

## **Expansion of Signs of Safety: the challenge of dealing with difficult social work cases in the world**

Sietske Dijkstra and Marion Henneman had the opportunity to interview Andrew Turnell just before the 2011 Signs of Safety Gathering in Leiden on September 4<sup>th</sup> till 8<sup>th</sup>. They asked him questions on the evolvement of Signs of Safety, the place of parents, how to deal with partner abuse, to build up education and the growth of professionals in strong teams.

*We have the impression that Signs of Safety has become more wide spread around the world. Could you describe what happened to Signs of Safety during last two years?*

“There are three major developments. First of all the attention for Signs of Safety almost exploded. It was used in the Munro review of Child Protection for the English government. The three columns map of Signs of Safety has become well known. The three houses are used in different contexts. It is a human approach, putting families in the middle of the process, with parents giving permission to engage with children and bring the experience of the children to the parents. Working with Signs of Safety in the world means less children are taken into care. Secondly, there has been this large scale implementation going on in Western Australia since 2007 which involves more than 1200 workers and two million people. Thirdly, Signs of Safety is a world wide movement of practitioners who have written up case study material for more than twenty years. Together they collected hundreds of cases. It has become a collective inquiry. Basically it is always about this knock on the door. The development illustrates the importance when we as professionals share our practice together. It gives new energy and a growing team spirit: ‘we are doing what you are doing’. Signs of Safety is rooted directly in the work and brings together professionals. It combines grace and sensitivity with rigor and goes so much further than ticking this box.”

*What is the place and position of parents in the approach of Signs of Safety? Are they owners of the problems?*

“Yes they are. At the end of the day it is not our problem but the problem of the family. Parents and families are in the middle of the decision making and their needs are put in the forefront. That does not mean that they are always right. In fact, sometimes it means that the children live somewhere else. It is vital when you can speak about this and stop the damage of secret adoptions. But it is so important that you address the parents and do so with an open mind. You have to support parents with really good questions and the best professional knowledge.”

*How do you deal with the safety of adults when for instance you deal with partner abuse?*

It is a learning journey and it is so important not be patronizing. So don't demonize the man. And do not persuade her to leave the partner. I had a recent case with a social worker who was really disappointed with an abused woman who left her partner and after a few days swung and said: ‘I'm going back to him again’. Instead of making the decision for her we could help her to decide for herself and make her think things through. You could ask what he would do to make you return? What will makes you feel safe to return? And how would you scale that on a scale of zero to ten? What has happened that you take the decision to go back

again? What has changed that you want to return? And how confident are you that the abuse will stop? What is needed to let your confidence grow?"

*How is it possible that teams of professionals grow in such a way that after a period of time they can deal better with severe cases?*

"Let me give a case example of the clear view of the social worker Cindy Finch in Minnesota. She was dealing with a very difficult case of an alcoholic mother who had six children placed in care, three children born dead, in a very violent relationship and with a new baby to come. Cindy let the mother talk about her losses and the violence and she was able by intense professional support to arrange 20 people in the Safety Network and to keep the baby. Brenda, the mother said, don't tell me to stop drinking alcohol. Cindy said we are not trying to change you, thanks for being so honest. But it is important to be not too naive and honor the strength. To make skillful use of authority. Now the baby is a two years old and Brenda left her violent partner and lives in a trailer park with her child. It is all about honoring practitioners for their hard work and ask them questions how things can be better".

*What do we need in the education of social workers to develop those kind of professionals?*

"Unfortunately, there is this big split between theory and practice. That can become rather bizarre. Academics are the leaders of practice. It is important to get their support. Practice is always uncertain and precarious, finding of ways of talking that is true. In Sydney it was found that the most enthusiastic professionals were after two years the ones who were most burned out. So you have to build in management and leadership too. And group supervision is powerful too in making practice deeper and do shared decision making. Furthermore, research is not always practice based. You have to give this time and really get in the practice and observe. Researchers often do not spend that time in practice, you need patience and perseverance. And an open mind. Also the professionals need to videotape the transcripts, to encourage bringing in questions and help to build up practice based evidence. Usually academics are doing this so called content-analysis. This feeds the defense, the fear and uncertainty, because practice is never perfect.

The approach of Signs of Safety evolves further; there is no doubt about that. We should continue listen to professionals and families to build up further in order to underpin and value the work".

To help spreading and intensifying the Signs of Safety approach, Sietske Dijkstra, and her team from Avans Applied Sciences Social Studies will start a Masterclass on Signs of Safety in 2012 for practitioners, managers, students and teachers which addresses the principles of Signs of Safety, casework, developing group supervision, working with tools en embedding Signs of Safety in the organization and interagency work.

Further information

[www.signsofsafety.net](http://www.signsofsafety.net)

Veilig opgroeien, see <http://www.huiselijkgeweld.nl/interventies/effectieve-interventies/overzicht2/detail?id=1445>