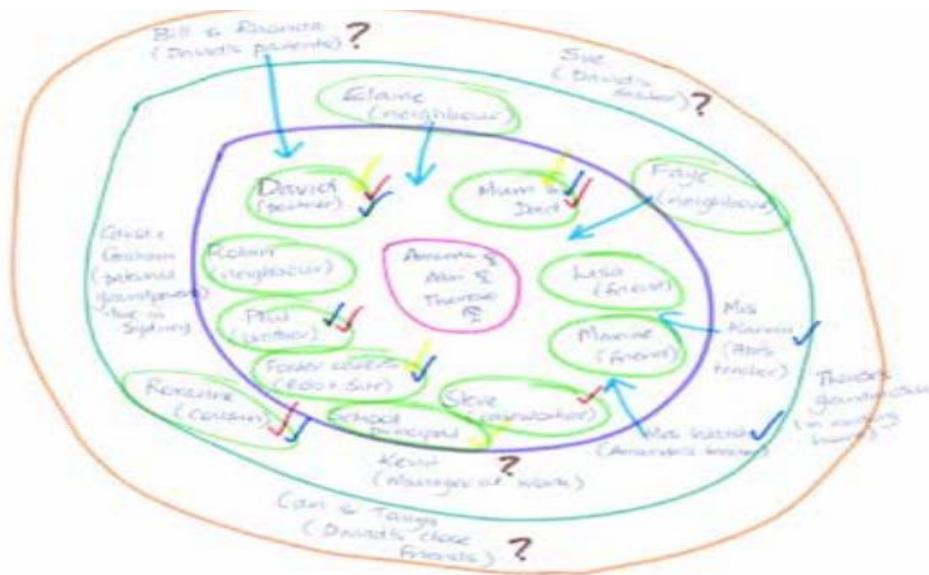


# Every conversation starts with the child”

## Circles of Safety



As many of you will know I am currently enjoying the systemic practice training with a number of colleagues, both SW's and managers. I know that we are all learning some new ways of looking at social work and perhaps some new strategies for working with families. Systemic practice focusses on relationships and locates the difficulties families experience within relationships as opposed to the individuals. How does one part of the system impact on another? Whilst I was reflecting on my own situation during lockdown and missing my family I realised that if they didn't know me so well they would not know how to support me. Last week I received a surprise bunch of flowers from my children, they knew that I was feeling down and know that this acknowledgment from them that they are 'out there' would be massive for me, and they were right.

But what if there were issue for me which were impacting on my life which they didn't know about. What if I were struggling to deal with difficulties about which they were not aware, perhaps a substance difficulty that I was ashamed to share

with them or involvement with children's social care for which I thought they might judge me?

We all work with families who appear to lack support. Those who refuse to allow us to make contact with wider family or friends regarding their difficulties. Perhaps because they feel they might be judged. Perhaps they are ashamed or embarrassed, perhaps there is a history of CSC involvement and they don't think their family or friends would understand or want to help? How can we be more curious in situations like this and how can we support families to introduce change within their relationships and to identify more support.

The Circles of Safety and Support tool was developed early in 2010 by Sonja Parker as part of her safety planning work with families in Western Australia and is based on ideas drawn from the Resolutions Approach for working with 'denied' child abuse (Turnell and Essex, 2006) and the relationship circles concept from the Protective Behaviours program. Sonja says;

*"I usually use the Circles of Safety and Support tool on the very first visit with a family, when I am talking about the need for us to work together to build a safety plan to address the concerns and the importance of having a safety and support network, of family and friends and involved professionals, who will work with us to develop the safety plan to ensure that the children will always be safe in the family's care in the future. At this point, parents/caregivers very frequently say that they do not have people in their lives who can be part of a safety and support network, either because they have ended their friendships with their old drug-using buddies or they have moved to a new area to get away from their old drug friends, or because their family relationships have broken down over the years and they no longer have contact with any of their extended family. This is the point that I introduce the Circles of Safety and Support tool".*

The following comes from her work.

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



In a lot of ways the Circles of Safety are similar to building a genogram with the family. However its focus is often on the people within the support network who might not be family and importantly on those who *could* be in the 'circle' but are not.

Another way of using Circles of Safety is to work with a family to enlarge the circle to include friends perhaps who don't know about the domestic abuse a person is suffering or the fact that they have lost the care of previous children or have a long standing substance misuse difficulty which is impacting on their parenting. The more 'safe' individuals that know the difficulties the family are facing the, the more people there are to support them and those they can speak with without having to 're-tell' the story.

The development of this work with the family can be enhanced by using systemic questions related to the people within/or not the circle.

"What might X say if you were to discuss your current situation with him?"

"If I asked Y who would she say could be included in your circle?"

Like most of the tools we use in SW, there is nothing which is 'brand new' but I hope that bringing these ideas to you will enable you to identify which tools work best for you and for the families you are working with. Sonja Parkers ideas and case studies of work she has done with families is included in the publication 'Circles of Safety & Support. A tool to help parents identify people for their family's safety & support network' (<http://www.spconsultancy.com.au>).

The 'Circle of Safety' is also a tool which can be usefully used with children when developing safety plans. Susie Essex used variations of this safety circle to help parents identify safety network members (Working with Denied Child Abuse. Turnell & Esse3x 3006 P:92).

## Family Safety/Support Circle



Research on resilience in children suggest that that children do better when they have a sense of control. Often children struggle to articulate when they don't feel safe or to explain why or what needs to happen to feel safe. Using the 'Circles of Safety' picture might help you to start these conversations and also help children to understand who is in their network who makes them feel safe.

The safety object (used in signs of safety) is another way of working with children to support them to say what is important to them. There might be a particular object which they can bring to the meeting which starts a conversation about where it came from and who the person is who bought it/gave it to them and other people who are important of who they might be able to tell if they feel unsafe [Signs of Safety® Tools \(safetyplanning.org\)](#).

The most important element of safety planning is that whatever tools you work with, the plan is **co-created** with the child/family. A safety plan developed by professionals is unlikely to be understood by the family and for children in particular, will not be something they will understand or 'own'. Most importantly a meaningful plans is developed within a relationship with the child/family developed over a number of visits.

Sonja Parker has also developed a tool for safety planning with children (Parker, 2009). The tool expands on the Three Houses tool which visually engages children in the safety planning process and engages the child in talking about 'who might 'live' in their 'safe house', who will they speak to if they feel unsafe?' details included at the end of the blog.



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As ever I am really interested in your views on the blog and more importantly if you have used any of the techniques/tools please let me know. Donna Davies

(advanced practitioner) is undertaking some work to bring to the improvement board regarding how we have used systemic practice in our work with children and families so if you have any work which you feel able to share please send it to Donna.

I have also been working this week on a report about complaints and compliments and I was surprised by the low number of compliments we had received. I have done some 'digging' and apparently this is because we are not very good (and I include myself) in accepting compliments and in sending these on to [haveyoursay@york.gov.uk](mailto:haveyoursay@york.gov.uk). I would like all of the compliments and commendations you receive to be logged and reported on so **PLEASE** remember to send them on. Managers if you get anything or hear anything in your supervisions with SW's please pass these on.

The Government is currently undertaking a Care Review and there is an opportunity for you to get involved. The invitation is for people with experience of children's social care to join the ' Experts by Experience Group' and I have added the details to the email accompanying this blog. I have also added information about the 'coaching' opportunities available for us all to access. The review is being led by Josh MacAlister who was until recently the CEO and founder of 'frontline' so we are expecting great things.

Finally once again, don't forget to let me know your feelings about social work in general and social work in York. I have sent out diary invitations to a monthly PSW challenge session. There is no agenda so it's an open session for us to chat about practice and all things social work.

What is going well	What is not going well	What would you like to change
Comments		

## *Dallas*

Principal Social Worker  
Head of Quality Assurance and Safeguarding

### References:

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