

Strengthening families | Protecting children
Framework for practice



Foundational elements

The Strengthening Families Protecting Children Framework for Practice was developed with the assistance of Philip Decter, Raelene Freitag and Heather Meitner of the NCCD Children's Research Center and Sonja Parker, Eleonora De Michele and Catherine Santoro of SP Consultancy. Copyright is jointly owned by the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs, the NCCD Children's Research Center and SP Consultancy.

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Introduction

In 2012, the Honourable Justice Tim Carmody was asked to form a commission to review Queensland's child protection system and to deliver a roadmap for enhanced and enduring child safety.

Following more than 12 months of public inquiry and deliberation, the commission named three key goals:

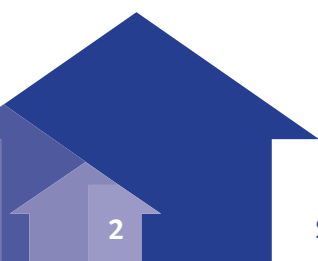
1. Reduce the number of children in the child protection system
2. Revitalise frontline services and family support to break the intergenerational cycle of abuse and neglect
3. Refocus on learning, improving and taking responsibility for a better child protection system.

To achieve these goals, Child Safety has embarked on the creation of the Strengthening Families Protecting Children Framework for Practice, a new strengths-based, safety-oriented practice framework to help guide our child protection practice with children and families. In the context of this document and other supporting resources, the term 'child' refers to children and young people with whom the department works.

The framework is designed to help all the key stakeholders involved with a child — the parents, extended family, community, child protection worker, supervisors and managers, non-government organisations (NGOs), partners, lawyers, magistrates, and even the child himself or herself — focus on assessing and enhancing child safety at all points in the child protection process.

It begins with a commitment to always viewing families in context and constantly eliciting families' strengths, knowledge and wisdom. This commitment is organised around a rigorous and balanced assessment and planning process that is developed collaboratively with children and their families and communities. This provides the focus for families, professionals and helping networks to work together to develop and implement detailed plans that describe the day-to-day actions everyone will take to ensure and enhance children's safety, belonging and wellbeing.

This Framework for Practice seeks to name, define and operationalise what the department does, why it is done that way and how it could be improved. It articulates the hopes, values, principles, knowledge and skills child protection workers use every day in doing their complicated and important work. It ensures that families encounter robust casework practices across the state, especially at key decision points, and serves as a reference point for quality and continual improvement.



The framework is designed to provide a template for what child protection work looks like in Queensland – within the context of child protection legislation – when it is most effective, collaborative and successful. This framework will have an impact on how we in the department see our work with children, families and community partners, as well as within the organisation itself.

With regard to children and families, the framework highlights the importance of developing strong working relationships and provides skills and practices for accomplishing this goal in even the most challenging circumstances. It attempts to ensure that workers are always rigorous and balanced in assessment and planning work – searching for individual and family strengths as carefully as we search for concerns. Practices that foster enhanced participation and respect for culture and tradition are major elements of this approach.

Carers, NGOs and the broader community are an integral part of the child protection system. This framework provides a reminder of the critical role we all play in the lives of the families we work with. Lasting change is only possible for families when we all work tenaciously and effectively together.

Within the department itself, the framework provides a roadmap for the organisational structures, policies, procedures and relationships we are seeking to build and enhance. Strengths-based, safety-oriented work requires a commitment from the organisation to support practices of reflection, appreciation and ongoing learning. Everything we do, including how we manage, lead and supervise staff and our continual quality improvement and training processes, must reflect this commitment.

Perhaps most importantly, the framework explicitly provides a vision for child protection work as a change process and child protection workers as skilled facilitators and change agents who create meaningful partnerships with the children, families and communities they serve.

Best hopes

Everyone who works for the safety of children across all work groups and functions has an important role to play in meeting the needs of vulnerable children and families. We choose to work in the child protection field because we share the following best hopes for Queensland's children and families.

Safety

Children and young people are safe, and surrounded by family, networks and community who protect them from harm and danger over time. Communities, carers and NGOs are genuine partners in supporting families and protecting children.

Belonging

Children and young people have strong, meaningful, lifelong connections to their family, extended family, community and culture. Families are connected to their community and culture.

Wellbeing

Children and young people are supported and nurtured to be the best that they can be and to thrive in all areas of their lives. Families and communities are supported and strengthened.

Reflective questions

1. Take a moment to consider the hopes and dreams that you have for the children in your life.
2. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being very skilled and 0 being not at all, how skilled do you feel the department is in general at creating partnerships that foster safety, belonging and wellbeing in the lives of children?
3. How would the lives of the children we work with be different if we achieved our best hopes for them?

Values

Values shape every part of our work — how we respond to the families we work with and one another, structure our activities, set goals, form relationships, gather information, assess, plan and facilitate change. Our core values are:

- family and community connection
- participation
- partnership
- cultural integrity
- strengths and solutions
- fairness
- curiosity and learning.



Family and community connection

We recognise that a child’s safety, belonging and wellbeing are best met within his or her own family, community and culture. We are committed to practice that supports families and communities to strengthen their capacity to safely care for their children. This is always our first and most important goal. When children and young people are unable to be safely cared for within their own family or networks, we will ensure that their connection to family, community and culture is maintained.

Participation

We recognise that child protection interventions are more likely to lead to meaningful and lasting change when children, young people, parents and their networks are active participants in assessment, planning and decision-making processes. The expression ‘Nothing about us, without us’ captures this commitment to ensuring that, to the greatest possible extent, any planning *about* the family is done *with* the family.

Partnership

Protecting children is everyone’s responsibility. To be effective in supporting families, we recognise that everyone who cares about the child — the extended network of family, friends and community, carers, government departments and NGOs — needs to work in partnership to build and maintain open, transparent and collaborative working relationships that lead to best outcomes for children and families. Genuine partnership recognises what each participant brings to the table and respects the expertise of others.

Cultural integrity

We value difference and diversity, and respect people from all cultures as being the experts in their own lives and culture.

We acknowledge the detrimental and lasting effects past government policies have had on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in Queensland. We are committed to working respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and partnering with members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and agencies in making decisions about their children's lives. In particular, we honour the enduring and separate cultures and traditions of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and recognise that connections to family, community, country and culture are central to children's safety, belonging and wellbeing. We will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to maintain and enhance their connections with their family, community, country and culture.

This is a value that invites us to be humble and curious about what we do not understand; to reflect openly on our own potential biases and lenses; to address potential barriers in relationship building, including power imbalances; to understand the impact of history; and to be accountable for more just practices today.

Strengths and solutions

We recognise that everyone we work with — children, young people, families and carers — has a reservoir of strengths, resilience and abilities that can be drawn on to facilitate change. Children and families have the capacity to find their own solutions and, with meaningful support, can create a vision of change and identify the steps necessary to achieve that change. We are committed to working collaboratively with families, their networks and communities and our partner agencies to identify and build on each family's strengths; to elicit a shared vision of future safety, belonging and wellbeing for children; and to support families in creating that future.

Fairness

We are committed to helping to develop a socially just, fair and equitable society. Our practice must match this goal. To accomplish this, we have a responsibility to adhere to the value of social justice, which recognises that many of the children, young people and families we work with enter the child protection system with social and economic disadvantages. This value calls on us to create practices and systems that ensure children, young people and families are treated in fair and just ways and to recognise that our work must include assisting families in accessing resources and supports to which they have a right.

Curiosity and learning

We are committed to maintaining a stance of curiosity, humility and ongoing learning. This will underpin our practice, our decisions and our organisation. We use information, data and learning from our own practice, the families we are privileged to work with, the communities and agencies that we consult with, and the larger child protection field.

We will:

- stay connected to what has been determined as best practice nationally and internationally
- study our own outcomes to seek continuous quality improvement
- seek feedback from families and key stakeholders to better understand the effectiveness and impact of our practice
- gather information using appreciative inquiry processes
- make changes based on what we learn to ensure the best possible outcomes for children, families and communities.

Reflective questions

1. Which of these values are most visible in your practice?
2. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being always and 0 being never, how often do these values inform the way that you treat colleagues and partners? What is one thing you could do to increase this rating?
3. Take a moment to consider what the work would be like if these values influenced all of our interactions with families and children. What would be different? How would you see this difference on a day-to-day basis in your actions and those of families?

Practice principles

Our principles are touchstones on the journey to reach our best hopes. They give us direction as practitioners and help us to apply our values, knowledge and skills so that we can achieve our best hopes for children and families. Our practice principles are:

- We always focus on safety, belonging and wellbeing.
- We recognise that cultural knowledge and understanding is central to children's safety, belonging and wellbeing.
- We build collaborative working relationships and use our authority respectfully and thoughtfully.
- We listen to the views of children, families and communities and involve them in planning and decision making.
- We build and strengthen networks to increase safety and support for children, young people and families.
- We seek to understand the impact of the past, but stay focused on the present and the future.
- We are rigorous and hopeful in our search for strengths and solutions.
- We critically reflect on our work and continue to grow and develop our practice.

We always focus on safety, belonging and wellbeing

The focus of every interaction and intervention within the Framework for Practice is on creating enduring safety, belonging and wellbeing for children and their families. This is achieved through partnering with the families, communities and professionals who know the children best. Through these partnerships we can collaboratively assess what is happening in the family that has an impact on the children and work together to address any concerns through creating and implementing meaningful and sustainable plans.

Wherever possible, we use rigorous and collaborative planning processes to secure children's safety within the care of their family, recognising that children's sense of belonging and wellbeing is least disrupted if they can safely remain with their family.

If children are unable to remain safely in their parents' care, we will work collaboratively with the family, their network, carers and community to develop plans that uphold the children's sense of belonging and wellbeing. Carers play an important role in meeting the needs of children who grow up not in their parents' care, and children themselves often know what they need most.

We work to increase safety and return children home in the shortest possible timeframe. When it is not safe for children to return to their parents' care we will partner with carers to ensure that the children and young people are safe and secure and retain a strong connection to family, community and culture. For those children who grow up in care and transition to independence, we seek their active participation in assessing and planning for their long-term safety, belonging and wellbeing.

We recognise that cultural knowledge and understanding is central to children's safety, belonging and wellbeing

Culture is central to who we are and to how families care for their children. When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, and with families from other cultural groups, we actively listen to, learn from and work collaboratively with Elders, community leaders, families and key community agencies. The cultural knowledge and wisdom they provide helps us to understand culturally specific child-rearing practices and to more effectively partner with families and communities to enhance children's safety, belonging and wellbeing. Elders, community leaders and key community agencies are valued participants and partners across the full spectrum of our work with families and communities.



We build collaborative working relationships and use our authority respectfully and thoughtfully

Child protection agencies have enormous power to intervene in the lives of families. While statutory power needs to be exercised if a parent is unable to protect his or her child from significant harm, we have a responsibility to ensure that this authority is exercised in ways that are respectful and preserve the dignity and wellbeing of family members. The quality of the relationship that child protection workers build with families is one of the most critical factors in determining whether or not our interventions will be effective.

The Framework for Practice is grounded in a spirit of respect, curiosity, empathy and partnership, and we recognise that good outcomes for children are more likely when families feel respected and listened to, and believe that their views are taken seriously. Whatever our view about the behaviour or actions of a person, our framework reminds us of the importance of building collaborative working relationships that preserve people's dignity, respect their views and invite their contributions.

We listen to the views of children, families and communities and involve them in planning and decision making

Child protection interventions are more likely to lead to meaningful and lasting change when the voices of families and their networks are at the heart of our assessment, planning and decision making. We use tools and processes that foster inclusive and collaborative decision making so that the strength, capacity and wellbeing of children, families and communities is enhanced rather than undermined by the involvement of child protection agencies.

Children and young people also need opportunities for meaningful participation in every part of the work that is occurring with their family. While there is a growing awareness within the child protection field about the importance of listening to the voice of the child, meaningful participation for children requires more than just eliciting the child's voice about what is happening in his or her family and world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes children's rights to be heard and to participate in planning and decision making about issues that affect them.

We build and strengthen networks to increase safety and support for children, young people and families

An essential principle underlying the Framework for Practice is the inclusion and strengthening of a network of safety and support for children and their families. To increase children's safety, wellbeing and connection we will deliberately and actively engage and construct networks around children and their families. This network needs to be fully aware of the concerns and able to partner with the family, the support agencies and the department in developing and implementing a rigorous plan to ensure the children's future safety, belonging and wellbeing. The network also supports the family in maintaining the plan and the changes over time.

We seek to understand the impact of the past, but stay focused on the present and the future

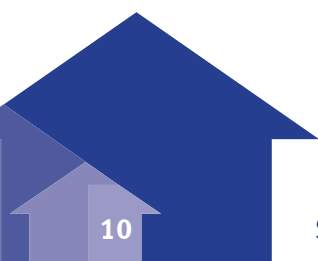
It is very common in child protection work that family members and professionals disagree about whether or not children were harmed and who was responsible for causing the harm. While an understanding of what happened in the past is critical in undertaking a rigorous and balanced assessment, trying to force agreement about what happened can lead to a breakdown in communication and get in the way of building working relationships.

Family members and professionals do not need to agree about the past to be able to work together effectively to build future safety. This is not naïve acceptance of denial or an invitation to be less than rigorous about our assessments. This is an opportunity to listen to one another's views about the past and, rather than getting stuck there, to shift the focus to working collaboratively to vision and build future safety, belonging and wellbeing for the child.

We are rigorous and hopeful in our search for strengths and solutions

Effective interventions with families begin with a balanced, comprehensive and collaborative assessment that incorporates a detailed exploration of past harm and present challenges and danger in the family's life, as well as a rich exploration of actions of protection and strengths within the family. Even when families are facing serious challenges, there will still be resources and strengths that they draw on and times when they have been able to overcome the problems they face in some way. Paying attention to these exceptions and strengths does not minimise harm, but creates a platform for change.

The Framework for Practice also emphasises the importance of a focused and determined search for solutions. Child protection work often focuses on problems, and while the issues we are striving to address are serious, focusing on problems in the absence of a vision for the future can leave families and workers feeling overwhelmed and without hope or energy to make changes in their lives. Our work with families is organised around a vision of future safety, belonging and wellbeing, which is developed collaboratively with the parents, children and other significant people in the children's lives to address the identified concerns.



We critically reflect on our work and continue to grow and develop our practice

We commit to creating an organisational culture grounded in reflection, appreciation and ongoing learning. Reflection invites us to always be examining ourselves, our work and our assumptions. Appreciation speaks to how we want to be with each other, appreciating each other's perspectives and what we each uniquely can bring to the work. We focus on continuous quality improvement and ongoing learning, which is achieved through:

- reflecting on our own work
- listening to feedback from the families, communities and the agencies we partner with
- understanding the best of research in the field
- applying it all within a culture of appreciation for the children, families and communities we work with, as well as with ourselves.

The work that we strive to do with families must be reflected in the way that we work within our organisation and with our partner agencies.

Reflective questions

1. Which of these principles do you feel most inspired by and why?
2. Do any of these principles challenge you? Why these ones and not others?
3. How could you use these questions in supervision to direct and reflect on your practice?

Knowledge

When we draw upon our knowledge, we make a choice about what is relevant to our work and what we see as being of value. In child protection systems, there has traditionally been a reliance on organisational knowledge, often at the expense of the practice wisdom of the worker, the child and family, and others. Organisational knowledge is important, but on its own it is not enough for sound practice. Some bases of knowledge have been underdeveloped or underutilised in child protection, such as the richness of cultural knowledge, the knowledge of the first-hand experience of families and children, and the theoretical and empirical knowledge base. The Framework for Practice recognises all these sources of knowledge as being essential to quality practice.

Individual and family based

Individual and family-based knowledge respects clients and acknowledges family members as having critical knowledge and expertise about themselves, their families, the problems they face and possible solutions to those problems.

Even a very young child has expertise as to what needs to occur for him or her to experience a sense of safety and security. An adolescent is likely to have a great deal of knowledge about both the pros and cons of a challenging situation he or she is facing. Parents will know what kinds of contexts act as ‘triggers’ or make them vulnerable.

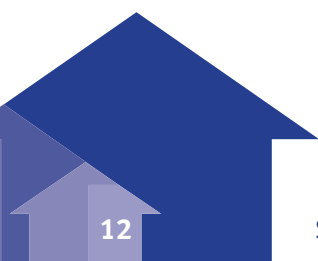
When a child is in need of protection and the department intervenes, it is critical that we continue to see families as holding expertise about their own lives. The Framework for Practice acknowledges that a key component of child protection work is the eliciting and inclusion of family knowledge in assessment and planning processes.

Community and cultural based

Community and cultural-based knowledge respects the wisdom and understandings of communities and cultural groups. In particular, the department respects the separate knowledge, wisdom, practices and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We commit to working with children, families, community and culturally competent agencies to better understand the complexities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture — that is, family, clan and kinship structures — so that we can together make collaborative and informed decisions that are culturally respectful and responsive.

We also need to understand the knowledge and cultural history of the many and varied groups of people living in Queensland, whose heritage derives from all corners of the globe. These diverse elements of culture, race and religion may sometimes challenge our assumptions about the nature of society, childhood and family systems.

Community knowledge can also come from professional sources. Our service and agency partners in the community have critical knowledge about the families and communities they work with, which strengthens our ability to work effectively for positive outcomes.



Research based

Research-based knowledge in our field is often called ‘evidence-based practice’. Evidence-based practices are those that have been found through research to be safe and effective and to produce the intended outcomes. The Framework for Practice draws on the best of current research in working with children, young people, families and communities to enhance the outcomes of safety, belonging and wellbeing.

As practitioners in a helping field, we have an ethical responsibility to understand and make use of the evidence and research about what is most effective in this complex area of work. We must be rigorous in putting into action what we know works and identifying and evaluating what we are still learning about. Research can be and should be a part of everything we do.

One way the department makes use of research-based knowledge is through the Structured Decision Making® (SDM) system. The SDM system is a suite of evidence-based assessment tools designed to help departmental staff make consistent, equitable and research-aided decisions at key junctures in casework practice. SDM tools help us to bring the best of expert and research-based knowledge to the key decisions we make every day and allow these key decisions to become more just and consistent.

Research also helps us understand issues that are often faced by families in the child protection system. These issues are important because they often have an impact on parents’ capacity to care for or keep their children safe and can make working with the family to assess the child protection worries more difficult and complicated. These issues may include domestic and family violence, mental health needs, substance misuse, attachment concerns, and trauma and resilience.

To work effectively and safely within a child protection setting, practitioners must be supported to develop and maintain a comprehensive knowledge of current research in relation to issues that have an impact on children and families. Research continues to grow in these areas and we must be diligent in ensuring that our work reflects the most current evidence-based practice. Specialist agencies often have access to the most contemporary research and understanding of issues, and building networks allows us to take advantage of this.

Practitioner based

Practitioner-based knowledge focuses on what those who work in the area of child protection learn from their work. This knowledge is formed when workers and the families and children they serve act as co-researchers. Through conversation and reflection, they consider what works and what does not, and what could be improved. Practice is enhanced when workers come together with their peers to reflect on the work, understand what is successful and what is not, and begin to circulate that knowledge through story, role modelling, and participatory practices such as group supervision, action research and appreciative inquiry.



Systems based

To be effective as child protection workers we need to understand the systems that influence and affect the children, young people and families with whom we work. These systems are often complicated and can have a significant impact on families' lives and the ability to safely care for their children. Relevant systems that interface with child protection include income support, health, education, the criminal and judicial systems, probation and parole, and the housing and homelessness system. When workers better understand these systems they are more able to advocate and support children, families and carers to access supports that they need when they need them.

Summary

The Framework for Practice includes this articulation and collection of different knowledge bases and what they teach us. The framework is a commitment to become conversant with and use all of these knowledge bases. We will improve our skills in eliciting family wisdom about the impact of problems in their lives. We will more effectively and regularly consult community members and cultural representatives about what helps, what has hurt in the past and what can heal. We will make use of research and specialist knowledge on the kinds of programs and practices that are most helpful, while deepening our own skills in this work.

Reflective questions

1. Which knowledge bases do you regularly draw from to inform your practice and why?
2. Which knowledge base do you draw from least and why?
3. How would your practice be different if you were able to draw from all knowledge bases?

Core skills

The Framework for Practice focuses on the core skills, tools and processes that child protection workers use. These skills will be put into practice through a focus on tools and processes workers can use in their everyday practice. They include:

- **Engagement:** the development of effective working relationships
- **Assessment:** critical reflection and robust decision making at key decision points
- **Planning:** collaborative processes for building rigorous change plans
- **Process:** focus on processes that support and reinforce the practice.



Engagement

Many years of research in the helping fields in general, and child protection in particular, have shown the centrality of relationships. The presence of an effective working relationship between the worker and the child and their family, and between the organisation and the community, has a positive effect on outcomes.

An effective working relationship is one characterised by openness, curiosity, transparency and rigour. Research in the child protection system has consistently shown improved outcomes when workers:

- demonstrate judicious use of power and authority
- display openness and curiosity about children, young people, families and their wisdom
- set clear bottom lines about the problem and what is needed to satisfy statutory requirements for safety
- work collaboratively on developing plans and next steps to facilitate purposeful change.

The framework emphasises engagement by advocating a spirit of curiosity and a commitment to undertaking assessment and planning ‘with’ children and their families, not ‘to’ or ‘on’ children and their families. Using plain language that makes clear what the child protection concerns are and does not marginalise children and families is primary to the framework.

In particular, the skills of engagement are supported by a series of tools and practices such as solution-focused questioning, the Three Houses and the Family Roadmap. These practices allow practitioners to create effective working relationships even in difficult circumstances.

Assessment

Assessment, accompanied by critical reflection, involves rigorous examination of situations, beliefs and actions. It is a practice of examining both what is out in the world and also what takes place in our own thinking, values and beliefs. Critical reflection comes alive in our daily practice when we conduct rigorous and balanced assessments — maintaining both accuracy and consistency on one side, with our commitment to participatory practices on the other.

For our assessments to be balanced they must track not only the history of worries and concerns that families may be experiencing but also the history of strength, resilience and protection that has been shown in the family. Just as the best predictor of future harm is past harm, so it can be said that the best predictor of future protection and safety is past actions of protection and safety. Child protection workers begin to add depth to their assessment skills when they partner with the families they serve. We will search as rigorously for the history of strength and protection, as we do for the history of harm and concerns.

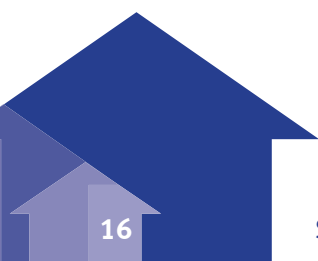
This balanced assessment is supported through the use of a collaborative assessment and planning framework. This framework enables a balanced and comprehensive child protection assessment to be undertaken *with* families and their networks. The process involves organising all the key information known about a child and family at any given time into key domains relevant to the goal of enhancing ongoing safety, belonging and wellbeing for the children. This case ‘mapping’ process can also be used in supervision and case consultations to bring clarity and focus to casework and case planning, and is a critical step in the development of rigorous and long-term, family-centred plans.

For assessments to be rigorous they must be supported by the best of evidence-based practice at key decision points. There are regular, critical decisions that need to be considered in almost every child protection intervention — for example, opening and closing the case, bringing the child into care, what to include on a case plan. Research on child protection decision making indicates that these key decisions frequently are made in an inconsistent fashion, using variable criteria, which often leads to inaccurate and inequitable outcomes. The evidence-based SDM system brings the best of child protection research and aggregate data into assessment tools that are used by caseworkers to ‘check’ their analysis at these key decision points, ensuring that these important decisions are consistent across the state and congruent with both research and organisational policy.

In particular, the SDM model helps to highlight the differences in the key concepts of danger and risk. For many years in child protection practice, these concepts have been confused. Danger speaks to immediate harmful situations that can have a negative impact on children. The SDM risk assessment helps keep the concept of risk clearly focused on the likelihood or probability of the child experiencing future maltreatment, a determination made with an actuarial risk assessment. This allows the department to direct greater resources to families with greater risk and can help family members develop increased motivation for change.

Planning

Having developed effective working relationships and made use of enhanced critical reflection in our assessment processes, practitioners and families are better able to work together to create plans that achieve the best hopes of safety, belonging and wellbeing. Three critical features are important about these plans: they involve a broader group of friends, family and network members; they are collaboratively created; and they are more than just a list of service referrals — they involve detailed action steps to address the concerns and provide a purposeful pathway for change.



Child abuse thrives in a culture of secrecy, and one of our greatest assets is simply the sharing of information and the sharing of the responsibility to promote change. As a result, our plans must involve more than just the biological or immediate family. They need to involve a family network — friends, families and members of the community who care about the child and are willing to take steps to promote change. This network should be consulted from the moment we begin our work with families and, in particular, must be a part of the planning process. Tools such as the Circles of Safety and Support allow practitioners to more easily partner with families to identify, develop and enhance these networks.

All plans, whenever possible, should be jointly developed and created. Parents, their networks, children and young people should see their ideas, words and decisions reflected within the plan. This recognises the need for families to ‘own’ their plan and also the important wisdom and knowledge that families and their helping communities bring to the planning process. Tools such as the Safety House and the Safety Planning Framework help with this collaborative planning.

The Framework for Practice is based on the belief that workers are purposeful change agents and child protection practice must result in more than a simple list of services to which a family has agreed. In this approach, services and safety are not the same thing. Services should be a means to an end, with that end being mutually agreed-upon and implemented action steps and plans that enhance safety, belonging and wellbeing for the children, young people and families we serve.

Process

A focus on process management is required to achieve planned and strategic outcomes at every level of the organisation. Daily processes within organisations, such as supervision, family group meetings, continuous quality improvement, leadership, relationships with support staff, and human resources, need to be aligned with the framework for the meaningful, ongoing uptake of these practices to occur. When organisations implement new practice frameworks, there is always a need to ensure their meaningful use and congruence across the organisation and to avoid the fragmentation that can occur with change efforts. Attention to the complex dynamics of system change is required to implement effective practices. It is often not *what* we do that creates change but *how* we do it, and it is important to ensure that we have the skills to manage process and be planned and purposeful in every interaction.

The Framework for Practice will ultimately touch all of our work and will be embedded within almost all of our daily organisational processes. While many of these shifts will take place over time, some organisational changes will begin almost immediately. These may include enhanced attention to case consultation and group supervision; shifts to our continuous quality improvement processes; and the use of appreciative inquiry to guide our leadership, management and supervision. These shifts in process reflect skills and a commitment to the framework.

Reflective questions

1. When you think about your work with families, when is it easiest to build good working relationships? When is it more difficult?
2. What about your assessment and planning work are you most proud of?
3. What are the things that we need to pay attention to in our processes so that they reflect the values and principles of the framework?

Core practice skills, tools and processes

Engagement: the development of effective working relationships

- Solution-focused inquiry
- The Three Houses
- The Family Roadmap
- The Future House
- The Immediate Story
- Foster carer profile

Assessment: critical reflection and robust decision making at key decision points

- Collaborative Assessment and Planning Framework
- The Structured Decision Making® (SDM) system
- The Safe Contact Tool

Planning: collaborative process for building rigorous change plans

- Circles Of Safety and Support
- The Safety House
- The Safety Planning Framework
- Child- and family-centred safety plans

Process: focus on processes that support and reinforce the practice

- Appreciative inquiry
- Enhanced intake
- Regular group supervision and case consultation
- Facilitated family group meetings with use of the framework
- Enhanced partnerships with NGOs and the courts
- Continuous quality improvement efforts

The future

In late 2014, more than 500 family members, cultural representatives, community agency representatives and department staff were consulted in listening sessions designed to elicit their best hopes and dreams for a new practice framework for Queensland. They described a desire for a safety-oriented, strengths-based collaborative model, one with meaningful, well-integrated tools and processes, shared decision making, a supportive organisation, and a recognition that outcomes of child safety, belonging and wellbeing must be achieved through partnership.

This Framework for Practice is our next step in bringing that vision alive. It describes our organisation and our practice as we hope it can be. It may describe some things we do already but mostly reaches for new ways of being, acting and working together.

It describes a practice that is participatory and interventionist at its heart. It sees children, young people, families and their networks as full partners in this work; communities and cultural groups as having critical knowledge and skills about safety, healing and solutions and who must be consulted and a part of our work; child protection workers as skilled practitioners who can help facilitate a change process; and an organisation that reinforces the need for rigour, makes the best use of data and reflective practice for all involved, and ultimately houses, supports and keeps the practice alive.

The hopes, values, knowledge base, principles and skills described within this framework are not all new. Many families, departmental staff, carers and NGO partners have been working this way or trying to work this way together for some time. What this framework does is to explicitly reinforce this as a vision for child protection in Queensland and begin to provide the organisational backing and infrastructure to support and embed these ways of working moving forward. We are committed to this vision and doing what is needed to make it come alive in our work and across our system.

