

Strengthening families | Protecting children  
**Framework for Practice**

# The Safety House Tool

*A child protection tool for involving children  
and young people in safety planning*

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# Involving Children in Safety Planning

Working with families and their networks to develop comprehensive and rigorous safety plans that lead to ongoing, demonstrated day-to-day safety for children, is one of the most challenging tasks facing child protection workers. Developing a collaborative and detailed plan that will address the child protection concerns requires workers to undertake an extensive planning process, which needs to involve all of the key stakeholders (family members, their safety and support network and professionals) working together to determine the specific day-to-day care arrangements within the family that will satisfy everyone that there is enough safety for the children to return home or remain in the home.

Given the complexity of the collaborative planning process itself, it is not surprising that most child protection systems have not developed ways of meaningfully involving children in the process of defining and creating future safety. Many of the children and young people involved in child protection systems don't understand how decisions about their safety are made and do not feel they are given opportunities to meaningfully participate in these decision-making processes. The Safety House is a practical, visual tool, that has been designed to address this issue. The Safety House creates a context for talking with children and young people about the collaborative planning process and elicits their views on what would need to happen within their family to ensure they are safe, in situations where they may have previously been hurt or were at risk of being hurt.

In using the Safety House, the outline of the house is first drawn by the child and the worker and then the worker uses the structure of the Safety House (described in detail below) to talk with the child about the specific safety arrangements that would need to be in place to make sure that these worries do not happen in the future. The child's views are recorded in the Safety House in both pictures and words. The child is then invited to create a 'safety path' leading to their Safety House and to locate themselves on the safety path as a way of representing their assessment (or scaling) of current safety within their family.

By helping the child to create their personal Safety House, child protection workers are able to:

- Create a context to talk with the child about what the professionals mean by "safety" and "danger" and understand what those concepts mean to the child.
- Gain an understanding of the relationships that are significant to the child and identify who might be important to participate in enhancing safety, belonging and wellbeing for the child.
- Understand the child's views on what needs to happen for them to be safe, well and connected in the care of their family.
- Help the child to understand more about the collaborative planning process.
- Assist children who are feeling particularly anxious about reunification to imagine what they would need to see to feel safe in the future with their family.
- Record the child's 'safety plan' in a form that the worker can bring to the family/their safety and support network to inform the development of the overall detailed plan.

While the Safety House tool is designed to bring the voice of the child into the middle of the collaborative planning process, some professionals may well be concerned that this places too much pressure or undue responsibility on the child. It is vital that the Safety House tool and process is undertaken within a broader collaborative planning process that involves all the key adults and is enacted with a clear understanding that it is always the adults' (not the child's) responsibility to ensure that the child's safety, belonging and wellbeing is secured.

This booklet will cover:

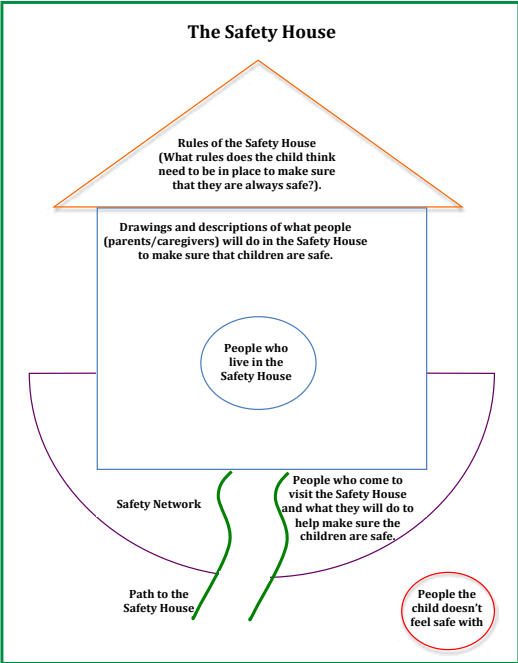
- A description of the Safety House tool
- Two brief practice examples including the child's Safety House drawings
- How the use of the Safety House fits into the collaborative planning process
- The steps in undertaking the Safety House process
- A practitioners' prompt sheet for using the Safety House tool
- A Safety House template

## Elements of the Safety House

The Safety House is designed to capture a visual representation of everything the child thinks needs to be happening for them to be safe in the care of their family. The Safety House contains five key elements:

- Inside the Safety House
- Visiting the Safety House: The outer semi-circle
- The Red Circle: Unsafe people
- The Roof: Rules of the Safety House
- The Safety Path: Scaling the Progress to Safety

Each of the five elements of the Safety House is designed to explore a particular aspect of the child's views about safety, belonging and wellbeing.



## *1. Inside the Safety House: The inner circle and inside the four walls*

The child first draws her or himself within the inner circle of the Safety House. Starting by drawing themselves in the house will help the child to engage with the process, and the act of placing themselves right in the centre of the house has the added benefit of reinforcing that it is the child who is at the heart of this process. The child then adds to this inner circle the other people who will be living with them in their Safety House.

Inside the four walls is also where the child records the things that people would be doing inside his or her Safety House. These might be details of the day-to-day activities that the child enjoys such as “Mummy cooking dinner and reading me a story at bedtime” or may directly relate to safety, belonging and wellbeing such as “Mummy will always stay with me when Grandpa comes to visit”.

## *2. Visiting the Safety House: The outer semi-circle*

This section contains the people whom the child wants to visit their Safety House to help keep them safe (their safety and support network; people who are aware of the concerns and are actively involved in ensuring the children are safe). These people are drawn between the house and the outer semi-circle (the garden fence) and details of what these people would do to help support the child’s safety, belonging and wellbeing can be drawn or described in words next to each person.

## *3. The Red Circle*

The people the child identifies as being people they do not want to have in their Safety House (either living there or visiting) can be placed in the red circle, which is outside and totally separate to the Safety House.

## *4. The Roof*

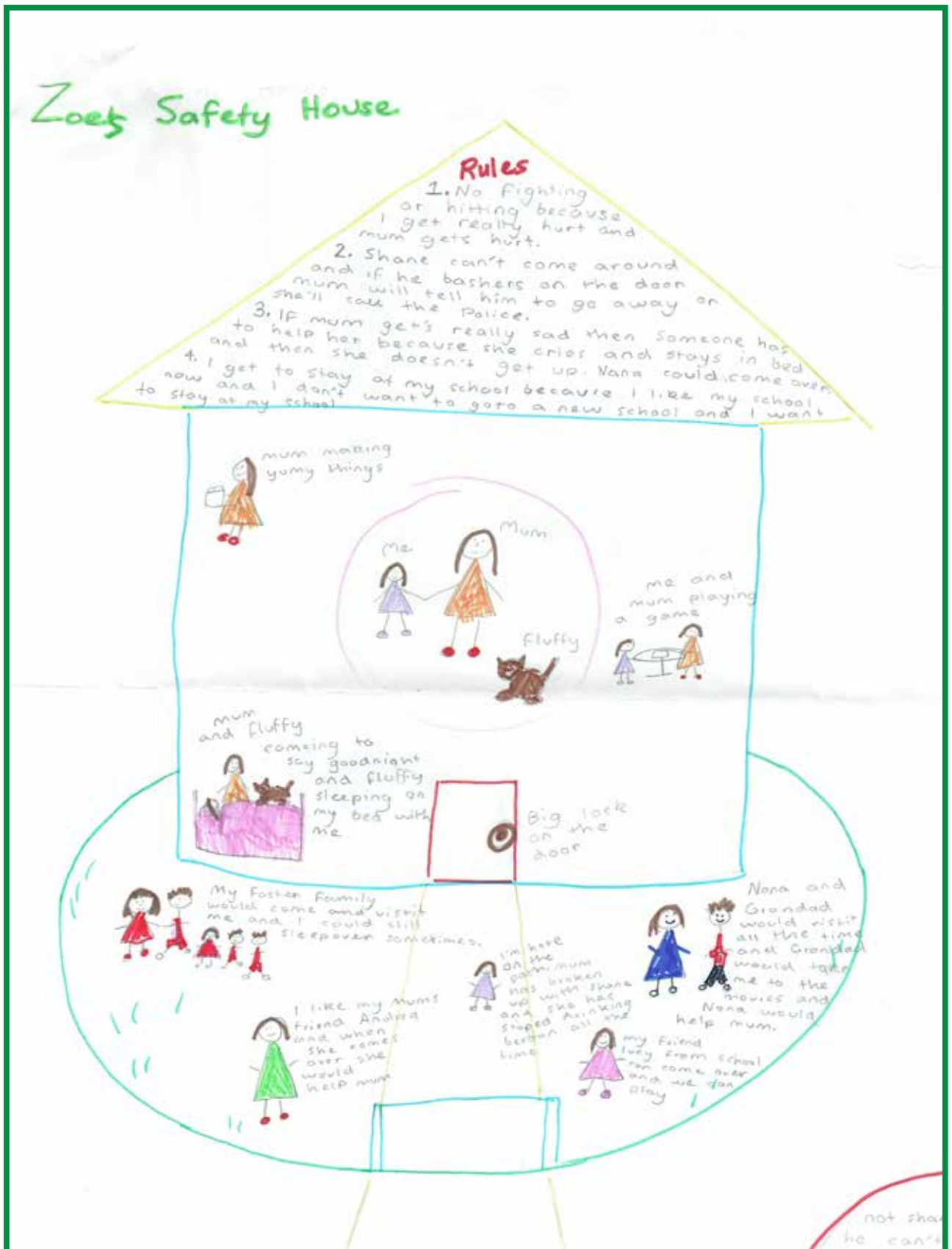
The roof of the Safety House, the top part of the house, is used to record the child’s ‘rules’ for their safety house. These rules describe how the child wants everyone to behave in their “safety house” to ensure that they are always safe and cared for. The emphasis here is on rules that ensure everyone is safe, rather than rules about the children needing to be ‘good’ (which is how some children will interpret the idea of rules).

## *5. The Safety Path*

The path that leads to the Safety House represents the connection from the past and the worries that led to Child Safety being involved with their family, to a future represented by the Safety House, where the child is safe in the care of their family. This safety path enables the child to rate their present safety, belonging and wellbeing from the beginning of the path where they feel very worried about the concerns that led to them being in care/involved with Child Safety (which the child might want to write at the beginning of the path), all the way to the door of the Safety House when the child is able to go inside their Safety House because all the worries have been addressed. Using the path as a scaling device, the child is asked to rate their sense of safety by locating themselves on the safety path, either by drawing themselves on the path, or by colouring the path up to the point where they are, or any other way that makes sense to the child.

# Safety House Case Examples

## Zoe's Safety House



The Safety House example presented opposite was created with a 10 year old girl, who will be called Zoe. Zoe was taken into statutory care following an incident where her mother's boyfriend punched Zoe in the face. Zoe had also frequently witnessed her mother being hit by Shane, over a period of 12 months. The Safety House was created with Zoe about six months after she was taken into care. Tanya had ended her relationship with Shane three months after Zoe was taken into care and for the past four months, Tanya had been meeting regularly with Child Safety to address the child protection concerns.

As part of the initial stages of the reunification process, Sonja used the Safety House with Zoe as a means of explaining the collaborative planning process and to identify Zoe's ideas about what needed to happen for her to feel safe living back home with her mother.

Prior to the Safety House session, Zoe told professionals that she wanted to live back home with her mother but she was reluctant to start overnight stays and wasn't able to explain her worries about overnight stays. In Zoe's Safety House, she identified that she wanted locks on the windows and doors and a process for Tanya to call the police if Shane should try to break in. After Zoe and Sonja presented Zoe's Safety House to her mother, Tanya told Zoe that she thought these ideas were brilliant and that they should start them straight away. Child Safety assisted Tanya to have locks installed on the windows, Zoe and her mum drew up signs to put beside the front and back door that reminded Tanya not to let Shane inside the house and to call the police if he came to the house (in breach of the protection order) and Zoe had her first overnight stay the following week.

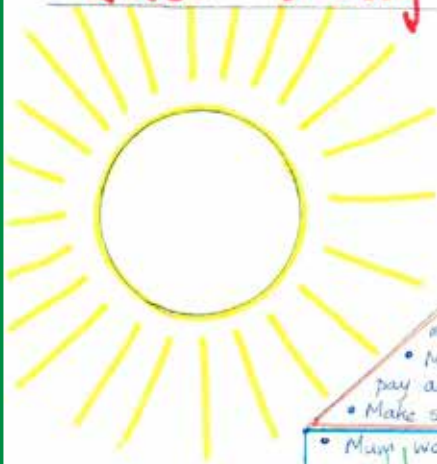
## *Zac's Safety House*

The second example involves using the Safety House with a nine year-old boy, who we will call 'Zac'. Zac and his two younger brothers were taken into care when Zac was four years old, as a result of severe ongoing neglect due to their parents' drug use. At the time that Zac created his safety house, Zac's mother, 'Megan', had shown clean results on urine tests for the previous six months and Megan's new partner, 'Bob', had been assessed by Child Safety as not posing any risks to the children. The family had been referred to a reunification agency to facilitate the return of the children to their mother's care.

The Safety House process was undertaken with Zac about six weeks into the reunification process, when Zac and his brothers had begun having overnight stays with Megan and Bob. The reunification agency had begun working with Megan and Bob to develop a safety and support network and a long term plan that would ensure that the children were safe and well cared for over time. Both Megan and Bob were keen to have the boys' input into this collaborative planning process and were willing for the children to participate in the Safety House process.



# Zacs Safety house



- Z, J + K are not allowed to wander off and stay where Mum can see us & hear us.
- To listen to instructions.
- Mum & Blue have to look after us and teach us stuff that we don't know.
- Mum and Blue have to follow the law and pay attention to the road.
- Make sure there are no arguments and everything is fair.

Mum won't use drugs anymore.

Having fun and doing lots of stuff.

of fun

laughing

telling jokes

going to the football.

Spending time with me.

Blue and me doing spelling words together.

Bridget playing uno

Charlie playing uno

Nana piane and Poppy to take me

to their house

Aunty Janelle Nana Dianne

Poppy

Joe playing uno

To check on us  
 To join in with the fun.  
 To play uno.  
 To talk and ask about how are things going.

Go to the Royal Show with Aunty & Janelle.

Mum's stopped being on drugs

Mum and Blue solving the other problems.

Jayden  
 Zac used to be here about a year or two

Kaelin

# Fitting the Safety House into the overall collaborative planning process

The Safety House tool is designed to be undertaken with a child or young person as part of a collaborative planning process, which involves working with the parents, the children, a network of people supporting the family and all the key professionals to develop a detailed long term plan. The detailed plan created through this process describes the day-to-day arrangements that a family will need to put in place to ensure that everyone, including the child, is confident that the child will be protected over time in situations where they may have previously been hurt or were at risk of being maltreated. As discussed above, the Safety House is a tool that enables children to make sense of and participate in this collaborative planning process.

For long term planning to be effective, it needs to be built on a foundation where the worries (what professionals are worried will happen to the children if nothing changes in the family) have been identified in clear, straightforward language that everyone, including the children, can understand. Only when these worries have been expressed in language that the child can understand, is it possible to then use the Safety House tool with the child to explore their views of what would need to happen within their family to ensure that they are safe in relation to these worries.

If the child does not know what the child protection worries are, this should be addressed prior to undertaking the Safety House process. There are a number of tools that can help professionals and family members talk with children about why they are in care or why Child Safety are involved with their family. Two such tools are the Three Houses (Weld, 2008; Weld and Parker, 2014) and the Words and Pictures process (Turnell and Essex 2006). Both the Three Houses and the Words and Pictures processes are most effective when used with the involvement of parents and other significant family members and professionals.

The Safety House process is designed to bring the voice and opinions of the child into the broader collaborative planning process. Family members and professionals are often very moved when seeing the child's views expressed through the Safety House and this helps motivate and focus both the professionals, the parents and their network to create a more robust and detailed long term plan. Whatever perspectives the child's Safety House generates, these will need to be explored and addressed within the collaborative planning process alongside the views expressed by other family members and professionals. The child's perspectives will almost always deepen the adults' perspectives and deepen the collaborative planning process, but should never override or minimise the identified worries.

# Process of using the Safety House tool

## 1. Preparation

Before meeting with a child or young person to undertake the Safety House process, the practitioner needs to ensure they have the necessary background information about this family and child, which includes:

- A clear straightforward description of the child protection concerns.
- The significant people in this child's life.
- Who the child is living with and what contact arrangements are in place.
- Any changes this family have made since Child Safety have been involved.
- A clear commitment from all key professionals that reunification or family preservation is being genuinely pursued with the parents.
- How the child understands the issues that led to them being in care or to Child Safety being involved with their family, including the language the child uses to explain why they are not living with their parents or why Child Safety is involved with their family.

The other important preparation is working out what materials the practitioner will use in creating the Safety House with the child. Since there is a lot of detail to cover, it is usually best to create the Safety House on a large sheet of blank paper (A3 paper, for example) and it is always good to have some spares. It is also useful to have a good range of coloured pencils and textas (some workers like to use special paper and artists' crayons, pencils or textas so that children feel as if this is something special they are creating). A template for the Safety House is included in the back of this booklet or the practitioner can design their own or draw up the basic outline of the safety house together with the child, which is a good way of both engaging the child over the initial drawing task and to explain the elements of the Safety House to them.

## 2. Informing parents, carers and professionals before working with the child

Before approaching the child to undertake the Safety House process, it is vital to secure the endorsement of all the key stakeholders involved in the case. Collaborative planning is most effective when undertaken with the full support of the professionals and significant others involved in working with a family, so before exploring the Safety House process with the parents and carers, it is important to inform and secure the support of these professionals for the idea of using the Safety House tool with the children.

Helping parents to understand the purpose of the Safety House tool and the process that their child will be engaged with is an important step in using this tool. One of the primary purposes in using the Safety Houses tool is to bring the child's views into the collaborative planning process, so it is vital to explain the process to the parents and wherever possible secure their support for the process. This advance work creates a transparent context for the practitioner to then bring the child's views back to the parents and the family's network.

If the child is in foster care or kinship care, it is important to explain the Safety House process to the carers so that they can support the process. As with the parents, this creates the context for bringing the child's Safety House back to the carers (with the permission of the child and the parents) and will usually significantly help the carers to understand and engage productively in the safety planning process and the anticipated reunification process.

Knowing that their parents' and caregivers understand and support the Safety House process will almost always make the child more comfortable with engaging in the process.

### 3. Introducing the Safety House to the child

When introducing the Safety House to children, Sonja usually says something like:

*“Did you know that your mum and dad and nana and pop and \_\_\_\_\_ (other key stakeholders) are meeting together to work out what needs to happen in your family for it to be safe for you to go back and live with Mum and Dad? We want to make a special plan with your family to make sure that nothing like what happened in the past (use details as appropriate) is going to happen in the future.*

*All of us are talking together and listening to everyone's ideas and because this is about you, we want to make sure that we're listening to your ideas too. I'd like to do something with you called the Safety House, which is something I do with a lot of children and it will help me to understand your ideas about what needs to happen to make sure that you are always going to be safe. I've explained the Safety House to your Mummy and Daddy and to \_\_\_\_ (carers) and they all think this is a good idea. Is it okay if we do a Safety House together?*

*What we're going to do together is create a picture of what you want in your house when you go home to live with Mum and Dad so that you will always be safe and have everything you need to grow up strong and well, and so you know that nothing like what happened before can happen again. We're going to put all of that into your Safety House so we can show Mum and Dad what you want to have included in the plan. Are you ready to make your Safety House with me?*

### 4. Working with the child to create the Safety House

#### Drawing the Safety House outline

In most instances, it is helpful to start with a blank piece of paper and draw the Safety House outline and the elements of the Safety House together with the child, as a way of both actively explaining the process to the child and engaging them with the worker and the idea. Drawing the outline in this way also helps to create a sense of ownership for the child. If you think that this won't work for the child or young person, then you can use a pre-drawn template of the Safety House, with the worker explaining the different elements to the child and perhaps even tracing over the outlines in different colours or adding features to the house (such as a sun) that make it more significant for the child. Using a pre-drawn template can be useful if time is limited. The shape and structure of the Safety House can be varied to fit the cultural context appropriate for that child. For younger children, workers can draw the house on paper or construct a house using felt/blocks etc and then use felt figures to depict significant people and felt images or pictures of various household objects to represent objects/activities within the house.

The worker then asks a range of questions to help the child create a detailed picture, usually using both words and drawings, of what would be happening within the child's Safety House. Suggested questions are provided below. The child can draw their answers to these questions within the Safety House and the worker can write words beside those drawings that need some explanation, or the child and worker can draw and write the child's answers together.

### **Putting themselves in their Safety House**

After they have drawn or created the outside of the Safety House together, the worker then asks the child to draw a picture of her or himself in the inner circle of their Safety House (making sure they leave room for other people). Drawing themselves in the centre of the house also helps the child to feel a sense of ownership of their Safety House.

### **Other people who live in their Safety House**

*"Who else would live in your Safety House with you?"*

The worker asks the child to then draw the other people who would live in their Safety House within the inner circle. In Zoe's case, she said that she wanted to live just with her mother and she then drew herself, her mother and her new kitten (that her mother had just bought for her) in the circle. Zac identified that he would have his mother, his mother's partner and his two brothers living in his Safety House.

If the collaborative planning process is considering the possibility of someone else living with the family for a period, then workers can seek the child's thoughts on this by asking:

*"Has your family ever had anyone else living with them even for a short time? What was it like to have them living with you? What do you think about having someone else living with you and your family, even just for a little while, when you go back home?"*

### **People the child does not want to live in/visit their Safety House**

In the process of identifying the people who they want to live in their Safety House, some children will naturally start to talk about people who they do not feel safe with and who they do not want to have living in or visiting their Safety House. In Zoe's case, she volunteered that she did not want her mother's ex-boyfriend, Shane, to live in the house with them. Any person who the child identifies in this way is placed in the red circle outside the Safety House.

If the child does not volunteer information about who they might not feel completely safe to have living with them or visiting them, workers can ask:

*"When you go home to live with \_\_\_\_\_ (eg. Mum and Dad), is there anyone who you don't want to have living in your safety house or coming to visit you?"*

In Zac's case, he thought carefully about this question and then answered, "No, there isn't anyone that I don't feel safe with". This in itself provided significant information about how Zac was feeling about returning home, and was positive information that Sonja was able to feed back to his mother and mother's partner.

If the child identifies someone in response to this question, this will usually be a person, such as Shane was in Zoe's case, who professionals already have concerns about in relation to the safety and wellbeing of the child. However, it is possible that this question will elicit new information that raises safety concerns for the child. Together with the parents and network, the worker will need to do whatever is required to ensure the ongoing safety of this child in relation to this new information.

Placing a person in the red circle outside the child's Safety House does not automatically mean this person cannot live with or visit the child, but highlights that this is a person who the child may not feel safe with and this will need to be addressed in the collaborative planning process and will certainly need to be discussed by the professionals and the parents. This can be delicate territory to navigate since family members and professionals may be anxious that people placed in the red circle may be excluded from having any contact with the child. The critical point is that the child's opinions are listened to and taken seriously by all the adults and if decisions are made about who will have contact with the child that does not concur with what the child wants, this needs to be reconciled with the child. To further inform the adults about the child's perspective on a person they have placed in the red circle, the worker can ask the child to think about what arrangements would need to be in place for the child to feel safe if/when this person is present. The worker might ask a question such as:

*"If \_\_\_\_\_ (Grandpa) was to visit when you are home living with Mummy, what rules do we need to have to make sure that you are always safe?"*

The behaviours that the child describes (e.g., Mummy will always stay with me and not leave me alone with Grandpa) can be recorded in the Safety House using pictures or words and the rules that the child suggests are then written in the Safety House roof.

### **What do people do in your Safety House?**

*"What are the important things that \_\_\_\_\_ (eg Mummy and Daddy) would do in your Safety House to make sure that you are safe?"*

This question may elicit information from the child about general activities they enjoy doing with their family as well as specific information about what people would be doing to make sure that the child was safe. The child can draw pictures or write words inside their Safety House to show these activities, or the worker can help the child to write words that describe these activities. Hearing specific details of what they do that their child values or that helps their child to feel safe can be very powerful for parents. In the first case example, Zoe drew a picture of her Mum making yummy food for her, after describing how her Mum now makes yummy food for her on contact visits and how she wants this to continue when she goes home to live with Mum. In the second case example, Zac wrote that he and his family would tell jokes and laugh together and that his Mum and Bob would "spend time with me". Zac said that in his Safety House, spending time with him was the most important thing Mum and Bob would be doing with him.

If the child hasn't focused on safety in the question above, then you can help them to record their ideas and then ask the question again with the focus very specifically on safety. In the first case example, Zoe told Sonja that her Mum would always check that all the doors and windows were locked every night so that Shane couldn't get into the house. Zoe also said that Mum would call the police as soon as Shane came around and that there would be a big sign on the wall next to the doors to remind her to do that.

The child may already have described what they want to have happen in relation to the specific concerns (when they were exploring who would or wouldn't be living in their Safety House) but if this was not the case, then workers can now ask for the child's ideas in relation to the specific worries. For example, if the concern has been about the mother hitting the children when she was angry, the worker might ask:

*"In your Safety House, when Mummy gets angry with you, what does she need to do to make sure that you are feeling safe even when she is feeling angry?"*

As discussed earlier in this booklet, talking with the child about specific concerns requires earlier exploration with the child about what they know about the worries, and is best done using the language that the child uses to describe the worries.

It is also important to ask the child if there are any objects need to be put in place. For example:

*“Are there any important objects or things that need to be in your Safety House to make sure that you are always safe?”*

This question can elicit the child’s ideas about what sort of practical things need to be in place to ensure their safety. In the first case example above, Zoe said that she wanted locks on the doors and the windows so that Shane could not get inside and hurt her or her Mum (there had been a history of Shane breaking into the house). Zoe also said that she wanted a big sign on the wall next to the front and back door that said ‘Ring the police if Shane comes’ and with the phone number for the police.

### **People who come to visit their Safety House**

*“Who would/will come to visit your Safety House to help make sure that you are safe?”*

Here the child is identifying who they think are important people for the family’s safety and support network (those people who need to be aware of the concerns and are actively involved in supporting the family to secure the child’s safety, belonging and wellbeing). These people are drawn within the outer circle of the Safety House. As the child draws these people, the worker can ask how often the child thinks the people should visit and what these people would do when they visit, which can be written beside each person.

### **What do people do when they visit your Safety House?**

*“When \_\_\_\_\_ (each of the people identified above) come to visit you in your Safety House, what are the important things they need to do to help you be safe?”*

Again, this question can be asked generally (ie. What would \_\_\_\_\_ do when they come to visit?) or can focus specifically on safety (by adding the additional “what do they do to help keep you safe?”). In the first case example, Zoe told me that she wanted a number of people to visit, with the focus for her Nana and her mother’s friend, Andrea, being on helping her Mum (particularly during the times when she was ‘sad’).

In the second case example, Zac listed a number of people who he wanted to come and visit. Zac described how his Nana and Pop would take him to their house and how all the other people would join in with playing Uno (a card game that Zac regularly played with his family and with his Child Safety caseworker when he came to visit). Asking what each of these people needed to do when they came to visit to ensure that he was safe did not appear to be a meaningful question to Zac, as he answered that he already felt safe. This led me to ask:

*“If things were not going so well when you’re living back home with Mum and some of the problems from the past were starting to happen, who of all these people who are coming to visit would notice?”*

Zac immediately identified that Charlie (his Child Safety caseworker) would be the first person to notice. Sonja was then able to ask:

*“What would Charlie need to do when he comes to visit to make sure that he notices how things are going?”*

Zac said that he wanted Charlie to “Check on us. Join in with the fun. Play ‘Uno’ (a card game). To talk and ask about how are things going”. This provides important information to the collaborative planning process about who Zac would feel most comfortable talking to if things were not going well at home, and also gives a clear message that Zac would like Charlie to ask “How are things going?”

## Rules for the Safety House

The roof of the Safety House is where we record the child’s safety rules, written in the child’s language. These rules describe the child’s thoughts about how everyone must behave, on a day-to-day basis, to ensure that the child is always safe and well cared for. Questions that can be used to elicit the child’s ideas include:

- *“Remember we talked about how all those adults are talking together to make a special plan for when you go home? One of the things they are trying to decide is what the rules of the plan should be. What do you think? What would the rules of the house be so that you and everyone would know that nothing like \_\_\_\_\_ (use specific worries) would ever happen again?”*
- *“What else and what else?”*
- *“If your \_\_\_\_\_ (brother/Nana etc) was here, what would they say needs to be in the rules?”*

In Zoe’s case the rules she wanted to see were:

- No fighting or hitting because I get really scared and get hurt and Mum gets hurt.
- Shane can’t come around and if he bashes on the door Mum will tell him to go away or she’ll call the police.
- If Mum gets really sad then someone has to help her because she cries and stays in bed and then she doesn’t get up. Nana could come over.
- I get to stay at my school because I like my school now and I don’t want to go to a new school and I want to stay at my school.

Zac wanted the following rules written in the roof of his Safety House:

- Z, J & K (his two younger brothers) are not allowed to wander off and stay where Mum can see us and hear us.
- To listen to instructions.
- Mum and Bob have to look after us and teach us stuff that we don’t know.
- Mum and Bob have to follow the law and pay attention to the road.
- Make sure there are no arguments and everything is fair.
- Mum won’t use drugs anymore.

Zac’s first two rules appeared to be about how he thought he and his brothers needed to behave so Sonja asked Zac, *“What do Mum and Bob need to do to make sure that you and your brothers are always safe?”* This triggered Zac to come up with the next three rules. Given that Zac had not mentioned any rules that related to the primary concern about his Mum’s past drug use and the impact of this on himself and his brothers, Sonja asked:

*“What rules do we need to have to make sure that the things that happened in the past that worried everyone don’t happen again?”*

Zac offered the final rule.



In a similar manner to how Sonja worked with Zac, workers can ask specific questions to help children think about the rules that they would like to have in place in relation to specific worries, for example:

*“Something you were worried about was \_\_\_\_\_. What rule do we need to have to make sure that doesn’t happen when you go home to live with Mum and Dad?”*

Some children may not be able to come up with rules or safety guidelines, but even a simple statement from a child such as “No-one is allowed to hit anyone” can lead to a worker asking “What would people be doing instead?” The child’s answer, however simple, can be written down in the roof of the Safety House and can be a powerful message to a parent about how the child would like things to be in the future.

## **Developing a path to the Safety House**

Once the child has described, in as much detail as possible, what would be happening in their Safety House, the worker can then elicit the child’s perspective on how safe they would feel at this point in time if they were living with their family.

The worker and the child first draw a path that leads from outside of the house to the front door. The worker then explains that this is the safety path, with the beginning of the path being where everyone was worried (eg. that Shane might hit Zoe or that Zoe might get hurt when Shane was hitting Mum) and the end of the path (at the front door) is where all the worries have been sorted out and the child is able to go inside their Safety House. Sonja usually explains the safety path by using a question such as:

*“If the beginning of the path is where everyone was very worried and you weren’t able to live with Mum and Dad and you had to go and live with \_\_\_\_\_ and the end of the path at the front door is where all those worries have been sorted out and you are now completely safe living with Mum and Dad, where do you think things are right now?”*

As suggested earlier, the Safety House tool can only effectively be used if and when the child understands what the professionals’ concerns are for his or her safety. This is particularly evident when using the safety path, which is only effective following clear and straightforward discussions about what the child’s specific worries have been and once the child is aware of what professionals are worried about. Once this is done, the questions can be asked in relation to those specific worries, for example:

*“If the beginning of the path is that you feel very worried that if you go home to live with Mum (or have an overnight stay) that Mum will start using drugs again and then not be able to look after you properly and the end of the path at the door is that everything that you have said needs to be in your Safety House is already happening and you’re not worried at all that Mum will use drugs again, where are you right now?”*

The child can identify their safety rating by either colouring the path or drawing themselves on the path or by using a number, counter, etc to place themselves on the safety path.

Workers can then talk to the child about where they have located themselves on their safety path, exploring what has happened that has helped the child get this far along the path and what needs to happen for the child to move a little bit closer to their Safety House. This information can be written beside the safety path.

In Zoe's case, the safety path immediately made sense to her and she drew herself about three quarters of the way along the path. Sonja then asked Zoe what had happened to help her move this far along the path and Zoe replied, "Mum has broken up with Shane and she has stopped drinking berban (bourbon) all the time". Zoe then wrote this next to the drawing of herself on the path.

Sonja then asked Zoe what would need to happen for her to move further along the path and be a little closer to her Safety House and Zoe stated "We need to get those locks on the windows and put those signs next to the doors so that Mum rings the police if Shane bashes on the door".

Zac drew himself almost all of the way along his safety path and when Sonja asked him "So you're all this way along the safety path?" he replied, "Yes I'm almost at the gate and I'm just about where the middle of my head is" and then he drew a dotted line on either side of his head to show his position. Zac explained that he was this far along the path because "Mum's stopped being on drugs" (which Sonja wrote beside the path). Zac then went on to explain that about a year or two ago he wasn't so far along the safety path and then he drew himself about half way along the path and used a different colour to show that this was an earlier time. Sonja wrote "Z was here about a year or two ago" to record this information. Sonja then asked Zac: "What else has happened to help you move from where you were a year or two ago to where you are now?" and Zac said "Seeing Mum more" (which he wrote beside the path). When Sonja asked Zac what needed to happen for him to move all the way to the end of the safety path and for him to feel completely safe living back home with Mum and Bob, and Zac said "Seeing Mum even more".

As was the case with Zac, the Safety House and safety path can be used (either in the first or in subsequent sessions) to identify where the child is now on the safety path and to explore what has happened for them to have moved on the path – either forwards or backwards – so that everyone (professionals and family members) can better understand the child's sense of safety as the collaborative planning or reunification process progresses.

The worker can also use the safety path to help the child understand how other people view the current level of safety, by asking where the child thinks other people might be on the path and why they would be located at that place. In Zac's case, Sonja asked him where he thought his two brothers would be on the safety path and he drew them just over half way along the path. When Sonja asked Zac what he thought needed to happen for his two brothers to move closer to the Safety House, he said, "I don't know". Sonja then asked, "If J and K were here and I asked them what needed to happen for them to move closer to the Safety House, what do you think they would say?" Zac thought about this for a long time and then said "Mum and Bob solving the other problems". Zac then added "But I don't know what those problems are". While this didn't make sense to me at the time, it was later explained to me by the reunification agency that during the past few days, the statutory agency had decided not to proceed with reunification for the two younger children at this stage as they were showing signs of anxiety. This issue was being explored further between the family, the statutory agency and the reunification agency and was obviously something Zac was aware of but did not fully understand.

## *5. Talking with the child about what happens next*

Once the worker and the child have finished the Safety House, it is important to explain what will happen next to the child or young person, and to obtain their permission to show their Safety House to others, such as parents, carers, extended family, or professionals. Some children may want to present their Safety House or to be there while it is presented, whereas others may feel anxious about this and choose not to be present. Whatever the process that is agreed upon with the child, it is important to talk this through carefully so that the child knows what will happen next.

Zoe was happy for everyone to see her Safety House and wanted to be present when we showed this to her Mum and then later, to her Nana and Grandad. Zoe asked if she could have a copy of her Safety House to keep. Zac was also happy for everyone to see his Safety House but said that he didn't mind whether or not he was there when we showed it to his Mum and Bob because "they already know all of this stuff".

The Safety House tool, while primarily a collaborative planning tool, may also elicit new assessment information in working with some children. If this information raises additional safety issues, then it is important to talk to the child or young person about their concerns or your concerns and to develop a plan together about how to ensure they will be safe once this information has been presented to others. Sometimes this will mean bringing the child into care (if they are not already in care), at least while the issues are explored with their parents. Involving the children in this process will sometimes slow down the pace at which professionals act, but whenever possible, it is important to go at a pace that the child is comfortable with. If the worker feels compelled to make decisions that go beyond what the child is comfortable with, these decisions need to be explained to the child before any action is taken.

## *6. Showing the child's Safety House to others*

The final step in the Safety House process involves bringing the child's Safety House, and the child's voice and ideas expressed within their Safety House, to everyone involved in the broader collaborative planning process. As discussed above, workers will need to talk with the child about who will present the Safety House, whether that is the child and the worker or just the worker. It is usually important to bring the child's Safety House to the parents first and explore the Safety House with them fully before taking it to the broader collaborative planning group.

In Zoe's case, Zoe wanted her mother to see her Safety House first and we sat down together with Tanya during Zoe's next contact visit to show her Zoe's Safety House. Zoe explained her Safety House to her mother, describing each of the pictures and then reading the rules aloud to her mother. Tanya was very moved by Zoe's thoughts and after hearing the second rule about calling the police and Zoe's idea about the signs next to the door, said "That's brilliant. Let's do that". Tanya started to cry when Zoe read her third rule about someone having to help Tanya when she gets really sad and told Zoe that that was an important rule. And after Zoe read her fourth rule about wanting to stay at her school, Tanya acknowledged that Zoe had had to move schools too many times and that she would try to make sure that Zoe could stay at her school.

Sonja then talked to Zoe and Tanya about showing Zoe's Safety House to the family network and professionals who were involved in the collaborative planning process and Zoe and Tanya decided that Tanya would show Zoe's Safety House to everyone at the next meeting. At this meeting, Child Safety agreed to pay for locks for the windows of Tanya's house. In discussing Zoe's third rule, Sonja asked Tanya for her ideas about what would help her when she was feeling really sad. Tanya said that it would help her to talk with her mum (Nana) and close friend, Andrea, and both of them

agreed that they would be part of a plan to help Tanya and Zoe when Tanya was feeling really sad. The group agreed that this needed to be worked out in a lot more detail. Tanya also said that she wanted to have someone she could talk to, like a counsellor, to help her to not feel so sad about things that had happened in the past.

In Zac's case, the reunification agency worker, Jo, was present when Zac and Sonja worked on his Safety House and Jo said that Zac talked more during this one session than in all the weeks she had been working with him. Jo said that the Safety House process helped to confirm that Zac was feeling very positive about returning to live with his mother and Bob and helped to identify the other family members who were important to Zac. Jo also said that the information about Charlie's role was important and that she would be highlighting this information with Child Safety.

Jo and myself met with Zac's mum, Megan, a few days later to present Zac's Safety House. Bob was not able to be at the meeting as he was working and Zac said that he and his Mum would show his Safety House to Bob later in the day when Zac came for his contact visit. In presenting Zac's Safety House to Megan, Sonja briefly explained the purpose of the Safety House and then gave Megan a copy of Zac's Safety House and talked through each part. Megan said that she was not surprised by anything that Zac had written/drawn in his Safety House and that seeing his Safety House helped her to know that she was on the right track.

## *7. Involving the child in the ongoing collaborative planning*

As the collaborative planning process with the family and network continues, make sure you regularly come back to the child (with the parents' consent) to help the child understand what is happening and to find out their views on how things are progressing. The child's Safety House can be added to or updated over time, or they can do a new Safety House if things have significantly changed. It can be very powerful for the parents/caregivers and for others involved in working with the family to see the child moving further along the pathway toward their 'Safety House'.

And working with the child over time will also make it more possible to develop a relationship of trust with the child, which may mean that over time they feel more confident in sharing information that they may not have been ready to talk about in earlier conversations.

## **Safety House Template and Prompt Sheet**

A template for the Safety House is provided at the end of this booklet for photocopying purposes. The template can also be downloaded from [www.spconsultancy.com.au](http://www.spconsultancy.com.au)

A summary of each of the Safety House elements and suggested questions are provided on a prompt sheet, provided at the end of this booklet, which workers may find useful to photocopy and have alongside them as they begin to use the Safety House tool.

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# Prompt sheet for using the Safety House

## 1. Inside the Safety House: The inner circle and inside the four walls

Inner circle:

- Child draws her or himself in the inner circle (leaving space to draw others).
- Who else would live in your Safety House with you?

Inside the house:

- What are the important things that \_\_\_\_\_ (eg Mummy and Daddy) would do in your Safety House to make sure that you are safe?
- Are there any important objects or things that need to be in your Safety House to make sure that you are always safe?

## 2. Visiting the Safety House: The outer circle

- Who would/will come to visit you in your Safety House to help make sure that you are safe?
- When \_\_\_\_\_ (each of the safety people identified above) come to visit you in your Safety House, what are the important things that they need to do to help you be safe?

## 3. The red circle: Unsafe people

- When you go home to live with \_\_\_\_\_ (eg. Mum and Dad), is there anyone who you don't want to have living in your safety house or coming to visit you?

## 4. The roof

- Remember we talked about how all those adults are talking together to make a special plan for when you go home? One of the things they are trying to decide is what the rules of the plan should be. What do you think? What would the rules of the house be so that you and everyone one would know that nothing like \_\_\_\_\_ (use specific worries) would ever happen again?
- Something you were worried about was \_\_\_\_\_. What rule do we need to have to make sure that doesn't happen when you go home to live with Mum and Dad?
- If your \_\_\_\_\_ (sister/Nana etc) was here, what would they say needs to be in the rules?

## 5. The Safety Path

- If the beginning of the path is where everyone was very worried and you weren't able to live with Mum and Dad and you had to go and live with \_\_\_\_\_ and the end of the path at the front door is where all of those worries have been sorted out and you will be completely safe living with Mum and Dad, where do you think things are right now?
- If the beginning of the path is that you feel very worried that if you go home to live with Mum (or have an overnight stay) that Mum will start using drugs again and then not be able to look after you properly and the end of the path at the door is that everything in your Safety House is happening and you're not worried at all that Mum will use drugs again, where are you right now?

# My Safety House

