

# Using the 'Three Houses' Tool

Involving Children and Young People in  
Child Protection Assessment and Planning



by Nicki Weld and Sonja Parker

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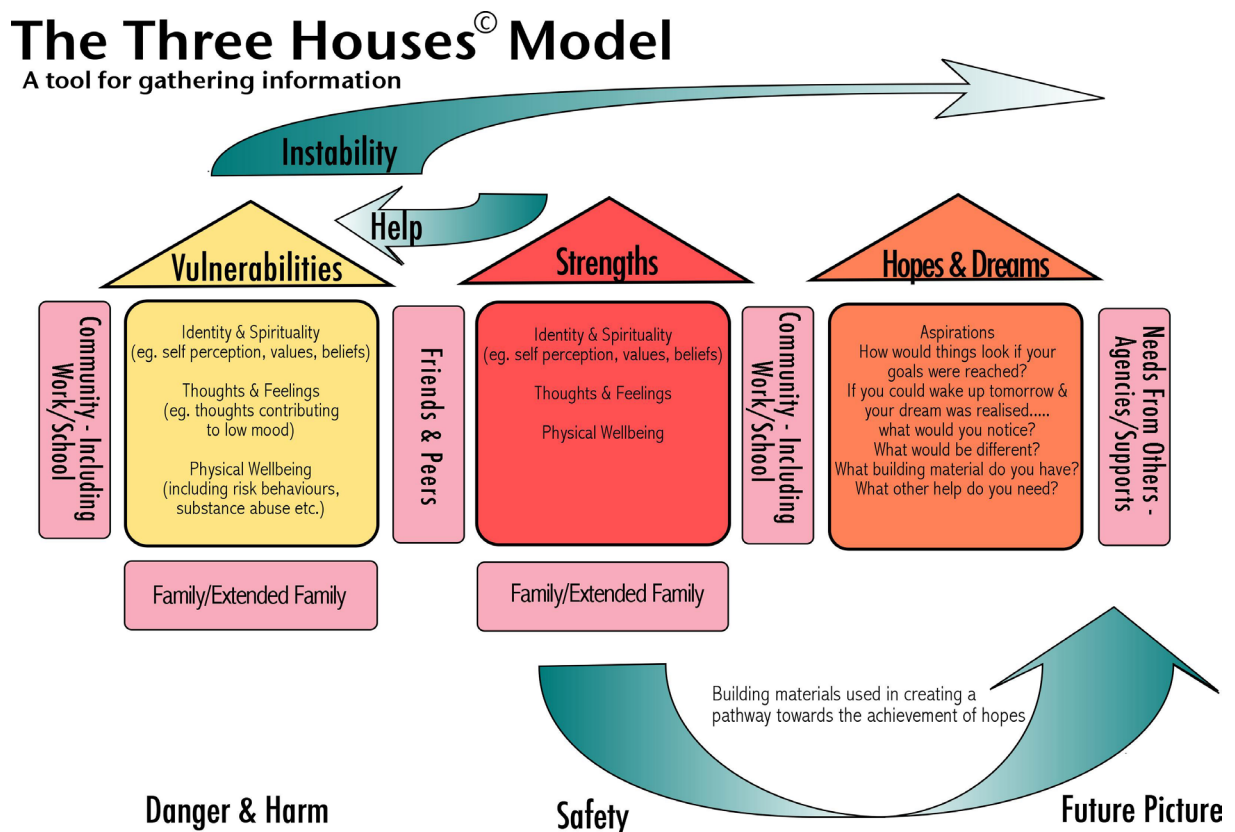
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# Introduction

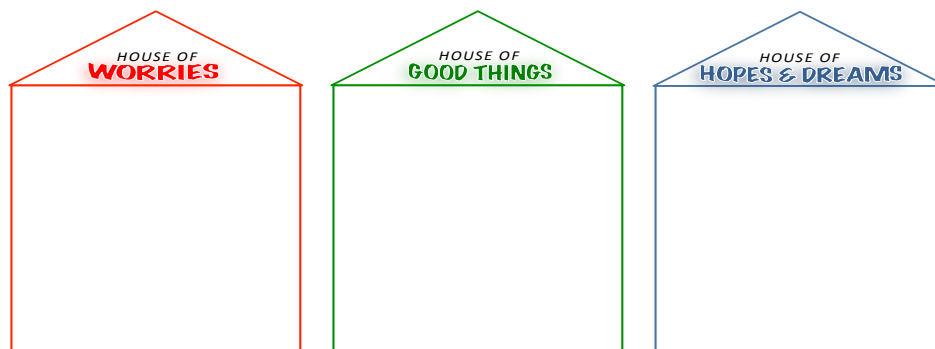
The Three Houses tool is intended to help bring the voice of children, adults, young people, and families more fully into information gathering processes, assessments, and plans. It contains a simple graphic of three houses which are used to help individuals and families externalise and explore what is happening in their lives, particularly in relation to danger and harm, safety factors, and their hopes and dreams. The tool involves both drawing and words and was developed in 2003 in Aotearoa New Zealand within the national statutory child protection agency, Child Youth and Family. Its development was influenced by feedback from family court judges that child and youth plans were too generic, and also by the introduction of strengths based practice which required a more conscious relational approach to child protection work.

The tool provides a visual way to help parents and families identify their strengths, hopes, dreams, and vulnerabilities, along with identifying a future picture of possibility to help build greater safety. The tool was designed to be used by social workers and social service practitioners in everyday work situations with families. It is not designed for forensic or evidential interviewing as these are specialised fields that require specific training. Once I completed an initial design of the tool, my colleague Maggie Greening helped me develop this into this first version of the Three Houses tool:



The tool was trialled by Child Youth and Family in Tauranga, New Zealand, and first used on an investigation with a mother where there were care and protection concerns. The worker found it opened up the conversation with the mother who talked a lot more freely through the use of the tool because it explored not only about the worries, but also the strengths of her and her family. The Tauranga staff continued to develop the tool and commented that the word vulnerabilities was quite hard for young people to understand so they simplified it down into 'worries' or 'bad things'.

It was then presented in its original version at a Signs of Safety Gathering in Gateshead, England, in 2005. With help from practitioners in a range of different countries, including Sweden, Japan, the Netherlands, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, along with the ongoing work of the Tauranga team and other staff in New Zealand, a simplified children and young person's version emerged as can be seen below:



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Although much of the development of the tool has occurred with statutory child protection settings, the two versions of the tool can be applied in range of contexts including both government and non-government work.

A number of theories and concepts support the Three Houses tool including Te Whare Tapa Wha – a Maori model of health (Sir Mason Durie, 1988), Narrative theory (Michael White and David Epston), Strengths Based Practice and Solution focused thinking (Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg) and the book Signs of Safety (Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards, 1999). Sir Mason's Durie's work in particular helped influence the design of the first version of the tool as his model for exploring Maori mental health uses the concept of a house or 'whare'. He uses this as a metaphor to explore the areas of family (whanau), spiritual health (wairua), physical health (tinana), and mental or psychological health (hinengaro) in a person's world. This supports a holistic approach to a person and also a systems perspective that recognises the interdependent nature of all aspects of our internal and external self and what is both strong and perhaps vulnerable within these.

It is essential to bring a principled approach whenever using a tool, model, framework, or strategy, and the strengths based practice principles provide a way to do this. Strengths based practice emphasises the building of partnership and relationship in or work, where we still mindful of the inherent power imbalance that is always present. Social service work at all levels is relationally based, and without a working relationship with people we cannot support the work of change that may need to occur. The primary skill in using the Three Houses tool is less about direct questioning, and more about listening and building understanding. It is best to regard the tool as a way of supporting a conversation where we take the time to create the space where people can tell us about their world and their views rather than see it as an 'interviewing' tool. The information can then support our assessments and planning, which is also informed by a range of sources.

## *Understanding the Houses*

### **The House of Vulnerabilities or Worries**

Vulnerabilities include past and present hurts and issues that can make a person more vulnerable to danger and harm such as addictions, anger, sadness, past and current experiences of violence, or being involved in or exposed to criminal activities. Worries might include these types of vulnerabilities and also anything that may make a child, young person, or adult feel sad, angry, scared, and ashamed, and therefore worried about. Vulnerabilities and worries can be



both internal and external, and might include behaviours both within people and from others that increase the likelihood of harm or distress for them.

## **The House of Strengths or Good Things**

Exploring 'Strengths' or 'Good things' helps identify internal and external factors that are working well to support safety and wellbeing, and the things people feel good and ok about. The strengths and good things in a person's world often become the resources and ways to help manage the vulnerabilities and worries, and also to support people to reach their hopes and dreams. Strengths and good things might include humour, supportive family members or friends, positive values and beliefs, faith, positive self-identity, good engagement in work or school, and skills or talents. If people do not have a great deal in this house this is likely to indicate we need to look at bringing in additional resources to help them build more safety and greater well-being in their lives.

## **The House of Hopes and Dreams**

The house of 'Hopes and Dreams' explores what people would like to see happening in their world, especially in relation to their vulnerabilities or worries. This house helps us build understanding of what someone may like to be different in their world and their goals and aspirations around this. It is here that solutions and goals can start to be formed to build a future picture of increased safety and well-being. Without a future picture people can become stuck, unable to see where they could be or what might be, and less motivated. This is especially true for children, young people, and adults who have experienced trauma and may have difficulty thinking longer term or having goals and aspirations.

When we are helping someone to explore their house of hopes and dreams we need to link this back to their worries so it isn't just an unrelated wish list that may not be related to increasing safety and building protective factors. We can ask what they would like to see happening instead of a named vulnerability or worry, and therefore we directly use the house of vulnerabilities or worries to help inform the house of hopes and dreams. We can look at their house of strengths and see if there are any current internal or external resources they might like to grow or develop and put these in their house of hopes and dreams. The house of hopes and dreams helps people to see past the presenting problems into a possibility of what could and might be, and helps us to gain an understanding of what people would like to be different in their world.

The three houses within the tool interconnect and are informed by and from each other. In the first version there is a pathway that connects the house of strengths to the house of hopes and dreams to indicate that strengths and good things are all resources that can help build the goals. We need to use existing resources first before we bring in other resources as this helps value a person's existing capabilities and supports. The house of strengths or good things also can help with the vulnerabilities and worries, by helping to address these. The house of vulnerabilities or worries can cause instability to people's strengths and hopes and dreams so this needs to be consciously attended to in subsequent planning by ensuring the hopes and dreams and strengths are directly linked to addressing the vulnerabilities and worries.

People often ask which house you should start with and as long as the interconnectedness is understood, it doesn't matter where you start. As will be seen in the next chapters, part of the process of applying the tool is about inviting a person to choose where to start. A key role of the worker is to help people see and make the connections between the houses and how they link and support each other, and to help the development of the person's three houses in a respectful and supportive way.

# Case Examples

## Dutch Example

Margreet Timmer, a child protection worker from Bureau Jeugdzorg in Drenthe, The Netherlands, was responsible for a case involving a mother, her boyfriend and two children who we will call Ramon (10 years) and Stephanie (7 years). The school that Ramon and Stephanie were attending had contacted Bureau Jeugdzorg, concerned that the children's behaviour had deteriorated over the past six months. Ramon had become very aggressive to students and teachers and Stephanie was constantly having arguments with the teacher and not accepting their rules. Both children's schoolwork had deteriorated. There were concerns that the children's home life was difficult and that their mother was in a violent relationship, but the information Margreet had was very vague. Margreet had interviewed the mother and gained little information and had also made two attempts to interview the children with little success. The school continued to raise concerns about the children and knowing she needed to do something different, Margreet decided to interview Stephanie and Ramon using the 'Three Houses' tool.

Margreet conducted the interview with both children together, using one piece of paper per house and asking the children to draw pictures in the houses to represent their experiences.

### Ramon and Stephanie's 'House of Worries'

Margreet began by asking Stephanie and Ramon to draw an outline of a house. Margreet wrote the word 'Zorgen', Dutch for worries, at the top of the page. The children then drew the stables outside their house at the top of the page and began to tell the story of how their mother's boyfriend often locked them in the stables all evening as punishment for misbehaviour. They described how they were cold in the drafty stables, and scared because there were lots of mice and because the boyfriend would also lock a big black aggressive dog (drawn at the left above the stables) in the stables with them. Ramon described how he would try to comfort and protect Stephanie during the evening.





Next the children drew the following in the 'House of Worries':

- On the roof they drew their mother crying in distress.
- Ramon drew a picture (in the middle to the right) of him kicking and yelling at the boyfriend – this had never actually happened but it was obvious to Margreet that it was important to let Ramon draw this picture.
- In the roof space they drew Ramon's bedroom (which he said he hated) including a broken window that made the room cold. Stephanie described that she didn't have a bedroom since the boyfriend came to live with them but had her bed in a corridor.
- A picture of the boyfriend yelling at them for not finishing a meal and the fork which he used to stab them with as punishment (One of the children had healing scars on their hand which were consistent with being stabbed with a fork).

By the time the children had completed this drawing, Margreet was both distressed by what the children were describing but also pleased that she had been able to find a way in which the children could tell her what was happening to them.

### Ramon and Stephanie's 'House of Good Things'

In their 'House of Good Things', Stephanie and Ramon made drawings of spending time with their biological father, who they visited every second weekend. The drawing shows the father and Ramon kicking a soccer ball and Stephanie holding up a yellow card. Inside the house they have a bedroom in the attic, complete with a disco ball, which they share and both like. They told Margreet that there are good things to do at their father's house. Interestingly, Stephanie and Ramon also added mice to this drawing and to both of their 'House of Dreams' drawings.



## Stephanie and Ramon's 'Houses of Dreams'

Stephanie and Ramon drew separate 'Houses of Dreams'; Ramon's drawing is on the left, Stephanie's on the right. Both drawings involved the children living together with their mother on their own, with each having their own bedrooms and lots of activities to do and toys to play with (this is more evident in Stephanie's drawing). In Ramon's drawing, he wanted to have two big aggressive dogs and he decided they were so aggressive that they had to be kept apart by a large fence in the back yard. Stephanie drew her house with two very strong front doors, lots of animals to play with, and lots of clothes, toys and activities.



## What Happened Next

After completing the 'Three Houses' drawings with Stephanie and Ramon, Margreet met with their mother (the boyfriend was invited but chose not to attend). Seeing the visual representation of her children's experiences created a context for the mother where she admitted that her boyfriend was violent and that she knew she needed to leave him. In the discussions that followed, the mother

said she would try to leave her boyfriend within a month and that prior to this time, she would make sure the children were no longer forced to stay in the stables and that she would protect the children from the boyfriend, particularly at meal times. Unfortunately the mother was not able to leave the boyfriend within this time frame and Stephanie and Ramon were taken into care based on the information that Margreet had gathered in the 'Three Houses' assessment. However, nine months later the mother was able to leave the boyfriend and she immediately came back to Margreet asking for her children to be returned to her. It took some time for the mother to get herself established in a house and then the children were returned to her care. For Margreet, the 'Three Houses' process with the children provided the turning point in this case.

## *Australian Example*

Sonja Parker from Perth, Western Australia, used the 'Three Houses' tool to undertake an assessment with an eight year-old girl, who we will call Tia. Tia was brought to the hospital where Sonja worked by her maternal grandparents, who were caring for Tia and her three year-old brother, Michael, while their mother was in hospital following a psychotic episode. Tia and Michael's grandparents brought Tia to the hospital because they were concerned that during the few days they had been caring for the children, Tia and Michael were crying frequently, were experiencing difficulty falling asleep and were having nightmares. When the grandparents asked Tia what was upsetting her, Tia told them that she was feeling frightened about having to go home and live with her mum. Not knowing what else to do, Tia's grandparents brought her to the hospital child protection unit.

After Sonja had talked to Tia and her grandparents about why they had brought Tia to the hospital, Sonja described the 'Three Houses' tool to them and explained that she would like to use the 'Three Houses' to understand how Tia was feeling. Tia agreed with the idea and when offered the choice by Sonja of talking with her grandparents present or on her own, Tia said that she wanted to talk to Sonja on her own. Before the grandparents left the room, Sonja explained that after she and Tia had completed the 'Three Houses', they would invite Tia's grandparents back into the room so that they could talk together.

Sonja then got three A4 pieces of paper and some coloured pencils and together she and Tia sat at a desk to work together. Sonja asked Tia to draw three big houses, one on each sheet of paper, with the name of the house on the top of each page. As Tia did this, Sonja explained again what each of the houses represented. Sonja offered Tia the choice of which 'house' she would like to start with and Tia chose the 'House of Worries'. Sonja then asked Tia whether she wanted to draw or write to explain her worries. Tia chose to use words and asked that Sonja do the writing for her.

### **Tia's 'House of Worries'**

When Sonja asked Tia what she was worried about, Tia immediately began talking rapidly, saying "Mum's health. She has been sick. She sometimes goes to hospital". Sonja had to write quickly and was careful to use Tia's exact words, and then read back to Tia what she had said. As soon as Sonja had finished writing and reading back the first statement, Tia began talking about her next worry, saying "She talks to herself and the walls and looks at herself in the mirror". Again, Sonja wrote the statement down and read back what Tia has said. This enabled Sonja to check that she had captured Tia's words accurately and also had the advantage of slowing Tia down a little so Sonja could keep up with her. This process continued until Tia paused, at which time Sonja asked "What else are you worried about?" and then wrote down Tia's next worry, until Tia said that that was all of her worries.

# HOUSE OF WORRIES

- Mum's health. (She has been sick. She sometimes goes to hospital).
- She talks to herself and the walls and looks at herself in the mirror.
- She sometimes yells at night.
- She wakes us up and Michael starts crying – I get scared.
- Michael – he is sometimes alone with mum.
- Sometimes mum wakes us up and drives us at night – she goes to all sorts of places.
- Sometimes people break into the house and steal our clothes, like on her birthday night.
- One man got drunk and came to the house when we were there and smashed the window.
- Sometimes I worry that the windows are going to get smashed again.
- Sometimes mum gets really mad and hits Michael and me on the arms and legs and bottom.
- Sometimes when mum drives us late at night and she doesn't get up and I have to do my hair and make my uniform look okay and get breakfast.
- Sometimes other people come around and our things get stolen like my PSP and then I get a smack.
- Sometimes when my mum comes to my Nana's house and she demands that I go with her and I feel scared – I'm sometimes scared to go with her.
- One night Mum held some tablets to her mouth and she told Michael and I that she was going to take them.
- Sometimes I have to lie to my Nana when my Mum is around.
- Sometimes my Mum swears and spits in my uncle's face at my Nana's house. I have to lock myself in my room.
- Sometimes Mum and her friends hit each other. Once Melissa punched Mum on the nose and Mum had a blood nose.
- Sometimes Mum goes out and leaves me and Michael alone at night. Our phone is broken.
- Takeaway 3-4 times a week (I miss the yummy food).

## Tia's 'House of Good Things'

With Tia saying she had finished her 'House of Worries', Sonja put that to the side and brought the 'House of Good Things' in front of Tia. Tia's last statement in the 'House of Worries' included her words, "I miss the yummy food Mummy used to make". This offered a very natural transition for Sonja to ask "What are the good things that are happening in your life?" and not surprisingly, Tia talked about the food mum used to cook. Following the same process as before, Sonja continued to ask "What else is good in your life" and wrote down all the things that Tia said were going well in her life.

When Tia had finished, Sonja and Tia looked over the list together and Sonja asked Tia if there was anything else that needed to be on the list. Tia said that there wasn't, so Sonja put that 'house' to the side and brought the 'House of Dreams' in front of Tia.

## HOUSE OF GOOD THINGS

- *Mum used to cook me food and she sometimes still does now.*
- *She takes us to the park sometimes or out to Fremantle or to AQUA (last term).*
- *She sometimes goes to my Nana's and stays with her.*
- *Sometimes she used to go into town with my Nana & us.*
- *Staying with my Nana and having fun there with my Auntie and Uncle. Michael likes going to my Uncle's.*
- *We get to do lots of good fun with my Uncle and Auntie at Hilary's beach.*
- *When we go to dinners like tonight, I get excited.*
- *School is good.*
- *I like being with my Nana, Pa, my Auntie and my Uncle and with my mum when she's good.*

### Tia's 'House of Hopes and Dreams'

Moving from the 'Houses of Worries' and "House of Good Things' to the 'House of Hopes and Dreams' is a shift from the past to thinking about the future. To mark this shift, Sonja explained that this was the house where Tia could write down all the things that she wanted to have happen in her life. Sonja asked Tia, "If you could have your life the way you wanted it to be, what would you like to happen?"

Tia, like most children in her situation, was very clear and specific about what she wanted. All the things Tia said she wanted are presented below in Tia's 'House of Dreams'. In describing what she wanted to have happen in her life, Tia repeated or rephrased a number of things, such as "For Michael and me to be happy" and "Me and Michael to be happy". Sonja made sure she recorded each of Tia's statements, including those that were repeated, as a way of accurately recording what was important to Tia.

# HOUSE OF DREAMS

- *I want to go live with my Nana, Auntie, Uncle, me and my brother.*
- *I want a happy family.*
- *For Michael and me to be happy.*
- *For my mum to be better and well.*
- *For my mum to have fun with us.*
- *To be with my mum more when she's better.*
- *For Mum to not get sick anymore.*
- *For Mum not to drive us around late at night.*
- *For us to move out of that house because it's scary now with all the windows being smashed.*
- *For people not to come in and out and steal our things.*
- *Me & Michael to be happy.*
- *For my Mum to stop hating my Nana, my Auntie and my Pa.*
- *For my dad not to go to jail anymore.*
- *To go and visit my dad sometimes.*

## What Happened Next

The whole process of creating Tia's 'Three Houses' took about 30 minutes. After they had finished, Sonja thanked Tia and complimented her for her courage in talking so honestly about what was happening in her life. Sonja then asked whether she would like to show her 'Three Houses' to her Nana and Pa. Tia said she wanted them to see the 'Three Houses' but she didn't want to read it to them and asked Sonja to do that for her. Sonja and Tia invited Tia's grandparents back into the room and Sonja began to read through the 'Three Houses' as Tia had asked. Both grandparents were very affected by Tia's 'House of Worries' and Tia's grandmother began to cry. Tia's grandparents told Tia that they were very proud of her for being able to talk to Sonja about what had been happening. Tia explained that she had been too scared to tell her grandmother in case she got into more trouble with her mum and then wouldn't be allowed to see her grandparents.

After listening to Tia's 'House of Dreams', Tia's grandparents told her that they would do everything they could to make sure that Tia and Michael could stay with them until their mother was well again and able to take care of them properly. Sonja explained to Tia and her grandparents that there were other people (within the statutory child protection agency and the Family Court) who may



need to be involved in making the decision that Tia and Michael could stay with their grandparents until their mum was well enough to look after them properly. Sonja briefly described the process for seeking support from the statutory child protection agency and the Family Court and asked Tia if she was willing for Sonja to show Tia's 'Three Houses' to people from both these agencies. Tia said that she didn't mind if other people saw her 'Three Houses' but that she didn't want her mother to see them because she would get angry with Tia for telling people what had been happening at home. Sonja talked through this issue with Tia and her grandparents, explaining to Tia that a lot of children in her position were worried that people might get angry with them. Tia's grandparents told Tia that she had been very brave in talking about the things she was worried about because now people could help her mum to make things better, and reassured her again that they were going to do everything they could to make sure that Tia and Michael weren't left alone with their mum until she was better and able to look after them properly. This seemed to answer Tia's worry.

With Sonja's help, Tia's grandparents put in an application to the Family Court and Sonja made a referral to the statutory child protection agency. Both the court application and the referral were based around the information in Tia's 'Three Houses' and a copy of the 'Three Houses' was sent to both. Based on Tia's 'Three Houses', the statutory agency supported the grandparents' application to the Family Court and the grandparents were awarded custody of Tia and Michael until such time as the children's mother could show the court that she was no longer using drugs and was able to safely care for the children.

## Process for Using the 'Three Houses' Tool

This section contains a suggested process for using the Three Houses tool with children, primarily in child protection casework. This process has been developed by drawing on the experiences of child protection workers, from around the world, who have used the Three Houses tool with children and young people.

As described in the introduction, the Three Houses tool has been developed with the aim of ensuring that children's voices are more present in our child protection assessments and intervention plans. While listening to the voice of the child is critical in our child protection work, meaningful participation for children doesn't just mean eliciting the child's voice about what is happening in their family and their world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (specifically Article 12) establishes children's rights to be heard and to participate in planning and decision-making about issues that affect them.

Under the UN Convention, participation is defined as an ongoing process that requires that children (taking into account their age and maturity) be:

- Given full information about what is happening.
- Given full opportunity to have his or her voice heard.
- Provided with clear information about the possible consequences of speaking up.
- Empowered to share decision-making with adults.

The process outlined below for using the Three Houses tool therefore focuses not only on eliciting the child's voice, but also on working with the child and their family in ways that enable the child to:

- Understand why child protection services are involved with their family.
- Understand the child protection processes that their family will be involved with.
- Be given the opportunity for their voice to be heard.
- Be provided with clear and developmentally appropriate information about the possible consequences of them speaking up.

- Be given the opportunity to participate in planning and decision-making in safe and developmentally appropriate ways.
- Be supported and helped to understand what is happening at each stage of the child protection process.

It should be noted that the Three Houses tool is not generally used with children under the age of four and being aware of possible differences between a children's biological and developmental age is also important; an example being that a six year old child with significant developmental delay may find the process too difficult or a very bright three year old may be able to meaningfully participate in the Three Houses process.

## 1. Preparing to use the Three Houses tool with children

### 1.1 Getting ready

Before using the Three Houses tool with a child, you will need to be familiar with the process. This doesn't mean that you have to be an expert, because everyone is a beginner at some point, but the more familiar you are with the process, the more relaxed you will be able to be within it. It is possible a child may be anxious about talking with you so it helps if you are as relaxed as possible. Some people have found it helpful to practice using the Three Houses tool, with a colleague for example, before they first use it with a child. It can also be helpful to have these notes beside you when you are first using the Three Houses tool (and don't hesitate to be open about the fact that you are new to this process).

### 1.2 Getting clear about your views

The first step in using the Three Houses tool is to take some time to analyse and reflect on the information you have about what is happening within the family, so that you are clear about your own views. The more that you have worked through your own initial assessment and your views on future safety (based on the information that you currently have), the more prepared you will be to:

- Listen to the child's views.
- Ask open-ended questions that cover all of the relevant areas of the child's life.
- Stay open to new information and possibilities.

Supervision is a good place to explore your initial views, thoughts, feelings, and possible assumptions about the situation. It is important to remember that the Three Houses tool is about creating an opportunity for the child's views to be heard, not for our information gathering needs to be met. This means it is important we do not lead or overly direct the conversation to fulfill our own need for information. You need to be prepared that the child may or may not share information that is relevant to informing your assessment, or they may not share anything with you, so it essential that the Three Houses tool is seen as a one way to support information gathered, not the only source of this, and that its primary purpose is to provide a way for a child to express their views about what is happening in their world.

### 1.3 Background information about the child

As well as getting clear on your initial assessment (based on the information you have received), it can be helpful to find out as much other background information as you can about the particular child or children and their unique circumstances. Learning a little more about the child before you meet with them can help in the process of building rapport and trust, and can also help to focus your questions if the child is finding it difficult to talk with you. Understanding their developmental

level, and what may have happened is essential to be able to focus and manage the conversation in a sensitive and responsive way.

Gathering this background information might include finding out who the significant people are in the child's life, who they live with, where they go to school, what sort of things they enjoy doing, how often they have contact visits with their family (if they are in care) and where these visits take place. Sources for this information could include speaking to the referrer, previous case files, the referral report, previous caseworkers, other professionals involved with the family, and family members.

#### **1.4. Materials you will need to take with you**

The other important preparation for using the Three Houses tool is organising the materials that you will need to take with you. At a minimum, you will need blank sheets of paper (preferably one for each house, as well as some spares) and some coloured pencils and felt pens. Some workers like to use paper and artists' crayons, coloured pencils or felt pens so that children feel valued and that this is a special process that they are involved in. There are many different materials that have been used to create a Three Houses picture with a child, and what you use is really only limited by your imagination and the child's imagination. Some workers have used lego, plasticine, drawings in the sand, or felt boards – whatever works to help you have these important conversations with the child. You can develop your own way of using the Three Houses tool to suit your working style and the particular needs and circumstances for each child. If you are working on paper, you may also need some way of taking a photograph of the child's Three Houses. Some children will want to keep a copy of their pictures and if that is the case, you can take a photograph (with a camera, mobile phone or tablet) that can then become your copy and be stored on file and printed as required. See point 10 for more information about what to consider if you are leaving a copy of the pictures with the child.

## ***2. Inform parents and whenever possible, obtain permission to talk with the child***

One of the primary purposes in using the Three Houses tool is to ensure that the voice of the child is included in the information we gather to develop our assessment and if there are concerns, the child's Three Houses can be provided to help engage the parents (and the family's network) in the process of creating future safety for the child. So it is important in using the Three Houses tool that we are as open and transparent as possible, to minimize the risk of alienating the parents/ caregivers in the process.

There are times, because of the nature of the concerns, when child protection workers have to talk with children without advising or without the permission of the parents or primary caregivers. An example of this might be a situation where the child is living with a parent who it is alleged has caused harm to the child and where the child may be the first person to speak of the alleged harm, or someone else has reported the alleged harm but the issues are not out in the open with the parent or the parent is denying the allegations. But there are also many times that it is possible to introduce the Three Houses tool to parents/caregivers and ask for their permission before you use the tool with their child or children, for example as part of a reunification process or a family preservation process where the concerns are already known and the parents/caregivers are already engaged in open and transparent conversations with professionals about these.

There are two approaches that you can use in introducing the Three Houses tool to parents/ caregivers. The first way involves using the tool directly with the parents to elicit their own views

and to share the agency's views (as an assessment tool with the parents). The advantage of using the same assessment tool with all parties is that this can make it easier for everyone to understand and participate in the assessment process and then hopefully be more able to understand and participate in the process of creating future safety.

If however you decide to use a different assessment framework with the parents/caregivers, then at a minimum it is important to show the Three Houses tool to parents beforehand and explain that you would like to use this tool to talk with their child. Explain that your purpose is to help everyone understand the child's perspective and to include the child's views and ideas in the safety planning process. When parents learn that a child protection worker wants to interview their child this often raises the parents' anxiety, so it can be helpful to show them a blank template of the Three Houses tool beforehand and explain the questions that the child will be asked. Seeing the Three Houses tool and understanding the process can also help parents to understand that the worker will not just ask the child about problems, but will also focus on good things and hopes for the future.

As mentioned above, talking this through with the parents beforehand begins to build a transparent working relationship that will make it easier for the worker to come back to the parents afterwards to talk about the information provided by the child (following discussion with the child, as described in point 12 below). If because of the nature of the concerns, the decision was made to talk with the child without first advising or seeking the permission of the parents/caregivers, then at a minimum it is important to talk this through with the parents afterwards and be prepared to explain the rationale for talking with the child without the parents' consent.

If the child is in foster care or is in the care of extended family, it is important to explain the Three Houses process to the carers so that they can support the process. As with the parents, this creates the context for bringing the child's Three Houses back to the carer (with the permission of the child and the parents) and will usually significantly help the carer to understand and participate in the safety planning process and/or the anticipated reunification process.

Knowing that their parents/caregivers know about and understand the Three Houses tool and related process and have given permission for workers to talk with the child using the Three Houses, can help children who are anxious to be more comfortable with participating in the Three Houses process.

### *3. Deciding where to meet with the child*

Being asked to talk with a child protection worker about what is happening in their lives will often cause children to feel anxious, so choosing a location where the child is likely to feel most comfortable is important, particularly for your first meeting. This can be at home, at another family member's house, at school, in the hospital ward, outside under a tree, or wherever the child will feel most relaxed. Wherever you meet, try to ensure there is space to spread out the materials, that there is privacy for the child (and family), and that interruptions will be at a minimum.

The other important consideration in choosing the location is the question of who will be there and the degree to which the child will feel able to speak freely. Meeting with their child in their home might work well if the issues are already out in the open with the parents or primary caregivers, but could lead to increased anxiety for the child and potentially less safety if any possible concerns are not yet on the table with the parents. This is discussed in detail in the next point.

## *4. Making the decision to work with the child with/without the parents being present*

The decision about whether or not to agree to the parent/caregiver being present when you talk to the child is an important decision. As discussed a number of times, the Three Houses process is part of a broader collaborative assessment and planning process, so we want decisions such as whether or not the parent can be present when you are working with the child to be made collaboratively with the family whenever possible.

However, there will be circumstances when child protection workers will be understandably concerned that the child may not feel able to express how they are feeling if their parent/caregiver is present and will need to insist that they speak with children on their own. Ofsted's evaluation of serious case reviews highlighted one case where children were only able to talk about the serious neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse they had suffered when they were talked with away from their home environment. A lesson from the review was that priority needed to be given to providing a safe and trusting environment, away from the carers, for the children to speak about their concerns<sup>1</sup>.

If the decision is made by the child protection agency to speak with the children on their own, then all efforts should be made to provide an honest explanation to the parents/caregivers about why the worker feels this is necessary. And as discussed in point 3 above, this conversation is happening in a context where you are also explaining the Three Houses process to the parents.

If workers are confident that the child will be able to speak freely with their parent/caregiver being present, then the decision about whether or not they are present during the interview can be made collaboratively with the child and the parents. The child may prefer to have their parent/caregiver in the room, or may prefer to meet with you on their own, either in the home or in another location. If you are talking with the child in a location such as a school or within their foster home, the child may want to have their teacher or foster carer present. If another adult is going to be present with you and the child, it is important to establish clearly beforehand that the support person needs to remain quiet and preferably sit off to one side of the room so that the worker can engage as much as possible directly with the child.

## *5. Talking with children separately or together*

If there is more than one child in the family, a decision needs to be made about whether to meet with the children separately or together. Each child usually creates their own Three Houses pictures, but some children may prefer to talk to you without their siblings present, while for others, having a brother or sister with them can help them to feel more comfortable and talk more easily. Often it can be helpful for younger children to have an older brother or sister to help them as long as this is managed so the younger child's view remains the focus.

Depending on the number of children in the family and their particular circumstances, it might work better to work with all the children during the same visit (either with one or multiple workers) or if there is no urgency, to create the children's Three Houses pictures over a number of visits.

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1 Ofsted (2010), The voice of the child: learning lessons from Serious Case Reviews. A thematic report of Ofsted's evaluation of Serious Case Reviews from 1 April to 30 September 2010.



## 6. Introducing your role and the Three Houses to the child

Even if the child was present with the parents/caregivers when the worker explained their role and the Three Houses tool and process, it is important to explain both these things to the child again. This is a context where children will usually be anxious and they may not have heard or understood what was said earlier. Use language that is simple and brief so that the child doesn't become confused by a long explanation. When introducing the Three Houses to children, Sonja usually says something like:

*“Hi, my name is Sonja and I am a social worker and I work for (name of agency). I don't know if you know what social workers do but I have a great job that involves talking to lots of children. It's my job to talk with children and their families when there may be some things that people are worried about, and then to help everybody to sort those worries out. I've talked with X (whoever the person is who raised concerns) and they've told me that there are some things that they are worried about, and now I'd like to talk with you to hear your ideas about how things are going? Is that okay?”*

*“I'd like to do something called the Three Houses with you, which is something I do with a lot of children. We draw Three Houses together and in those houses you can draw or we can write down the things that you are worried about, the things that are going well or good in your life, and the things that you would like to have happen in the future.”*

In the process of introducing the Three Houses tool to the child, start to draw up the outlines of the houses (or show the child the ipad/tablet app) so that the child has a clearer understanding of what you are talking about. Encourage the child to get involved in drawing or choosing the outlines as quickly as possible, as this active process of working together will help the child to relax a little more and start to engage in the process. The worker can then explain to the child something like: 'In the first house we will write or draw your worries, so that's the 'House of Worries'. In the second house, we'll put all things that you like in your life; that's the 'House of Good Things'. The third house is the 'House of Hopes and dreams, where we can write and draw how you'd like things to be in your life if all your worries were solved.' The worker and child can then write 'worries', 'good things' and 'hopes and dreams' on each respective house or as some workers do, the child can be offered the choice of suggesting their own name for each house or drawing a picture that symbolises this.

If you are using the Three Houses tool to gain a child view as part of developing a reunification plan or as part of a safety planning process, then it is important to explain to them how the tool fits in with the overall assessment and planning process. Hearing from a worker that their views are both valued and will be included in the planning process can be very powerful for a child particularly if they have previously felt as if no-one is interested in talking with them about what is happening.

## 7. Explaining how the Three Houses information will be used

One of the most important steps in using the Three Houses tool is talking with the child about how the information that they have put in their pictures will be used. Many workers are worried that if they tell the child beforehand that their Three Houses will be shown to other people (such as their parents), that this will stop the child from talking openly about what is happening in their family. This may well be the case in the short term, but being open with the child, and building a relationship of trust and honesty with the child, is vitally important and is one of the essential foundations for being able to work with this child and family to build long-term safety and wellbeing.



The Office of the Children's Commissioner in the United Kingdom has conducted extensive research with children and young people about their experiences of child protection processes . The young people expressed how confusing they found the child protection system and said that in their experience, the processes were far from transparent. The children and young people said that they wanted to be provided with better and more honest information about what was happening and to be given more emotional support through the process<sup>2</sup>.

*'Tell us straight, don't fob us off. Don't put it off or change the subject, tell us how it is.'*

*'With emotional problems, be there, be more calm but also be straight.'*

Not surprisingly, the research also revealed that many children felt anxious about talking to child protection workers. Children said that their fears about the possible consequences of telling, such as the break-up of their family or the risk of further violence in their family, was an obstacle to them talking openly. One of the key messages from children and young people is that the development of a trusting relationship helped them feel more able to talk openly.

*We 'need to get social workers that respect us and aren't going to be false to young people. If they trust us we'll trust them'.*

In addition to the importance of honesty and transparency highlighted by research with children and young people, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that children be provided with information about how their views and the views of others will be taken into account and will impact on decisions that are made. The Committee states that "The realization of the right of the child to express her or his views requires that the child be informed about the matters, options and possible decisions to be taken and their consequences by those who are responsible for hearing the child, and by the child's parents or guardian. The child must also be informed about the conditions under which she or he will be asked to express her or his views. This right to information is essential, because it is the precondition of the child's clarified decisions" .

So what this means in practice is that workers need to talk with the child about how the information they share will be used, including who the information will be shared with, what the possible consequences of sharing this information will be, and how the child's views and the views of others will be considered as part of the agency's assessment and planning processes. This discussion needs to happen in ways that are developmentally appropriate, using language that the child can easily understand, and needs to include both listening to the child's views on these matters and sharing the views/information from the worker.

For children who are feeling particularly anxious and/or frightened about speaking, it is important to have this conversation before you ask them to express their views within their drawings. For other children, it will be enough to have a brief discussion beforehand that lets them know that the information in their Three Houses pictures will be shared with others and then to have the detailed discussion after they have created their Three Houses. At a minimum, you need to make sure beforehand that the child understands that the information from their Three Houses will be shared, as you don't want to risk the child feeling that their trust and confidentiality has been betrayed. This could make it more difficult for the child to speak up and ask for help in the future.

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2 Submission by the Office of the Children's Commissioner to the Munro Review of Child Protection (2011)

## 8. *Creating the child's Three Houses*

This next section will describe the process of creating the child's Three Houses, with suggested questioning that can be used within each part of the process.

### 8.1 Deciding which house to start with.

Once you have introduced and briefly explained each of the Three Houses to the child, you can then offer them the choice of which house they would like to start with. Some children choose to start with the house of worries as their worries are what is most on their mind and what they know you are there to talk to them about, whereas other children who are feeling anxious or uncertain may find it easier to start with the house of good things. If you are concerned that the child may have been told not to speak openly, then focusing on what is going well is a good place to start as it would be unusual for a child to be told not to talk about things they are happy within their family.

It is usually more meaningful to create the child's house of hopes and dreams after they have created their house of worries and house of good things, as this will help the child's visioning about the future to be grounded in real life. However, some children will want to start with the house of hopes and dreams, particularly if thinking about how they want things to be in the future is foremost in their mind. If this is the house that the child wants to start with, make sure that you use solution-focused questions (see below for suggested questioning) that will help the child to focus on how they would like things to be in the future if all of the past/current worries and problems have been addressed. Careful questioning will help focus the house of hopes and dreams on real life and stop it going off into fantasy thinking, such as wanting to live in a lego castle or go on a spaceship to the moon! If a child does put these sorts of things in this house, don't worry too much as you can still bring them back to linking to their house of worries (see more in section 8.3).

Whichever house the child decides to start with, bring that house in front of the child and put the other two houses to the background to be worked on later. In saying this, it's important to remember that the Three Houses process doesn't need to be a linear process and that it is possible to follow the child's lead by moving backwards and forwards between the houses. If, for example, the child talks about some things that they are worried about and then what they wish was happening instead, you can first help them to record their worries in the house of worries and then bring their house of hopes and dreams forward and help them to record what they want in the future. Similarly, if the child talks about something that they like, the worker can help them to move between the house of hopes and dreams and the house of good things.

You can also move backwards and forwards between the houses to help the child manage the intensity of the conversation. If, for example, talking about worries becomes too difficult or distressing for the child, you can move to the house of hopes and dreams and ask them about how they would like things to be instead, or you could move to the house of good things and ask them to describe times when things are going well or about things in their life that make them happy.

### 8.2 Deciding whether to draw or write.

Another choice you can offer the child is whether they would like to draw or write within the houses. If the child is drawing, the worker can ask open-ended questions to invite the child to talk about the drawings, for example, "Tell me about this part of the drawing? Can you explain that part of the drawing to me?" The worker can then check with the child if it is okay to write the child's words or short sentences alongside the drawings. If choosing to write, younger children will usually want the worker to write down their words, whereas older children sometimes prefer to do the writing themselves and then show it to the worker afterwards.

In using the Three Houses tool with children, always make sure to use the child's exact words and ideas. If the worker is writing the information, they should read this back to the child at the end of each statement. This gives the worker an opportunity to ensure that they are accurately reflecting the child's views, and it also provides an opportunity to gain further information about an issue the child may have raised, for example by asking "Tell me more about that?"

### 8.3 Working with each house

This section will work through the houses in a linear manner, but as described in point 8.1 above, you can start with any house and you can move forwards and backwards between the houses.

#### 8.3.1 House of Good Things

After drawing up the 'House of Good Things' with the child (or after the child has chosen the template they want to use), it is good to start by reminding the child of what this house represents. For example:

*So this is your 'House of Good Things', which is where you can draw or write down the things that are going well in your life and the things that make you feel happy and okay.*

Some children may find it a little difficult to get started, so it can be helpful to provide the child with some simple information about the process, such as:

*Take as much time as you need and you have all these pencils, felt pens and crayons here that you can use to put all the good things that are happening in your life into your 'House of Good Things'. And if you want any help to draw or write anything, I will be right here beside you and you can just let me know.*

Once the child is ready to start drawing or writing, or if you are writing for the child, it can be helpful to ask an initial eliciting question, such as:

- What are the good things that are happening in your life?
- What are the things in your life that make you feel happy?
- What is going well in your life at the moment?

After this initial eliciting question, you can continue to ask the same broad question as many times as is needed, asking "What else is going well in your life?" or varying the question slightly, such as "What's another thing that is going well in your life?", until you think that the child has covered everything that they want to include.

In working through each of the Three Houses with a child, we start with open-ended and broad questions such as the examples above so that we are not limiting or constraining the child's views. Some children will be able to respond to the initial questions with a lot of detail, whereas other children will need more scaffolded questions to help them talk with us in more detail about what is happening in their life.

In situations where a child may be finding it difficult to think about things that they want to draw or say, or where they are not covering areas of their life that you are interested in exploring with them, then you can use more scaffolded, open-ended questions to elicit further information. It is essential though that we keep our questions open-ended and not ask leading questions that introduce a thought or assumption of ours. Some examples of these questions include:

- What things make you happy or feel good?
- What is good about living with Mum (or Mum and Dad)?
- What is good about where you are living at the moment?
- What are your favourite things to do with Mum/Dad?
- What is good about your visits with Mum?
- Who are the people in your family that you like spending time with? What's good about spending time with them?
- What is good about the friends you have?
- What are some things you like about school?
- What are your favourite things to do at home?
- Who do you most like doing those things with?
- What would other people say you are good at?
- What do you think is good about having me come to meet with you?

If you are writing down what the child is saying, always make sure to use the child's exact words and ideas. One good way of checking that you have got the information correct is to read what you have written back to the child, at the end of each statement. This also reinforces with the child that you are serious about listening to their views.

If you need more information about a particular drawing or statement, use open-ended questions with the child to elicit more detail. The acronym TED is a helpful reminder to keep the questions in an open-ended format, so that there is no risk of you leading the child's responses. TED stands for Tell, Explain, Describe and prompts you to ask open-ended follow up questions, such as:

- Could you tell me more a little bit more about that?
- Could you explain what's happening in this picture?
- Could you describe this picture a little more for me?
- Could you explain a little bit more about what you mean by that?

Once the child seems to have completed their 'House of Good Things' (either because they tell you that they have finished or because they seem to have run out of ideas), then take a moment to look over their 'House of Good Things' with them and acknowledge everything that they have recorded there. If you need more information about a particular drawing or statement, check for more detail as described above.

Then once the 'House of Good Things' is finished, put it to one side. Some children will need to have a break at this point (and maybe go outside and run around or play for a little while) and for some children, one house will be as much as they can do in this session. If you are finishing the session at this point, make sure you take some time to explain what will happen next to the child (see point 9) and to make a clear plan with the child about when you will meet again to create the rest of their Three Houses.

### 8.3.2 House of Worries

Bring the 'House of Worries' that the child has drawn (or the template that the child has chosen) in front of the child, and start by reminding them of what this house represents. For example:

*So this is your 'House of Worries', which is where you can draw or write down all of the things that are worrying you at the moment, or the things that are going on in your life that don't feel so good.*

If the 'House of Worries' is the house that the child is starting with, then you will need to provide the process information as suggested in the 'House of Good Things' section at the beginning of the process of creating this house. For example:

*Take as much time as you need and you have all these pencils, felt pens and crayons here that you can use to put all things that you are worried about into your 'House of Worries'. And if you want any help to draw or write anything, I will be right here beside you and you can just let me know.*

Again, start to elicit the child's views by using a broad eliciting question, such as one of the suggested questions below:

- Lots of kids I talk to often have worries. Worries might be things that make us feel sad, a bit scared, angry, or a maybe a bit bad. Are there any worries that you have at the moment?
- Can we put those in your house of worries?
- What are you feeling worried about at the moment?
- So what is happening that is worrying you at the moment?

After this initial eliciting question, you can continue to ask the same broad question as many times as is needed, asking "What else are you feeling worried about?" or varying the question slightly, such as "What else is happening that is worrying you?", until you think that the child has covered everything that they want to include. If you are writing into the child's Three Houses, make sure that you use the child's exact words and ideas as discussed in the previous section.

For some children, talking about the things that they are worried about may be a very scary experience, so it is important to pay close attention to how the child is feeling and to go at the child's pace. If they need to have a break, then have a break. If they need to go outside and run around, let them do that. If they start to cry or get angry as they are describing their worries, then it's important to be present with the child and to acknowledge their strong feelings and to let the child know that you understand how difficult this is for them. Even if the child appears to be fairly calm during the process, they may still be feeling quite anxious underneath their seemingly calm exterior, so it is important to give the child positive feedback during the process, letting them know that you understand that it might be difficult for them to talk about these worrying things and acknowledging their courage in being willing to talk with you.

In situations where a child may be finding it difficult to draw or describe what they are worried about, again use scaffolded, open-ended questions to elicit further information. For example:

- Are there anythings that make you feel sad, bad, scared or worried at home?
- What is worrying you about living with Mum (or Mum and Dad)?
- What is worrying you about where you are living at the moment?
- Is there anything or anyone who makes you feel sad, bad, scared or worried at school?"
- What is worrying you about your visits with Dad?
- What is worrying you about the friends you have?
- Is there anything that is worrying you about having me come to meet with you?
- Is there anything else you think needs to be in your house of worries?

If any of the child's drawings or statements are unclear or need further explanation, use open-ended questions with the child to elicit more detail (using the TED acronym as described in the 'House of Good' things section). For example:

- Could you tell me more a little bit more about that?



- Could you explain what's happening in this picture?
- Could you describe this picture a little more for me?
- Could you explain a little bit more about what you mean by that?

As discussed in the 'house of good things section, some children will need to have a break after finishing their house of worries (and may need to go outside and run around or play for a little while) or this might be as much as they are able to do in this session. If you are finishing the session at this point, make sure you take some time to explain what will happen next to the child (see point 9) and to make a clear plan with the child about when you will meet again to create the rest of their Three Houses.

### 8.3.3 House of Hopes and Dreams

Moving from the 'House of Worries' and 'House of Good Things' to the 'House of Hopes and Dreams' is a shift from talking about the past and present to visioning the future. It's important to help the child make this shift by reminding them of the focus of the 'House of Hopes and Dreams', saying something like:

*This is your 'House of Hopes and Dreams', and this is the house where you get to draw or write down how you would like things to be in the future and all the things that you want to happen in your life, particularly if all the worries were gone.*

As described for the previous two 'houses', start to elicit the child's views by using a broad eliciting question, such as:

- What are the important things that you want to have happening in your life that we need to put into your 'house of hopes and dreams'?
- What would you like to have happening in your life?
- How would you like things to be in your life?

As described for the other two 'houses', we start with open and broad questions and then if necessary, focus the conversation with more scaffolded questions. In the case of the 'House of Hopes and Dreams', we use scaffolded questions that link to the child's 'house of worries' and 'house of good things', such as:

- If all the worries were gone, what would you want your life to look like?
- What would be different in your life if all the worries were gone?
- If all the worries at home were gone, what would you want to see taking their place?
- What else would you like to have in your 'house of hopes and dreams' that would help with the worries?
- Are there things in your 'house of good things' that you think could help with the worries?
- What are the important things from your 'house of good things' that you want to make sure are happening in the future?
- Is there anything else you'd like to put in your 'house of hopes and dreams'?

### 8.3.4 Any final information

When the child has finished all three 'houses' (whether in one session or over a number of sessions), it is important to look at each house again and to ask the child if there is anything else they would like to add to any of their 'houses'. Sometimes it is at the end of the conversation that the child will feel able to talk about the issue that is most important to them.



One way to do this is to put each of the 'houses' in front of the child and together look over what the child has written or drawn. This gives the worker the opportunity to honour the child's openness and courage in talking about what is happening in their life, as well as asking the child if there is anything else that they want to add to each of the houses. If a particular 'house' is full, you can suggest creative ways of adding anything extra, such as drawing an attic in the house or a shed on the side of the house or another room on the house. If the child says that they have finished and that there is nothing else that they want to add to any of their Three Houses, explain to the child that they can always add more to any of their 'houses' in the future.

## *9. Explain what will happen next and obtain the child's permission to show their Three Houses to others.*

Once the child has finished creating their Three Houses, it is important to explain how the Three Houses tool fits into the overall assessment and planning processes, and to obtain their permission to show the Three Houses to others. Explain that you will be asking all the important people in their family the same three questions (what are they worried about, what is going well and what do they think needs to happen) and that you will be asking everyone to share their ideas with each other, where possible, so that everyone can work together to sort out the problems. Hearing from a worker that their views are both valued and will be included in the planning process can be very powerful for a child or young person, particularly if they have previously felt as if no-one is interested in talking with them about what is going on.

Some children are happy to be the one who shows their Three Houses to their parents/caregivers; others choose for the worker to read/present the Three Houses with the child sitting alongside, and some children choose not to be present when the worker presents the Three Houses. Whatever process is agreed upon with the child, it is important to talk this through carefully so that the child knows what will happen next.

Some children will be anxious about showing their Three Houses to their parents or caregivers, for example in situations where the primary parent is the person whose behaviour the child is worried about. In this situation, it is important to go at the child's pace as much as possible.

You can also help children to manage this anxiety by offering them choices about how the Three Houses are presented to their parents or caregivers. For example, they could start by just showing the 'house of good things' or 'house of hopes and dreams' to their parents/caregivers, or to a family member or another safe person in their world who they are not feeling anxious about sharing the information with.

For some children, the information in their Three Houses will be so concerning that you will need to take immediate action to ensure their safety. For other children, there will be safety issues as a consequence of showing their Three Houses to others. In these situations, 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. Sometimes this will mean placing the child in someone else's care, at least while the issues are explored with their parents and an immediate safety plan can be developed. 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 and to involve the child in the planning (such as who they could safely stay with). If the worker feels compelled to make decisions or take actions that go faster than the child's pace or beyond what the child is comfortable with, these decisions need to be explained to the child before any action is taken. Not doing so could make it less likely that the child will trust you or other professionals in the future and less likely that they will speak up and ask for help.

## 10. Drawing the session with the child to a close

As you draw your session with the child to a close, make sure:

1. You acknowledge the importance of the information that the child has shared in their Three Houses and the importance of everyone understanding the child's views. Remind the child that your role is to listen to everyone's views and then to help everyone work together to solve any problems.
2. You check whether the child would like to have a copy of their Three Houses. If the child wants to keep the originals, you can take a photograph of their Three Houses and then save them and print for the file/for others. If there are safety concerns that could arise by someone seeing the child's Three Houses, make a plan with the child about taking care of their copy for them and when they will receive their copy.
3. The child understands what is happening next, including who else you will be talking with and who else will see their Three Houses.

## 11. Put a copy of the child's Three Houses on the file

Some workers question whether the child's Three Houses is too child-like to put on the case file or include in something like a court report. The child's own assessment is very often far more powerful and revealing than a professional assessment of that child and very often has far greater impact on adults involved with the child than professional assessment. Magistrates receiving court reports and authorities who review the files are consistently impressed to read a Three Houses assessment since it directly communicates the child or young person's perspective and demonstrates that the worker has engaged the child in the casework. It is critical therefore that a child's Three Houses— with the child's permission - is placed on the file and included as a central document toward the development of case plans, safety plans, reunification plans, etc.

## 12. Presenting the child's Three Houses to parents and others

Workers all over the world report that taking the child's or young person's Three Houses back to the parents/caregivers is often the catalyst that helps the parents talk about the situation differently and be more willing to work in partnership with professionals to address the problems. As explored above, you and the child may be showing the child's Three Houses to their parents/caregivers together, or you may be sharing the child's Three Houses without the child being present.

Before bringing the child's Three Houses to the parents/caregivers and other significant adults, you need to have carefully assessed whether there might be any safety concerns for the child as a result of sharing the child's Three Houses with the parents/caregivers (or others). If the child's safety could be compromised as a result of showing their Three Houses to others, then you will need to take action to ensure the child's safety BEFORE sharing their Three Houses. And as explored in point 9 above, it is important to create a plan to ensure the child's immediate safety together with the child or at a minimum, with the child's understanding. If there are no safety concerns about sharing the Three Houses with some of the adults in the child's life, then this safety plan can also be developed in collaboration with these 'safe' adults.

When bringing the child's Three Houses to the parents/caregivers, it is often useful to begin with the 'House of Good Things', as this conveys that you are willing to acknowledge the positives and to gather information in a balanced way. A good strategy in bringing the information to the

parents is to first ask what they think the child would have included in each of their 'houses', before showing that 'house' to the parents. This process helps to open up a conversation with the parents/caregivers about how they understand the situation and also provides a sense of the parent's insight into their child's perspectives.

Presenting the child's Three Houses to other people (for example, members of the extended family network or other professionals) needs to be done, whenever possible, in consultation with the parents and the child. It's possible that the parents or the child may feel anxious about others seeing the child's assessment of the situation, and as with other steps in the safety planning process, it is important that this information is shared with the full knowledge of the family and at the pace that they are comfortable with.

An exception to this might be in circumstances such as those described above where there are safety concerns about sharing the child's Three Houses with the parents, but the child has identified a particular person in their family or network (Grandma for example) as a safe person and as someone who can support them through this next period. In this instance, the child's Three Houses can be shared with Grandma (with the child's consent) and Grandma can be involved in helping to plan both for the child's safety and for the process of discussing the safety concerns with the parents.

### *13. Sharing other people's Three Houses with the child*

Hearing the child's views is one part of the process of involving the child. Helping the child to understand other people's views is equally important. This needs to be done with the full understanding and permission of the parents and people whose views are being shared.

The Three Houses tool can be used to record your own views and the views of others (such as the parents, extended family members and other professionals) and then to share that information with the child. Having other people's views recorded within a framework that the child is familiar with can help the child to more easily understand other people's views and be more able to make sense of the assessment and planning process. Using the 'Three Houses' tool in this way helps the child to understand what professionals and family members are worried about, what they regard as the strengths and resources of the family, and what family members and professionals will be doing to try to make sure the child will be safe in the future.

### *14. Involving the child in the ongoing assessment and planning*

As the assessment and planning process with the family 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 Three Houses can be added to or updated over time, or they can do a new Three Houses 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 crossing out worries from their 'house of worries', adding things to their 'house of good things', and moving further along the pathway toward their 'house of hopes and dreams'.

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.

## Young People

This section focuses on using the Three Houses tool with young people and teenagers. The step-by-step process of working with children as described in the previous section is still relevant to young people or teenagers, but there are some important variations or practice considerations in using the Three Houses tool with this older age group. Please ensure that you have read the section on using the Three Houses tool with children, as this section won't repeat the detailed step-by-step process, but will focus on how to modify the suggested process with young people.

The preparation steps that are described for working with children are also applicable to young people, although you might like to think about the use of technology, given that young people are very comfortable in this medium. As described in the children's section, a Three Houses app is available for both an iPad and Android tablet. You might also want to consider bringing some blank templates of the Three Houses, as some young people prefer to take the Three Houses template away and fill this in on their own.

The issues that are discussed in the children's section about informing parents and seeking permission are also important when working with young people and teenagers, however the question of permission may not be as relevant for older teenagers or for young people who are in long term care or living independently. Even with this older age group however, it may still be important to let parents or significant caregivers know that you are having this conversation with their young person as part of the process of continuing to try to strengthen and involve a supportive community of people around the young person. Then with the young person's permission, their Three Houses can be shared with these people.

When working with young people and teenagers, it is vital that you take whatever time is needed to introduce your role and the Three Houses process and to explain why you want to undertake the Three Houses with them. Letting young people know that their views are important and, in fact, that they are one of the most important people to be thinking about and contributing to plans for their future safety and wellbeing, communicates a clear message to young people that their views and ideas will be taken seriously. This can be a very powerful message, particularly to a young person who may feel as if they have had little control or decision-making power in their life.

Young people frequently have a strong sense of fairness and justice. When talking with teenagers and young people about how the information within their Three Houses will be used, it is important that you are as open and transparent as possible about who will see this information and about any circumstances under which their information will be shared without their consent. Young people will read your body language in a moment and your willingness to be honest and transparent in the beginning of this process can make all the difference in a young person deciding whether or not they will talk with you.

In drawing up the Three Houses with the young person, you can offer them the choice of which house to start with and whether they would like to draw or write within each of the houses. Some workers feel uncomfortable suggesting to young people that they might like to draw, thinking that young people might see this as patronizing, but it's possible to offer the choice of either drawing or writing in a matter of fact manner, that equally values either medium or a combination of both. Young people often still do enjoy drawing and given the benefits of drawing (see detailed exploration with section on using the Three Houses with parents/caregivers), it is important that this is offered as a meaningful choice for young people. Drawing is also helpful for young people who struggle with direct one to one talking and who may have trouble articulating their thoughts

and feelings into words. For these young people, drawing is often a more comfortable medium of communication. I usually say something like:

*Within each of the houses, you can record your thoughts and ideas using either words or through drawing, or a combination of both. Some people prefer to describe their thoughts using words or writing and others find it easier to express their thoughts and ideas through drawing, so you are welcome to use whatever you are most comfortable with.*

Another choice you can offer the young person is whether they would like to work with you to create their Three Houses or whether they would like some time to create it on their own. While the Three Houses tool creates an 'alongside' approach that is often less intimidating or threatening than a face to face interview, some young people will still prefer to work on their Three Houses on their own. If this is the case, you can meet with the young person afterwards and then have a conversation with them (as suggested in the step-by-step process outlined in the previous section) to explore in more detail what the young person has drawn or described in each of their houses.

In working through each of the houses with the young person, the suggested process and questioning approach is still applicable, but you might want to use a more conversational style and to vary the questions to be more appropriate for their age or developmental level. Teenagers and young people are also more engaged with the outer world, so it is important to include more questions about life outside their family or foster home, such as their peer group, school and work life if that is relevant for them. It is important our questions help explore all the aspects of a young person's world including their health, education, activities, friendships, sexuality, and if there are any worries about low mood and suicide risk.

For teenagers or young people where the concerns for their safety and wellbeing are about their own behaviour (rather than about their parent's or caregiver's behaviour), then the conversation about how the information from their Three Houses will be used is still very relevant but may have a different orientation. Rather than the young person's views informing a safety or intervention plan that is being developed to support the parents in making changes, sharing the information within their Three Houses may be more about helping others to understand the young person's world and then be better able to support them in making safe and positive choices for themselves. For example, the information may help their family or caregivers to understand more about what is happening in their world and be better able to support them in dealing with their challenges and creating the life they want for themselves, or the information may assist professionals to work more effectively with the young person. But whatever the context, teenagers and young people need to be given a choice about how and when their Three Houses are shared. If a decision is made that their information needs to be shared without the young person's consent, then the reason for this needs to be carefully explained to the young person and they need to be involved in decision-making about how this happens to the greatest possible extent.

In New Zealand, the Statutory child protection service Child Youth and Family Services has developed a version of the Three Houses tool for use with young people in the youth justice system. In this version the houses are called 'Good', 'Not so good' and 'Hopes and dreams for the future.' They have examples of topics such 'your usual day', 'people in your life', 'where you live', 'your health', 'beliefs and behaviour' and 'offending behaviour'. When working with young people who are involved in harm toward themselves or others it is important that the conversation is directed to not only exploring their world but also about the behaviours we are worried about. Below are some examples of questions that can help with doing the Three Houses with a young person, especially if involved in unsafe behaviour.



## House of Good/Okay Things/Strengths

- Who is someone that matters to you? What do you think they'd say you are good at?
- What does a good day look like for you?
- What do you feel best about in your world right now?
- Who in your world helps keep you safe from the trouble you've been in?
- What sort of things do you think you are you good at?
- What sort of thoughts and feelings do you have that help you feel okay and keep you safe?

## House of Bad Stuff/Not So Good Things/Worries

- What are your biggest three worries?
- What's something you don't feel so good about?
- What thoughts and feelings are you aware of that makes you get in trouble and do unsafe things?
- Who's around when you get in trouble? What sort of things happen?
- What makes things worse?

## House of Hopes and Dreams

- When you were a kid what did you want to be when you were grown up?
- What would the person who most matters to you say you would be doing in the future that would make them proud?
- If you woke up tomorrow and all the trouble had gone, how would you know the trouble had gone, what would be happening instead?
- What sort of dad/ mum do you want to be for your son/daughter? What do want them to say about you when they're older?
- What's one thing that would help out with the bad stuff?

## Pathway

- What's one thing you can start today that'll help keep you safe/feeling ok? Who can help you with that? What other help do you need?

The Three Houses tool can also be very helpful when talking with young people who are leaving care or transitioning to independent or semi-independent living. You can include questions that focus on the future that they want for themselves, what worries they have for themselves as they thinking about leaving care/living independently and what strengths or resources they have that will help them get there to where they want to be. You can also focus on the young person's perception of other people's views and the Three Houses tool can help you to have conversations about other people's views. Here are some suggested questions you can use:

## House of Hopes and Dreams

- When you think about the life you want for yourself in the future, what does that look like? What would you be doing?
- Imagine we could jump 6 months (or 12 months) forward in time and you are living the life you want to be living. What would that look like? What would be happening?
- Who are the people who are important to you, who you want to be part of your life in the future?
- What could the child protection agency do to support you in creating the kind of life you want for yourself in the future?
- What do you think \_\_\_\_\_ (Mum, Dad, Grandma, best friend, mentor) would say they want for you in the future?

## House of Good Things/Strengths and Resources

- What is going well in your life right now? What else? Anything else?
- Who are the people in your life who know you well? What would they say is going well for you?
- Which of these things do you want to make sure continue in the future?
- Who are the people who support you and help you when things are not going so well? What do they do that is most helpful?

## House of Worries

- What are the three top challenges when you look ahead to leaving care?
- What are some of the things you feel unsure about?
- Are there any barriers (in you and around you) you can see that might stop you getting to where you want to be?
- What else is happening right now that is a worry for you?
- What stops you getting what you and where you want?

The Three Houses tool has proved successful when working with young people to help workers understand their world and to help keep young people safe and well within this. Young people may or may not wish to use the tool, but having it available to them can provide a different way of engaging with them as opposed to direct talking and questioning. We need to think about the important aspects of a young person's world when using the tool such as their health, education, activities, friendships, school, work, home, sexuality, and if there are any worries about low mood and suicide risk. The tool gives us a safe way to talk about the various aspects of their world, and to help look at further ways to protect and support them. For a number of young people this may be the first time they have had anyone really try and understand their world, and that in itself, can be an important step in their journey of wellness, safety, and recovery, especially if they come from a history of abuse or neglect.

# Conclusion

The Three Houses tool helps bring the voice of children, young people, and their parents and families more strongly into our work, especially within child protection settings. An absence of their voice leads to a risk of developing assessments and plans that do not have their views in them and are therefore more likely to be prescriptive and directive. This often results in plans not being effective in bringing about increased safety and protection for a child or young person due to the family feeling unwilling to participate in them.

When applied in especially the engagement and information gathering phase of our work, the Three Houses tool helps contribute a message of working in partnership and collaboration with children, young people, and families, where we recognise them as essential to building sustainable change in terms of increasing safety. Change most often occurs within the context of strong and positive relational work, and we must always strive to develop a working relationship like this where possible with the families we are working with.

For children and young people who have experienced abuse and neglect, an essential part of their recovery is how people respond to them when they share or disclose what is happening in their lives. It takes a great deal of courage for children in particular to tell us what is happening in their worlds, and it is always an honour and privilege to be the recipients of this information and it is essential we treat them and their information with kindness, care and respect.

Adults who are feeling judged, criticised, and ashamed or angry at the arrival of our services in their lives are more likely to respond to us if they feel we are interested in their views and open to working with them. Fundamental to this is realising that often the adults we are engaging with were also once children who did not get adequate support within their own experiences of abuse and neglect. This type of understanding helps move us from a place of possible blame to instead a place of understanding, along with still being clear about what safety and adequate care and protection must look like.

As the tool has been used around the world for some time now, there are a number of different ways it has been applied, with workers often being creative and imaginative, and adapting the tool to best suit the context and culture of those they are working with. Some people have made three houses out of boxes and had young people decorate them, others have drawn football fields or classrooms, the possibilities are endless when workers take time to consider what will best work for the person they are engaging with. However the key premises of the tool remain the same: to explore and learn about the good things or strengths, worries or vulnerabilities, and hopes and dreams of the person.

Ultimately in social work and child protection work, it is through the use of self to build relationships with those we work for that we will bring about change, and in order to do that, we too must also look after ourselves and understand our worries and vulnerabilities, our good things and strengths, and continue to have strong hopes and dreams for our work. That is how we will continue to make a positive difference in the lives of children, young people, and their families. Thank you for doing this important and valuable work.

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