



## Working with the Middle Column

A practice note from  
**Pene Turnell**

## ***'If you're not using the middle column (to inform assessment and decision making and as the foundation of safety planning), you're not 'doing' Signs of Safety.'* — Pene Turnell**

In a recent case consult, I was struck by a situation where I felt the workers were not drawing on the positive things that they actually knew were happening. I wanted them to refocus on what the family was doing, and I found myself saying: *If you're not using the middle column, you're not 'doing' Signs of Safety.*

In this work, I was using the group supervision process to lead into a short content mapping to help the group think through what they knew, and where the case should go. The worker and team leader wanted to make a pathway or threshold decision about the case. We mapped harm, focused on what the danger was, explored the complicating factors, then we moved to the middle column.

I was impressed by how much rich knowledge the worker held about both the strengths and safety in the family. She responded to my questions with little hesitation, giving me numerous examples, with behaviourally-specific detail about the people, plans, and actions that helped make this child's life better and kept him safe when the danger was looming. The worker had clearly engaged with the family on a human level. She had connected and got them to talk to all the things they do as a family to raise this little boy so he knows he is loved and he can trust the adults around him to keep him safe, even amongst the less shiny parts of their lives.

I asked the group to make a pathway decision for the child and specifically whether this was to continue to be a statutory matter. I asked that, for the purpose of this exercise, the decision for level of intervention (or not) was not the important piece. Whatever the decision they considered the agency should take, what I wanted was to hear a clearly articulated rationale for their decision.

What happened next left me frustrated and despairing. Every professional who gave feedback formulated their intervention decision solely based what was in the left-hand column — the worries. Not one person balanced their pathway or threshold decision taking into account the good, strong, or the positive which we had documented extensively on the whiteboard.

In the instant of decision-making, the rich knowledge gained from human connection and engagement with the grandma, mother, aunty and child was erased. It was essentially deemed insignificant in this clearly problem-saturated space. It was clear that the decision making came from a place of worst fears and from a sense that it is 'our' responsibility to ensure this child is cared for properly. The professionals used both the history and current information only in the negative for reasons to justify why they *must* intervene in this family.

I worked to soften my frustration and despair which I was able to achieve as I realised that when we 'step into the middle column' in the way Signs of Safety intends we should, we are asking people to connect as a whole person to whole people — to think and feel simultaneously. That is vulnerability at its core. That is hard work. You can't truly work the middle column and not connect with the real human beings in front of you, without feeling their pain, without having a sense of walking alongside. This asks so much more of workers than focussing only on the bad, difficult, dangerous.

If you know Signs of Safety even a little bit, you will know we spend a lot of time talking about 'the middle column', and 'existing strengths and existing safety'. We know this is what makes

our approach so different from other approaches, models and frameworks. For practitioners who really understand it, this is the part of Signs of Safety that lets us feel good about the work we do. We get in touch with ourselves and others as real human beings and bring kindness and empathy to work that can seem, at times, filled with darkness. It has been described as what sustains people in the most difficult times of the work — family and professionals alike. It is an integral part of work that is done within relationship, the heart of good child protection practice.

It is one of the most complex parts of the approach to get true understanding of and engagement with.

### What is it about this column that makes it so critical?

Child protection is a messy business — an inexact science at best — where we most often cobble together the least dirty solution.

We hear Andrew Turnell often say, that the 'biggest predictor of the future is the past'. In the world of child protection and child welfare, this is almost exclusively applied to the harm and danger.

Professionals look to what parents (or young people) 'have done wrong/or badly' in the past and use this to make judgements about potential harm/danger to the child in the future. This is the most usual way that the profession uses the history of the family. Practitioners, other professionals, police, judges, lawyers, and external auditing bodies pay careful attention to all the ways a child has been hurt or scared: physically, sexually and or emotionally 'harmed' by the adult caregivers. More than this, predictions of harm to a child are made — accurately or not — with no history of actual harm. They are based only on what professionals *think* parents' behaviours are and how they *think* they might impact a child ('Mum and Dad use drugs and therefore could not possibly care for an infant').

Ask any person, professional or not, what are all the things going on in the child's life that we need to think about in terms of making things safer for them and they can talk at length about all the bad stuff.

In child protection, people will fundamentally not think to balance that with the good, the strong, or the positive.

Signs of Safety asks us to seek information from many perspectives, to consider multiple possibilities and make judgements whilst holding them lightly. We use that to work alongside the people the child belongs to, to assess, make decisions about and plan around increasing the safety and wellbeing of the child within their family.

Sometimes this needs to happen with the child living outside of the family home for short or long periods of time.

Critically, Signs of Safety expects we will do this in a balanced way, paying careful attention to the actual harm we know has been caused to the child by the behaviours of the parents. We then use this to make predictions about the danger to child in the future, if nothing changes in the everyday living arrangements of the family. We cannot afford to ignore, minimise or lose sight of this piece. If we do so, we risk increasing the potential for harm to the child. At worst, this equates to dangerous practice.

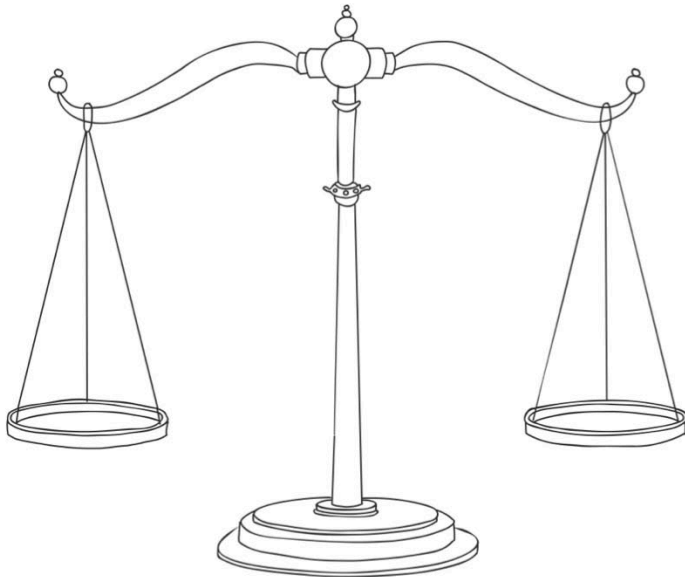
This focus on harm and danger must be balanced by careful gathering and analysis of the things around the child that are good, positive and strong and all the ways the parents, the

people around the child and the child themselves already keep them safe whenever the danger is present.

We must be as forensically focused on the strengths and safety as we are on the harm and danger. However, having our focus here is not the end of the middle column story. We use this information when we make judgements and hence intervention decisions.

### What is a balanced assessment?

Imagine an old-fashioned weighing machine:



The scales measure the weight of something by how the scale tips to one side or another. We can use this analogy to consider a balanced approach to assessment of safety. The left-hand side of the scales is where we put all the harm and danger elements (left hand column). The right-hand side of the scales is where we put all the strengths and safety elements (middle column).

When we are done, that how does it look? Is it even, tipped toward danger, or toward safety?

How does this help us with the judgement of safety for the child? What do we need to do to tip the balance to the right side (right-hand column)?

The problem here is that if you put stones on the left side and only feathers on the right then the left will outweigh the right every time and you will only ever feel the weight of the stones.



If there is weighted information in the left column and meaningless information in the middle column, the assessment will not be balanced. It only takes into consideration harm and danger. Both sides need to carry weight to make the assessment is balanced. We need to work hard at exploring stones for our middle column. If there is nothing to add to the middle column, what does this tell us about how safe the child is and hence what needs to happen?

### How do we explore weights on either side in equal measure?

The first step is to ask questions. It sounds simple, but it is difficult to action (refer to opening statement about the most complex part of Signs of Safety).

In the face of often awful, sad and shaming events, it's difficult to focus on strengths and safety without it seeming twee or naïve.

Let's face it, it's a vulnerable space.

It can transpire in different ways. Such as:

- Questions are asked and surface-level, shallow information is provided, and added to the column. It looks complete and people claim 'I did Signs of Safety' but what they actually do, as Kevin Campbell so powerfully states, is 'case practice as usual' and make a professional assessment based on the problems. (Statements such as 'parents are engaging with us', 'parents are attending counselling', 'Mum did a parenting course' or 'Dad wants to go to rehab'.)
- Surface-level information is gathered without any real exploration or evidence of safety has increased for the child. This results in assessment and planning decisions which are overly optimistic and increase the danger for the child, leading people to mistrust the Signs of Safety.
- Or as per the example I shared above: meaningful information is gathered. The professional and family have worked hard to genuinely explore all the positive things in the family and all the ways the naturally-connected networks are working together to increase the safety and wellbeing of the child, especially when the danger is present.

Sadly, it is all dismissed whilst the judgement of required CPS intervention is based solely on harm and danger.

The skill in using the middle column may initially sound simple, but it is in no way simplistic. We need to:

- create sharp questions to explore meaningful ideas, plans, actions;
- ask them with a strong focus on amplification of detail;
- apply the responses when making a judgement;
- bring the family and their network along on the journey.

### Next steps

The three columns sit alongside each other so they can interact. The middle column is in the middle on purpose! It is the critical go between for both the assessment (balanced with the left column) and the ongoing planning for safety (informing the right-hand column).

Hanging out in the middle column helps you with both sides. It's totally the happening place to be! It is where energy is accrued. It's where we can work with people in a way that means their shame does not define them and get them focused on what they do well.

As we said previously, the biggest predictor of the future is the past. Surely then if we are planning for future safety, we need to capitalise on all the ways the child has been kept safe in the past and get everyone connected to the child, naturally and professionally, thinking about this.

When did anyone do anything to increase the safety and wellbeing of the child when they noticed things were not going well in the family? Who did what? When? How? Who helped? How did they help? And what else? And when else? And who else? How can we get more of that? How can we strengthen that? How else? If no-one has, but they talk about plans for how they can, how do we help them action that? Who could help? And who else?

Test it out. Signs of Safety is a 'show me state'. Get the family and network 'doing' and reflecting on the doing. Use whatever means works for them (family safety journals, photos, private Facebook pages, WhatsApp messaging groups, simple spreadsheets... how do the family want to show us this?).

This is the action learning cycle for the family. Build on what they can do, no matter how small, to start. Be risk-savvy with this. Give them small opportunities to fail so we and they can see the successes. Explore the success in detail. Celebrate the successes. Utilise the slip-ups as opportunities for strengthening the plan. Help the family be energised by honouring every little thing they do. Carefully hold the balance of harm and danger all the while constantly filling that weights scale with stones on both sides.

If the left side of the scale is filled with more and more stones, and feathers is truly the best anyone can do on the right side, then we have very clear rationale for why a different approach needs to be taken to increase safety. This is not just 'because we as the professionals know best'.

If you can honestly say that this is the approach you, as a practitioner, bring to all assessment, decision-making and planning, in every case you have a footprint in, then yes, you are doing Signs of Safety.

If not, go away, refocus and come back to us later.

**'Hanging out in the middle column helps you with both sides. It's totally the happening place to be!' — Pene Turnell**