Manager of Risk Assessment, Craig Smith they have laid open the entire risk assessment procedure and protocol of the agency to Maori and Islander perspectives (NZCYPS, 1996a and b).

Given the constructivist heuristic of multiple perspectives it is important to cast one's net as widely as possible when making child protection judgements. Since we believe that risk assessment offers too narrow a focus on which to make child protection judgements we have sort to expand the map by creating an assessment process that is actively responsive to the service recipient' perspective (for example in the case study that follows the worker constantly monitors the progress of the case by inviting the child to provide a rating of her own felt level of safety) and that also constructs judgements based on information regarding family strengths and competencies, existing safety, and goals or envisaged safety in tandem with more traditional risk constructions.

The helping professions have long cherished the notion that its practitioners should be 'non judgmental'. We believe this needs some careful revisiting in the broader field (Hopwood and Turnell, in press), however in child protection the notion raises many dilemmas since whichever way you cut it this endeavour demands judgements. For the paternalistic professional there is no problem in making judgements since this is what they understand they're paid for. For the professional aspiring to partnership things are not so simple; we seek to train workers to make judgements based

on the best balance of detailed information and to also continually be willing to make these judgements vulnerable to the perspectives of the service recipient and recognize that although they must make judgments they "can never make the final judgement"[3].

2 THE SIGNS OF SAFETY MODEL AS AN EXEMPLAR OF PRACTICE ASPIRING TO PARTNERSHIP

In training workers in the Signs of Safety approach we seek to assist them to find a firm footing between the two polarities of "the professional is always right" (paternalism) or succumbing to the temptation to simply believe the service recipient (professional dangerousness). What is needed is a worker who in a clear eyed manner can squarely face the realities and ugliness of the alleged or actual maltreatment without dehumanizing or demonizing the people involved. This requires a receptiveness and open mindedness about the people involved that allows for possibilities and change without minimizing the level of harm or risk. Though this is a difficult task and this balanced attitude is often hard won through many year's experience, we are continually encouraged by experienced child protection workers we work with who retain and extend both a clarity of purpose and an openness of attitude that make them some of the most inspiring helping professionals we know.

The Signs of Safety approach fosters the ability of the worker to approach child protection situations in a open minded manner by pursuing a balance of information from the first intake contact. Initial casework (intake and investigation) in child protection usually revolves around gathering information about risk and harm. Information such as the severity and pattern of the maltreatment, the perceptions of family members regarding abuse and neglect, the vulnerability of the child to future harm, the tendency toward violence within the family and such additional factors as substance abuse, mental disorders and any history of childhood abuse in the parent's lives, make up the typical sorts of information collected for the purposes of risk assessment (e.g.; Sigurdson and Reid, 1996).

It is our contention that most risk assessment maps are too one sided; focusing exclusive attention on a family in the areas just mentioned is rather like mapping only the darkest valleys and gloomiest hollows of a particular territory. There can be no doubt that the child protection worker must gather information about past and potential harm and family deficiencies, but to balance the picture it is also vital to obtain information regarding past, existing and potential safety, competencies and strengths. The six practice elements of the Signs of Safety model provide one framework to assist the worker to elicit, amplify and assess the constructive side of a family's capabilities and this allows for a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the risk and harm.

The following is a very summated presentation of the practice elements of the Signs of Safety approach, for fuller treatment see Edwards and Turnell 1995, Turnell and Edwards, 1997 and Turnell and Edwards, in press.

i. Position Regarding the Abuse/Neglect

'Position' refers to the strongly held values or beliefs which inform the individual regarding the abuse or neglect. Paying attention to an individual family member's position can be done without agreeing or condoning their beliefs about the abuse/neglect and in our experience is vital if each family member is to feel respected.

ii. Exceptions to the Abuse/Neglect

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[3] We have arrived at this position regarding child protection judgements under the influence of a well known Western Australian union leader; Tony Cooke. Tony has publicly declared himself the son of Eric Edgar Cooke the last man to be hanged in Western Australia for having killed 6 people during 1960/1. Tony has had to wrestle with the legacy of a father who inflicted continual physical and emotional violence on himself and his mother and who was also a mass murderer. On a television programme (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1998) regarding his own and his mother's experience Tony comments that over the intervening 36 years since the execution he has come to increasingly know his father, he indicates that a valid judgement was made to execute his father but then states "you cannot make the final judgement".

Exceptions (first given this name by Steve de Shazer and colleagues, see de Shazer, and others, 1986), are times when the problem (in this case the abuse or neglect) could have happened and didn't. For example, a parent might have become enraged with their child but resisted the impulse to hit the child by doing something else. The caseworker elicits information of this sort by asking questions such as: "Tell me about the times when you get your child to listen to you without hitting her?" Exception questioning is built on the twin assumptions that the problem is not happening all the time and that the person very likely already deals with the problem appropriately, some of the time.

iii.   Family Strengths and Resources

Child protection scenarios can and frequently do become 'problem saturated'[4]. It is important to attempt to expand this picture by exploring positive aspects and strengths that family members see in each other and their family or are acknowledged by other people or agencies. This will also very likely foster cooperation between the family and agency in that the family may well gain the sense that the worker is bringing a balanced perspective to the situation, not just focusing on what is wrong.

As with all Signs of Safety elements, information about family strengths and resources is useful in two potential directions. If a positive scenario about family life evolves, this can quite possibly be built upon and at the very least gives good information about the quality and nature of family relationships. On the other hand, if family members can identify little or nothing positive about each other and their family this may, in conjunction with other information, be an indicator that the severity of the problem is greater than previously thought.

iv.   Goals

The foundation of the Signs of Safety approach is the explicit and careful focus given to the goals of the two key groupings involved in the process; the family members and the statutory agency.

In our view it is essential that throughout the life of a case the statutory agency clearly articulate - in concrete behavioural terms - what it will need to see that indicates enough safety to close the case. This inevitably requires careful thinking on the part of the case worker and supervisors and detailed knowledge of the case.

Alongside agency goals it is important to explore how family members see the issue should be dealt with and how they would go about creating safety. Discussion regarding exceptions should also have generated information about the safety that already exists in the family, and this may well be a foundation on which to discuss, assess and build envisioned safety.

v.   Scaling Safety

Child protection case work is a highly charged undertaking and there is a great need to bring detail and specificity to the endeavour. We have found that scaling questions can be invaluable in this regard. The Signs of Safety approach routinely and continually invites the workers *and* family members to access the level of safety with a scaling question such as "where ten is you are certain this sort of incident won't happen again and your son is safe and one is you think there is every likelihood this may happen again where would you rate the situation at present?". The case study which concludes this paper demonstrates a little more about how the model utilizes the scaling of safety.

Scaling questions offer an enormous benefit to child protection workers in that they conceive of the situation on a continuum from risk to safety. As any experienced worker in child protection will readily acknowledge, a guarantee of absolute safety is never possible. The reality is that the work is

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[4] White (1988/9), coined the term "problem saturated description", to refer to situations where the seeming enormity of the problem floods or saturates everyone's view of the situation leading to feelings of hopelessness and impotence. This view works against the possibility of envisaging the situation changing or getting better.

carried out somewhere in the space between total risk and complete safety. Scaling questions tap this sense of continuum and by the nature of their construction embrace the possibility of change (for further discussion see Berg and de Shazer 1993, Hopwood and de Shazer 1994, Turnell and Hopwood 1994a & b).

vi.   Willingness, Capacity and Confidence

In our experience it is not uncommon for agencies and workers to prepare child protection case plans without seeking family member's assessment of their own willingness and capacity to undertake any given plan and their confidence in the same. The Signs of Safety approach will hopefully generate ideas for action that families have used before or those that make sense to the family, since they incorporate their position on the problem and reflect their own goals. Regardless of how ideas are generated, it is critical, that the case worker canvas the capacity, willingness and confidence of family members. Frequently this is done in a straightforward manner using 0 - 10 scaling questions.

Assessment

The Signs of Safety practice elements are designed to be used alongside traditional risk estimation processes and to generate a balanced and family influenced assessment of the risk and potential for safety. The greater the specificity of the information the better, but there is no escaping the reality that having gathered the information the child protection professional must make judgements. Space does not allow a presentation herein of the particular Signs of Safety assessment and planning protocol (see Turnell and Edwards, 1997 and In press), however the case example which follows *is* indicative of the process we use for arriving at child protection assessments.

Case example

A girl in her early teens (whom we will call Gail) was raped by her stepfather's brother (Alan) while on a camping trip. The mother, Helen, had not participated in the weekend's activities, but immediately recognized that something was wrong when Gail returned home. Helen made her daughter sit down and talk, and in this way she found out what had occurred. At the same time, Gail also revealed to her mother that her stepfather (Thomas) had been sexually abusing her for the past two years. Helen immediately confronted Thomas and demanded that he leave the family home. Following this, a member of the extended family notified the child protection service.

Helen was terrified when the child protection worker[1] first visited. Her previous experience of "the welfare" had been negative and she was scared that all her children would be removed. (Gail was the eldest of four. Bill, her full brother, was two years her junior, and the youngest two, both preschoolers, were Thomas's natural children).

The case was further complicated by long-standing antagonism in Helen's extended family: Several relatives viewed her as an unfit parent and, on several occasions, had reported her to the child protection authorities. This was in part fueled by the fact that Thomas had fathered a child with Helen's sister. It was the sister who initiated most of the reports.

On the first home visit, the worker entered the messiest house that was she had encountered in her many years' experience. She found a family and mother with a highly chaotic lifestyle. Being sensitive to the signs of safety, the worker acknowledged that Helen had already made significant efforts to improve Gail's safety. The worker was very mindful of Helen's fears of "the welfare" and was careful to compliment Helen on her commitment to her children, the manner in which she approached her daughter such that the girl was able to reveal the rape and abuse, and her determination in forcing the abuser to leave the family.

It was evident that the shock of the events had caught up with Helen, and she was too overwhelmed to discuss things at any length. The worker did, however, ask both Helen and Gail to rate their sense

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[5] Caroline Sullivan, this case example is taken from Turnell and Edwards 1999.

of Gail's immediate safety. Both indicated she was quite safe for the time being. Drawing on all the information, the worker decided that there was enough safety for her to end the interview and schedule another appointment for a few days later. Following that first contact with the family, given the seriousness of the disclosures, the worker judged the level of safety for Gail at 3 (10 meaning safety is certain, 0 meaning reabuse is certain) with a case context of 2.

In the second contact with Helen and Gail, the worker discovered that Thomas had returned several times, ostensibly to visit his own two preschool-aged children, when Gail was home and no other adults were present. The worker acted quickly to forbid this situation, in part because Gail's own safety rating of these occasions was 1 out of 10.

It is important to note that the worker did not intend to be guided solely by Gail's answer to the scaling question. The answer simply provided her with good information and reflected that Gail appraised the situation realistically. If Gail had rated her safety in that context as high, the worker, would have been alerted to another problem. She still would have ensured that Thomas had no access to Gail, but she would also have set about gently exploring the issue further with the teenager. Following this second interview, the worker immediately met with Thomas. Together, they modified the visitation arrangements so that the girl would not be left alone with her stepfather again and ensured that there would be supervision for all visits with the younger children.

In subsequent contacts, the worker felt it was vital in building a collaborative relationship to address Helen's fear of the removal of the children. The worker informed Helen that if she continued to ensure Gail's safety the in same ways that she had already demonstrated she could not see herself having to remove any of the children. The worker also made it clear to Helen that she would do everything she could to help her maintain her focus on protecting her children and helping Gail deal with the abuse. Continued safety would eliminate any need to act on the complaints emanating from Helen's sister and other members of the family.

The worker's efforts to engage and reassure Helen clearly hit the mark; Helen revealed that she had been abused as a child. When she had disclosed the detail of this abuse, her mother had not believed her. In contrast, Helen was determined to provide the best support she could to Gail. Helen also commented that she had previously suspected that Thomas might have been abusing Gail, but when she asked, Gail had denied it.

The worker built relationships with Helen, Gail, and Thomas, always focusing carefully on building and maintaining safety for the teenager. She regularly visited the family home and made a careful choice to not confront issues such as the mess of the house since, although the state of the house was of concern, she judged that to raise it directly would be counterproductive. Further, the state of the house was not hampering Helen in supporting Gail and ensuring her safety. The worker was also careful to assure herself that the developmental milestones and general behavior of the two younger children were acceptable.

At the outset, Helen was very cautious about taking the matter to the police. When she had been abused as a teenager, she had gone to the police and they did not believe her story. The worker spent considerable time talking through this issue with both Helen and Gail. While the worker notified the police of the situation following the initial report, it took six months before both mother and daughter were ready for Gail to make a statement against Thomas and Alan.

Throughout the case, the worker continually elicited the mother's own concerns about Gail and the other children and encouraged her to come up with ideas to deal with these issues. In this way Helen addressed the chaos of her life and the mess in the house and began to deal with these things. The worker complimented Helen whenever she made any progress toward her goals.

The worker also took the time to build a good relationship with Gail, monitoring the teenager's sense of her own life, the sort of support she wanted, and her own sense of safety. The worker would often drive the teenager home from a group for sexually abused young people as a way of keeping in touch in an informal context.

A remarkable aspect of this case is that the worker developed a cooperative relationship with Thomas. The worker gained an admission of the sexual abuse from him well before Gail and her mother were ready to take the matter to the police. The worker skillfully utilized this knowledge to get Thomas to keep Gail safe by staying away from her. When the police became involved, the worker had a significant influence, getting Thomas to admit the abuse to the investigating officer and enter a guilty plea in court (for which he was subsequently jailed for six years). Thomas did this in part to spare Gail the trauma of a police investigation and cross-examination in court. The worker facilitated these actions on Thomas's part by giving him time to tell his story and not continually challenging his position that the abuse wasn't really his fault. The worker felt able to do this because she judged that Thomas's confession gave her sufficient leverage to ensure the safety she was seeking for Gail.

The worker also continued to keep Thomas informed as issues arose. She took the man seriously in his desire to have a meaningful relationship with his natural children and indicated that if this was done with demonstrable safety for the children—primarily to be shown through supervised contact—she would be supportive. Throughout her contact with this man, the worker was direct with him regarding the problems and situations of risk and was likewise very clear about what she required and expected. In child protection casework, it is not unusual for workers to sidestep working with perpetrators, but this case demonstrates that it is possible to work collaboratively and productively with men such as Thomas.

This is a very serious case with complex family dynamics involving fragile, fearful, sometimes aggressive, and confused individuals. Skillful, careful, and purposive use of her child protection role helped the worker facilitate cooperative relationships and assist significantly in securing very good outcomes for Gail and the other children. With the support of the worker, Helen made many changes in her life: she brought the relationship with Thomas to a complete end, she became more decisive and better organized in her life and in her care of all the children, she entered a relationship with a man that was more positive for her than any she had previously experienced, and she began to take more pride in her own appearance and that of her house. The worker complimented Helen at every step. The outcomes for Gail in this case were very good. She was making good progress in her life.

Not everything in this case progressed as the worker would have liked. It became obvious that Gail's brother Bill, who was a few years younger, was deeply affected by everything that had transpired. He was clearly very angry, sullen, and withdrawn much of the time, and Helen was very concerned about him. In was eventually discovered that he had also been sexually abused by Thomas on several occasions. Attempts were made to draw Bill out of his shell, but, despite the best efforts of the worker and Helen, he remained largely uncommunicative. Additionally, at the time of writing, the matter of the rape inflicted by Alan was only just coming into the courts. The worker was not willing to close the case until she had seen the family make a successful transition through the stress of the court case.

Conclusion

This case demonstrates well the key tenet of the Signs of Safety approach, this being that child protection casework should always be purposefully focused on securing and maintaining demonstrable safety for children and young people. From this perspective establishing evidence of risk can be seen as a part of the process of building safety - not an end in itself.

There are many nuances involved in this case and as with all good case work the worker was continually exercising her best judgement regarding how to proceed. There are points in this story that the reader may wish to challenge, for example the worker's decision to ignore the filth and chaos of the house, the decision to not become confrontative of Thomas's position regarding the abuse and her decision to support supervised access for the father with his young children. This case represents the Signs of Safety approach well because all of these decisions were made with a clear and purposeful focus on the level of existing and increasing safety, informed by the view that to build partnerships with the individuals involved would enhance the worker's leverage to foster further constructive change.

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