Strengthening families | Protecting children
Framework for Practice

Circles of Safety and Support Tool

A tool to help parents identify people for their family's safety & support network

Queensland
Government

Contents

Identifying people for the family's network

A core component of a strengths-based, safety-centred practice approach is the development or strengthening of the family's safety and support network. The safety and support network is made up of people such as extended family, friends and community members who will work with the parents and involved professionals to develop and maintain a plan that will ensure the children's long term safety, belonging and wellbeing. The safety and support network provides support to the parents and safety for the children, and in some situations, safety for the adult whose behaviour we are worried about.

The Circles of Safety and Support tool, inspired by the concentric circles used by Susie Essex in the Words & Pictures method and the circles concept from the Protective Behaviours approach, is a visual tool that has been designed to help identify people for the family's safety and support network. This tool also helps workers have conversations with family members about why a safety and support network is necessary, about the role the network can play, and the process of determining who would be the most appropriate people to participate in this network.
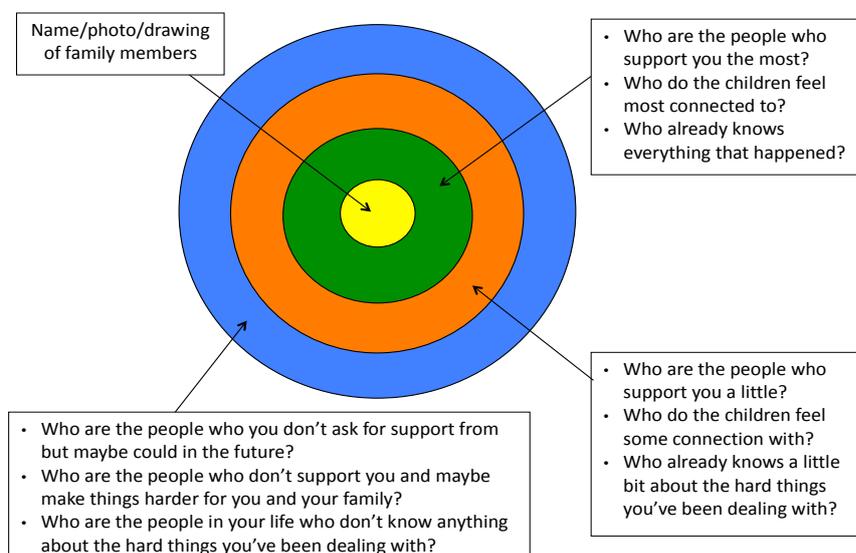
The Circles of Safety and Support tool can be used on the very first visit with a family or at the point when you are starting to talk with family about the importance of involving a network of family and friends and involved professionals. Many parents and caregivers are reluctant to involve other family members or friends in conversations with child protection workers and it is quite common for parents/caregivers to say that they do not have people in their lives who could be part of a safety and support network. The Circles of Safety and Support tool helps workers to introduce and explore the idea of involving a network.

This booklet contains an overview of the Circles of Safety and Support tool, a detailed case example, and a suggested process for using this tool with families.

Structure of the tool

The Circles of Safety and Support tool is a very simple tool, consisting of three concentric circles drawn around the family. The family members (children and parents/ caregivers) are represented in the middle of the tool (in the yellow circle) by a quick drawing of the family, by writing the family member's names or by a photo of the family or children.

"Circles of Safety & Support" Tool

Name/photo/drawing of family members

- Who are the people who support you the most?
- Who do the children feel most connected to?
- Who already knows everything that happened?

- Who are the people who support you a little?
- Who do the children feel some connection with?
- Who already knows a little bit about the hard things you've been dealing with?

- Who are the people who you don't ask for support from but maybe could in the future?
- Who are the people who don't support you and maybe make things harder for you and your family?
- Who are the people in your life who don't know anything about the hard things you've been dealing with?

The innermost circle (green) is where we write the names of all the people in the children's and the family's life who already know about what happened that led to the children being taken into care or that led to child protection services being involved with the family, or who are already actively involved in supporting the family.

The middle circle (orange) is where we write the names of those people in the family's life who provide a little support to the parents and the children and/or know some of what has happened but don't know all the details. Perhaps they know that the children are not in the care of the family and that something happened that led to that, but they do not know the details of what happened.

The outermost circle (blue) is where we write the names of those people who don't know anything about what has happened and don't know that child protection services are involved with the family.

Using the Circles of Safety and Support tool

1. Talking about the need for a safety and support network

The first step in the process of using the Circles of Safety and Support tool flows directly out of the conversation with parents/caregivers about what we mean by a safety and support network and the fact that a network needs to be in place for the safety planning work to progress. When discussing the need for a network I usually say something like:

> For our child protection agency to be confident that the things that we are worried about aren't going to happen to the children in the future, we need to know that there will be a safety and support network for the children; a group of people who see the children often and who will be part of the process of working with you and with us to develop a plan that will show everyone that the things we are worried about are not going to happen to the children in the future. You know that old saying that it takes a village to raise a child? Well the safety and support network is a bit like that village. We need to know that it's not just you and the kids on your own and that once child protection services walk away, that there will be a group of people who will be part of the children's lives and will help you to make sure that the children will always be safe in relation to the things we are worried about.

As family members start to talk about who might be part of the safety and support network or start to say that they don't have any people in their life who could be part of the network, you can move straight into using the Circles of Safety and Support tool. At this point I usually say something like: "Okay, so let me ask you a question" and as I'm saying that, I draw a large circle on a piece of paper and place this paper on the table between myself and the parents/caregivers so that it is visible to everyone.

2. The Inner Circle

I then ask the question:

- *Who are the people in your life and your child's life who already know about what has happened that led to your child/children being in care (or to child protection services being involved with your family)?*

As the parents/caregivers identify people who know what has happened, the names of these people are written into the inner circle (leave a little space right in the middle to come back to later and put the children's and parents' names or pictures).

Giving Compliments

As soon as the parents/caregivers identify one name, you have the opportunity to compliment parents for the openness and courage they have shown in talking openly with people about what has happened. In terms of bringing a sense of positive energy to the process, the earlier you can provide compliments to the parents, the better. For example, if a mum has just let me know that there are people in her life who she's had the courage to talk to about what has happened, I want to acknowledge and honour her courage by saying something like:

- *I imagine that might have been difficult to tell your mum about what happened. How did you manage to do that/find the courage to do that?*

or

- *You told all these people about what has happened. Wow, that can't have been easy. How did you manage to do that?*

Then continue asking *"Who else already knows what has happened?"* until the parents/caregivers have identified all of the people in their lives who already know what has happened and these names have been recorded in the inner circle. Having these people identified in the inner circles creates the opportunity for further learning about the parents/caregivers by asking questions like:

- *Who in the circle was the hardest person for you to talk to about this?*
- *How did you do that?*
- *What helped you to do that?*
- *Who was the first person that you told?*

The parent's/caregiver's answers to these questions will also provide important information about their relationships with the possible safety and support network people.

3. The Middle Circle

The next step in the process is to create the middle (second) circle by drawing a circle around the inner circle and then asking:

- *Who are the people in your life and the kids' lives who know a little bit about what has happened; who don't know the whole story but maybe know some of what has happened? Or maybe they know that something has happened but don't know any of the details?*

So then in the middle (second) circle, we write the names of those people who know a little bit or some of what has happened. Again, you can give further compliments to the parents/caregivers as more people are identified.

4. The Outer Circle

The next step is to create the outer circle by drawing a third circle around the other two circles. The question you are then asking is:

- *Who are the people in your life and your children's lives who don't know anything about what has happened?*

As these people are identified, their names are written into the outermost (third) circle.

5. Moving people from the outer circles to the inner circle

If there are not already sufficient/appropriate people in the inner circle (who meet the criteria of already knowing what has happened), the next part of the process is to explore who the parents/caregivers are willing to move from the outer two circles into the inner circle.

I usually start to make the connection between the inner circle and the safety and support network more explicit by saying something like:

> *Remember I said at the beginning that people in the safety and support network would need to know about what has happened in the past, well you've already got these people in this inner circle who you've been willing to talk to about what has happened, so you've already got these people as possible people for the network. So now we need to make sure we have enough people in this inner circle and the right people in this inner circle for the children's safety and support network.*

If there are not enough people in the inner circle, then I usually explore who from the outer circles could become part of the inner circle by asking questions such as:

- *Who else from these outer circles do you think needs to be part of this inner circle?*
- *Is there anyone in these two outer circles who you have thought about telling or come close to telling, but you haven't quite gotten there yet?*
- *Who would Grandma (for example - pick a person already in the inner circle) say needs to be in this inner circle with her?*
- *Who would the kids want to have in this inner circle?*
- *You know all of these people, I don't know them yet, but who do you think I would want to have in this inner circle?*
- *Who of all of these people do you feel most comfortable with/most understood by and think would be important to have as part of the safety and support network?*
- *The suggestions of who else could be brought into the inner circle can be represented visually by doing things like drawing arrows that connect the people's names in the outer circles with the inner circle, or the suggested people can be added to the inner circle in a different colour to distinguish them from the people who already know what has happened.*

6. How many people do we need in the network?

At some point within this process, the question of how many people need to be in the safety and support network will usually be asked. This can feel like one of those 'how long is a piece of string' questions, but it is nonetheless one that we need to answer and to try to quantify.

There is no one definitive required number for the safety and support network that applies to every family situation. The number of people needed for the network needs to be determined based on the seriousness and nature of the concerns, the age and vulnerability of the children, and the availability of the other safety and support network people. We need to know that there are enough people in the network to be able to meet the day-to-day arrangements required in the safety plan. If, for example, our safety goal requires 24/7 supervision of the children while they are with one or both parents, there would need to be a large enough number of people in the network to make that possible, and a much larger number than if we require the children to be supervised by the network when the children have occasional contact with granddad (for example).

The decision about how many people are needed for the safety and support network needs to be thought through and talked through with everyone involved in the safety planning process to ensure that everyone is confident that the number and availability of people in the network are going to be able to maintain and monitor the safety plan.

7. Talking about what we mean by 'safety' people

What has happened so far in the process is that the parents/caregivers have now identified a number of people who could potentially be part of the children's safety and support network. The Circles of Safety and Support tool can now be used to begin having the conversation about the need for the network to be assessed as 'safe' people and the process for making this decision/ assessing whether or not someone is a 'safe' person.

I usually introduce the idea of assessing whether or not someone is a 'safe' person by asking questions such as:
- *If you suddenly got sick and had to go into hospital, which of the people in this inner circle would you be prepared to leave your kids with?*
- *Who do you think your children would be willing/feel safe staying with?*
- *If grandma (or one of the other people in the inner circle) was here looking at the people in this inner circle, who would she say she was happy for her grandkids to be left with?*
- *I have met any of these people yet but they are all people that you know, so who do you think I would be happy to have the kids staying with?*

The information provided by the parents/caregivers in response to these questions can be represented visually by doing things like putting a circle around the names of the people who are identified as 'safe' people (you could use one colour for Mum's views, for example, and a different colour for who Mum thinks others would nominate as 'safe' people) and question marks or crosses put through those people who have been identified as potentially 'unsafe' people.

By asking questions from a variety of points of view (the parent's, the children's, grandma's, and the worker's view), you are demonstrating that the decision about whether or not someone is regarded as a safe person is based on information provided by a range of people involved with the family. You are also introducing the idea that this decision will be made collaboratively, with the significant people in the children's lives being involved in the process of assessing whether or not it is appropriate for someone to be part of the children's safety and support network.

While the ultimate decision about whether or not someone is assessed as being an appropriate person for the safety and support network rests with the statutory agency, the information provided by the parents/caregivers, the children and by other people in the safety and support network is a vital part of that decision-making process.

8. What do people need to know to be part of the network?

Once the people who 'know everything' (in the inner circle) have been identified, you are then able to explore with the parents/caregivers what these people actually know and what else they need to know. I usually start this conversation by asking a question such as:

• *You said that these are the people who know everything about what has happened. Can we now talk about what it is that they actually know? What have you told them?*

A bottom line for the safety and support network is that people in the network need to know child protection services' views about what has happened to the children in the past and to understand the worries that professionals have about what might happen to the children in the future in the parents' care. This doesn't mean that the parents or the network need to agree with these views, but they do need to understand that these are the views held by child protection services and that these are the views that the safety plan must address, over time, for the child protection agency to be willing to close the case.

At a minimum, we would want the safety and support network to be presented with the harm statements (what the child protection agency (CS) believe has happened to these children or any other children in the past in the care of these parents), the worry statements (what CS are worried may happen to the children in the future in the care of these parents) and the goal statements (what CS would need to see the family doing, over time, in their care of the children that would satisfy everyone that there was enough safety to close the case).

9. How do we ensure that everyone is informed?

There are a number of ways that this information can be presented to the safety and support network:
• The parents/caregivers can take responsibility for talking this information through with all the potential people for the safety and support network prior to the first safety and support network meeting. If this happens, it is important that child protection services go over this information at the initial network meeting to make sure that everyone is clear about CPS' views.
• A copy of the assessment and planning framework can be provided to all the potential people for the safety and support network prior to the first network meeting and this can be discussed/ explored further at the meeting.
• The Words and Pictures document that has been prepared for the children can be presented to the safety and support network at the first network meeting as a means of ensuring that everyone understands CPS' views. (For further information on the Words and Pictures process, see "The Resolutions Approach: Working with 'Denied' Child Abuse", Turnell & Essex, 2006, or the Words and Pictures DVD, available at www.signsofsafety.net).

10. The role of the safety and support network

The Circles of Safety and Support tool can also help you to talk with the parents/caregivers about what the safety and support network would need to do. The safety and support network is an integral part of the safety planning process and so it is important that parents/caregivers understand what it is that the network will be asked to do and how this fits into the overall safety planning process. In most cases, it is the parents/caregivers who will be asking people to be part of the children's safety and support network and will be inviting them to the first meeting, so it is important that parents have had the opportunity to think and talk this through.

I usually start talking about the role of the network by saying something like:

- *We've got all these people now in this inner circle who know about what has happened and who could be part of the safety and support network, and I think it's fantastic that you've got so many people who already know what has happened. And you have also suggested other people from the outer two circles who you would be willing to have know about what has happened so that these other people could also be part of the network. So can we talk now in a bit more detail about what the network would need to do?*

Before presenting further information to the family about the safety planning process and how the safety and support network fits into this, I usually try to ascertain what the parents already know/understand about the role of the safety and support network by asking a question such as:

- *I know we haven't talked a lot about the network, but if these people agreed to be part of your children's safety and support network, what do you imagine they are going to need to do?*

I would then continue asking *"What else do you think the network is going to need to do?"* until you are pretty clear that the parents have had the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge/understanding about the role of the safety and support network.

At a minimum, we would expect the safety and support network to:

- Listen to CS' views about what has happened to the children in the past and their future worries that the detailed plan needs to address.
- Come to meetings with the parents/CS to develop the detailed plan that will demonstrate to everyone that the children will always be safe and well in relation to these identified worries. The number of meetings could be as few as one or two or could be as many as a dozen, depending on the complexity of the situation.
- Continue working with the family and CS to monitor how the plan is working. This is usually for a period of somewhere between 6 months and 2 years, depending on how long CS would need to see the plan in place and working for them to be confident that the plan will continue working once CS close the case.
- Continue supporting the family to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the children for as long as the children remain vulnerable to the identified worries. CS will need to have the conversation about how long the safety and support network will need to be actively involved for with the family and the safety and support network prior to CS closing the case.

11. Bringing the Circles to other people in the family

So far in using this tool, you have captured the parent/caregiver's ideas about who could be involved in the safety and support network. Other family members might have ideas about additional people who could be part of the safety and support network.

At this point in the process, I usually then ask the parents' permission to show their Circles of Safety and Support to others in the family (the children, grandma, the other parent if not present, etc) to seek their ideas. This meeting with the children or other family members can happen with the parent present or not, depending on the parent's preference. If the parent is going to be present, it can be useful for them to be the person who explains the circles of safety and support to the children or to other family members. Any additional people suggested can be added to the circles and the same questioning process can be used to understand the children/other family members' views about who needs to be part of the inner circle/safety and support network.

As the safety and support network is formed and begins to meet, the parents' Circles of Safety and Support can also be brought to the safety and support network and the network can consider the question of whether or not additional people are required for the safety and support network and who they could be.

12. Where to from here?

The final step in the Circles of Safety and Support process is to talk with the parents/caregivers about where to from here. Important next steps are:

- Deciding who is going to talk with the possible safety and support network people to ask them to be part of the children's network and when is this going to happen?
- Setting a date for the first meeting of the safety and support network (which will also involve the parents/caregivers and child protection services) and deciding where is this going to be held?
- Deciding what process will be used to ensure that everyone in the safety and support network understands the concerns.

Case Example

Amanda and Abi's Circles of Safety and Support
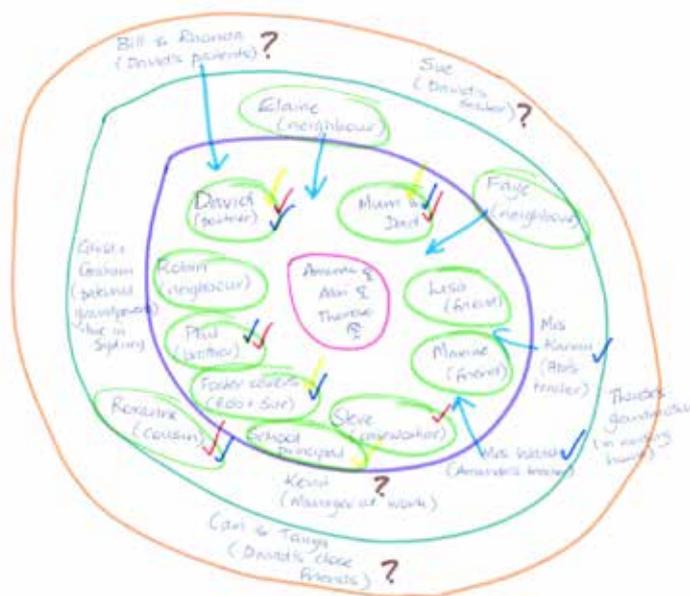
The Circles of Safety and Support example above is an anonymised example from my work with a family in Perth, Western Australia. This family consists of a mother, who I will call Therese, and her two daughters, Abi (6yrs) and Amanda (8yrs). Abi and Amanda were placed in the care of the Department for Child Protection (DCP) two years ago due to the girls witnessing signficant family violence between Therese and her partner at the time, the girls being hit by Therese's partner, and the girls often being left on their own at night while Therese and her partner went out to parties and to buy drugs.

Two years later, DCP referred the family to a reunification service as Therese had separated from her partner and had demonstrated that she was no longer using drugs. During my first meeting with Therese, I explained what the reunification and planning process would involve and began to talk to Therese about the need for a network of safety and support. Therese said that she didn't really have anyone who could be part of a network and I then drew a large circle on the page and asked Therese the following question:

- *So let me just ask you a question.... Who are the people in your life and the girls' lives who know about what happened in the past, about Terry hitting the girls and the girls seeing all those fights between you and Terry, and the girls being left on their own at night while you and Terry went out? Who are the people in your life who already know about what has happened?*

Therese immediately said that her partner, David (who she had been in a relationship with for about 6 months), knew everything about what had happened, and then added that her mum and dad also knew what had happened. I wrote David's name and her mum and dad into the inner circle and then used that opportunity to compliment Therese by saying *"That can't have been easy telling your new partner about that difficult stuff from your past. How did you manage to do that?"* Therese said that she had been pretty nervous telling David but that she learnt in her drug rehab program that unless she was honest with people, she wasn't going to be able to have much of a relationship with them.

I then asked Therese *"Who else knows what happened?"* Therese said that her friends from the drug rehab program knew what had happened and when I asked her for their names, she gave me the names of two friends she had made during the program, Lisa and Maxine. I wrote their names in the circle and then asked again *"Who else knows what happened?"* Therese thought for a while and said "My brother, but I don't see him much". I explained that it didn't matter at this stage how much she saw him; what we were doing was writing down the names of all the people who already knew what had happened. So I then wrote her brother's name (Phil) into the circle. I continued asking *"Who else knows?"* and writing their names in the circle until Therese said that she couldn't think of anyone else. At this point I asked *"Just think for a moment about all the people in the girls' life... Is there anyone else in their life who knows about what has happened?"* From this question, Therese added the girls' foster carers, their DCP caseworker and the person who brought them on contact visits, as well as the principal at the school which the girls attended. All of these names were added to the inner circle.

I then drew a second circle around this inner circle and asked *"Who are the people in your life and the girls' lives who know some of what happened; who don't know all the details, but know a little bit about what happened?"* Therese listed a number of people, including two more of her neighbours, Elaine and Faye; both of the girls' teachers; her cousin, Roxanne; and Kevin, the manager of the shop where Therese worked part-time. I then asked Therese "*Is there anyone else, in your family for example or the girls' dad's side of the family, who know something about what has happened?"*. Therese then added the girls' paternal grandparents, who she said she didn't speak to much as they lived interstate and they had stopped having much contact after the girls' father had died four years ago.

When Therese said that she couldn't think of anyone else to add to that circle, I then drew a third circle around the first two and asked *"So now who are the people in your life who don't know anything about what happened?"* Therese thought for quite a while and then said "David's family and friends, I guess. I've only met them a couple of times because they live outside of Perth, but I haven't told them that the girls don't live with me. They all think that we'd just left the kids at home with friends while we came to visit". I asked Therese who she thought were the most important of those people and Therese listed Bill and Rhonda (David's parents), Sue (David's sister) and Carl and Tanya (his closest friends). I wrote all of these names in the outer circle and then asked *"Who else is in your life who doesn't know anything about what happened?"* Therese said that she had never told her grandmother about what had happened as her grandmother was in a nursing home and didn't know that the girls were in care. I added her grandmother to the outer circle.

Once we'd finished putting the names in all three circles, I then asked Therese *"Looking at all the people you have put in these safety circles, is there anyone else who is important to you and important to the girls who we haven't put into the circles yet?"* Therese looked at her circles of safety and support and said *"No, that's everyone".*

Therese had listed 11 people in the inner circle, 8 people in the middle circle, and 6 people in the outer circle, giving us 25 people who were potential members of the safety network.

I then talked started to explore with Therese how 'safe' she regarded the people she had listed within her circles of safety and support, which I did by asking:

- *I want to ask you a question about all of these people now. Imagine that your girls are living back home with you and then you had to go to hospital suddenly. Of all the people you have put in these circles, who would you be willing to leave your girls with?*

Therese looked at the circles and straight away started pointing out the people that she would be willing to leave her girls with. I circled these people with a green pen. Therese also said that some of the people who she didn't yet know well enough, such as David's family and friends, and her manager at work, were possible safe people. I put a question mark next to these people.

Once we had identified who Therese regarded as 'safe' people for Abi and Amanda, I then started to explore other people's views. I did this by asking questions such as:

- *If you had to go to hospital, who do you think the girls would feel comfortable staying with? Who would your mum be willing for her granddaughters to stay with? Who do you think Steve, your caseworker, would be happy for the girls to stay with?*

Therese thoughts about her mum's views were represented with a red tick; her girls' views with a blue tick and Steve's views with a yellow tick.

Using Therese's circles of safety and support, I then talked with Therese about how many people she thought would need to be in Abi and Amanda's safety network, which led to a discussion about the role of the safety network. Therese said that if the safety network needed to come to meetings and help to develop the plan and then keep visiting afterwards to make sure that the plan was working, she thought there would need to be about 10 people so that a couple of people, like her mum and dad, weren't having to do all the work. Therese said though that she didn't feeling comfortable asking people to commit this much time to working with her and the girls and that she wasn't sure if they would agree to do it. At this point I reiterated again that having a safety network was a bottom line for the girls to return home and complimented Therese on being willing to think this through with me in so much detail.

This part of the conversation took quite a while, with me holding the bottom line of the safety network needing to happen and needing to have enough people to be able to perform the role effectively, and Therese eventually said that she understood that she had to have a safety network in place before the girls could come home.

I then asked Therese to think about who in the inner circle she thought would be good to have as part of the safety network. Therese said that she wanted to have her mum and dad, David, her brother if he was willing, her friends Lisa and Maxine and her neighbour, Robin. Therese added that she didn't think that Steve, her caseworker, the school principal or the foster parents would really count as part of the safety network and so then we started to explore who from the outer circles Therese would be willing to move to the inner circle.

To do this, I asked Therese questions such as:

- *Who from these outer two circles do you think needs to be in this inner circle and part of the safety and support network?*
- *Who would you be most comfortable talking with about what happened to the girls?*
- *Who do you think from these outer circles could most support you and the girls in creating the kind of life you want for you all?*
- *Who do you think your mum would want to have in there with her? Who do you think the girls would want to have in this inner circle and part of their network?*

Therese said that she thought both her neighbours, Elaine and Faye, needed to be in the inner circle, and that the girls would want their teachers part of the inner circle. Therese also said that while she didn't know David's parents very well, they seemed like good people and she would be willing to talk with them if David was okay with that. The people that Therese was willing to move to the inner circle, we showed by drawing arrows linking them to the inner circle.

That was as much as Therese and I covered during our first session together. Therese said that she wanted to show her circles of safety and support to David and to her mum and talk to them about the safety and support network and who needed to be part of it. We agreed that after she had done that, she and I would then talk together again about how to start inviting the people we had identified to a meeting to talk about the safety and support network. Therese's circles of safety and support led to a network of 13 people for Abi and Amanda, who at the time of writing this booklet, are all participating in the process of developing a plan for Abi and Amanda.

Some important process considerations

As you will see from the suggested process outlined above and the case example, there are a lot of detailed conversations with families that can result from the use of the Circles of Safety and Support tool. It may be necessary to use the tool over a number of sessions rather than trying to complete all of the work within one session.

The suggested process outlined above is not necessarily a linear process. You may find that you move from one stage to another, depending on what comments or questions the parents/ caregivers ask. What is important to remember is to record the information visually (it doesn't have to be neat or pretty; this is a working document!) and to cover all of the areas outlined in the process.

Conclusion

As discussed at the beginning of this booklet, developing and/or strengthening a family's safety and support network is a core component of a strengths-based, safety-centred practice approach. This booklet focuses on the development of a safety and support network through the use of the Circles of Safety and Support tool and isn't intended to give a thorough overview of the broader collaborative planning process. For further information on detailed collaborative planning, please see the reference list at the back of this booklet.

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