

Child Welfare News

Fall 2007

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IMPLEMENTING SIGNS OF SAFETY IN CARVER COUNTY DAN KOZIOLEK, CHILD AND FAMILY MANAGER CARVER COUNTY

Almost three years ago Olmsted County offered Carver County Community Social Services the opportunity to follow their lead by consulting with Andrew Turnell to implement an approach to child welfare services that Andrew now prefers to call “relationship-grounded, safety-organized social work practice.” As we have progressed in our ability to understand Andrew’s ideas and test them in our work we found that we first started thinking differently about services and then started thinking differently about safety. Our greatest remaining challenge is in figuring out how to move away from an approach that has long been driven by expert solutions toward an approach where we clearly define safety concerns with the family while firmly but respectfully teaching them to think through and find their own safety solutions.

Andrew frequently reminds us that services don’t equal safety. Deep down I suspect we always knew this. We substituted services for safety because we didn’t know any effective ways to get at safety. Think about a sex abuse case, for example, where the perpetrator fully admits to the accusations and is fully compliant with all expectations in treatment. Andrew tells us this happens in only 9% of such cases.

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A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR...

Greetings! It is with the greatest pleasure that I introduce myself to you in my new role as Director of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW). I’ve worked in the field of Child Welfare for nearly twenty years; thirteen of which was direct practice in the state of Connecticut. I obtained both my Master of Social Work (1997) and PhD (2005) as a **(Continued on Page 5)**

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But think about this person graduating from treatment and coming into court asking to return to the home. On a scale of 0-10 where 10 is you would have no problem with the idea of this person sharing a house with your own child and 0 is, completed treatment or not, you would just as soon this person stay at least 5 blocks away from your own child at all times, where are you?

As we began to practice some of Andrew's ideas for getting at safety, we started to realize that our ideas about safety planning had often been confined to either removing children for their safety, or leaving them in the home with services. Parents who admitted they were having problems and who agreed to accept services were often less likely to have their children removed. Yet, if a parent agrees to start services tomorrow, are their children safer tonight? How exactly did we come to believe that an admission reduces danger? Sometimes it is hard to believe we used to think as we did. Slowly our social workers have come to understand that their task is to clearly define our agency's safety concerns with the family and to insist on an immediate safety plan instead of relying on a service plan we hope will get us to safety several months into the future. Promises don't equal safety either.

One of the more powerful lessons we learned from Andrew came from a case situation where we were telling Andrew we were really concerned for the safety of the children even though we couldn't prove in court that they had been sexually abused. Andrew told us that given what we know about how many offenses most sex offenders commit before they are caught, we need to learn to suspect we are only

uncovering the tip of the iceberg every time such information comes to light. Andrew went on to tell us that we are child protection, people all over the world tremble at the mention of our name, and we need to learn to use this power effectively. In this case he told us we needed to go back to the family to engage them in a process that seeks to make sure that the allegations that came to our attention will never be made again. Andrew correctly predicted that the mother and children would welcome such intervention while the alleged perpetrator would be significantly harder to engage.

This process, which Andrew learned from Suzie Essex in Bristol, UK, is in her words like wrapping the perpetrator up with razor wire and handing one end to the mother and the other end to the child. It involves putting our concerns squarely, directly, and honestly on the table with the family and telling them we aren't going away until the family has built safety to our concerns. When we are able to do this adequately, the family secret is exposed and the power of the secret is diminished. In cases like this, the mother and children are empowered. It is a process that takes considerable skill and courage on the part of our caseworkers and a great deal of courage on the part of the families as well. Yet in some ways these cases are often managed better, and may even seem easier now, than our neglect, child welfare, and children's mental health cases where we aren't yet as good at clearly articulating our concerns and our bottom lines for the children's safety, support, and well-being.

We have been fortunate to have an intake social worker who has eagerly tested some of Andrew's ideas on "starting out right" from Chapter 4 of the Signs of Safety book. Primarily this involves asking a different sort of question than

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the ones we had been asking child protection reporters. Can you tell me about times when things are going well? What can you tell me that is good about these parents? What do you like about them? Who do you see them turning to for assistance? What is your best hope about what will come from your calling us? What are you able to do to help keep these children safer? Not only do these questions invite information about possible safety that we previously didn't get, they begin to define a sense of partnership between our agency and our community.

Besides taking the strengths and signs of safety identified by the intake worker out to start their assessment, our assessment workers have also been learning to slow down their process and to collect additional strengths from other professionals such as staff at school and from the children in those situations where they interview them first. By starting their interviews looking for strengths, the assessment workers create energy for the really difficult work and begin building a partnership with the family and involved professionals. Our social workers continue to get better at asking parents questions to help them think through their concerns for their children's safety and to uncover their ideas for immediate safety. Even when protective services are not needed our assessment workers will still summarize the family's ideas for safety planning in their determination letter to encourage the family to follow through with appropriate steps to improve their children's safety and make it less likely that they will be the subject of a future report.

Andrew has simplified the Signs of Safety framework to what are we concerned about,

what do we have going for us, and what do we need to do? We have come to describe using his Signs of Safety form as mapping the case. It seems dazzling simple, yet using it well is an art that will easily take us many more years to master. It isn't just about organizing the information we already have on the form as we did in the beginning, but actively seeking detail about strengths and safety and worries and sorting the harm and danger from complicating factors and then identifying the best next steps we can to help the family achieve our mutual best hopes. If the next steps aren't clear we go back to get more detail about the worries and strengths. Learning to truly use the family's strengths to build safety around the worries is also a continuing challenge. Andrew continues to encourage us to study Milton Erickson's work for more ideas about how to do this better.

In the beginning our social workers would often come to their supervisor for help mapping the case. A year ago we started mapping each new ongoing case with the assessment worker and supervisor together with the new caseworker and supervisor to improve safety during case transfer and better move the case critical detail with the case. Now our social workers are more frequently mapping the case with the family as a part of their assessment or case planning process and in doing so are collecting rich information, getting the family member's perspectives, and building an effective partnership around the children's safety and well-being.

Many of our caseworkers have also tested, or have teamed with contracted and trained in-home workers to test other tools that Andrew has brought to us. One of these tools which Andrew calls The Three Houses involves asking

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children to describe or draw their house of good things, their house of worries, and their house of dreams. Another tool is the Words and Pictures. This tool is used to summarize the concerns and strengths in words the youngest child can understand and to develop an agreed upon language to use to describe the concerns to other professionals as well as the relatives, friends and neighbors the family may choose to invite into their lives to help convince us their children will remain safe long after we have closed the case.

We understand that in Olmsted most cases start with family group decision making conferences or team case planning meetings. Our caseworkers do use these tools more often than in the past but we have long had a lot of resistance about team processes. Fortunately, we are getting better at recognizing resistance as a signal that we are trying to impose our expert solution. Likely the best thing we have learned from Andrew is that anything that appears to be a problem is instead a fantastic opportunity. The opportunity in this instance is about agency leadership learning to better put our concerns directly and honestly on the table with the caseworkers to seek their solutions instead of imposing ours. In the end implementing Signs of Safety seems to require a parallel process where supervisors and other agency leadership model the approach of doing with our social workers not to them in order to teach our social workers to do with their families and not to their families.

More information about Andrew Turnell can be found on his website at: www.SignsofSafety.net. Signs of Safety; a Solution and Safety

Oriented Approach to Child Protection Casework by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards was published by W.W. Norton and Company in 1999. Working with "Denied" Child Abuse; the Resolutions Approach by Andrew Turnell and Suzie Essex was published by Open University Press in 2006.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Mark your calendars for these spring events sponsored by CASCW:

April 16, 2008:

ITV and Panel discussion about Children with Incarcerated Parents

May 1, 2008:

Addressing the Best Interests of the Children in Immigrant and Refugee Families: Rising to the Challenge

featuring:
Randy Capps
The Urban Institute

Sonia Velazquez, Vice President-Children's Division of American Humane