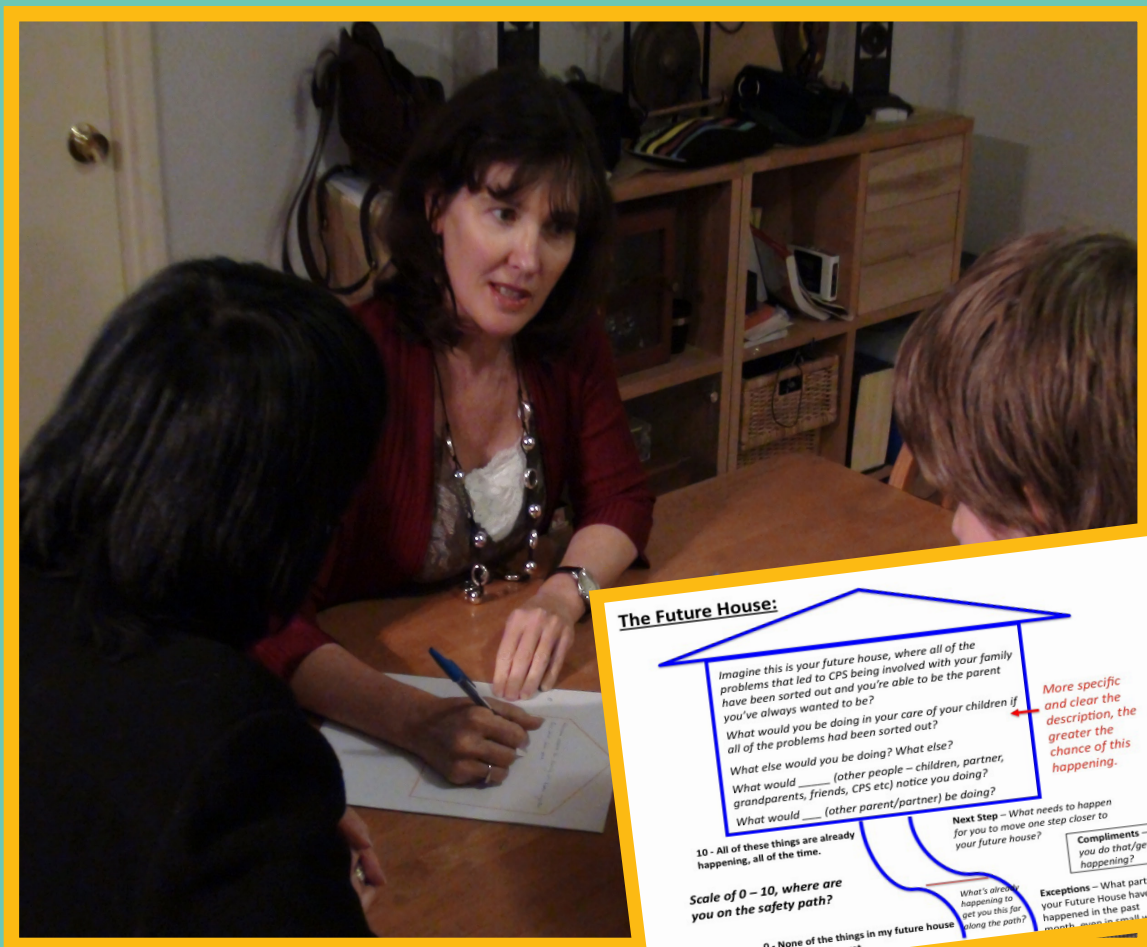


# The 'Future House' tool

Involving parents and caregivers in the safety planning process



by Sonja Parker

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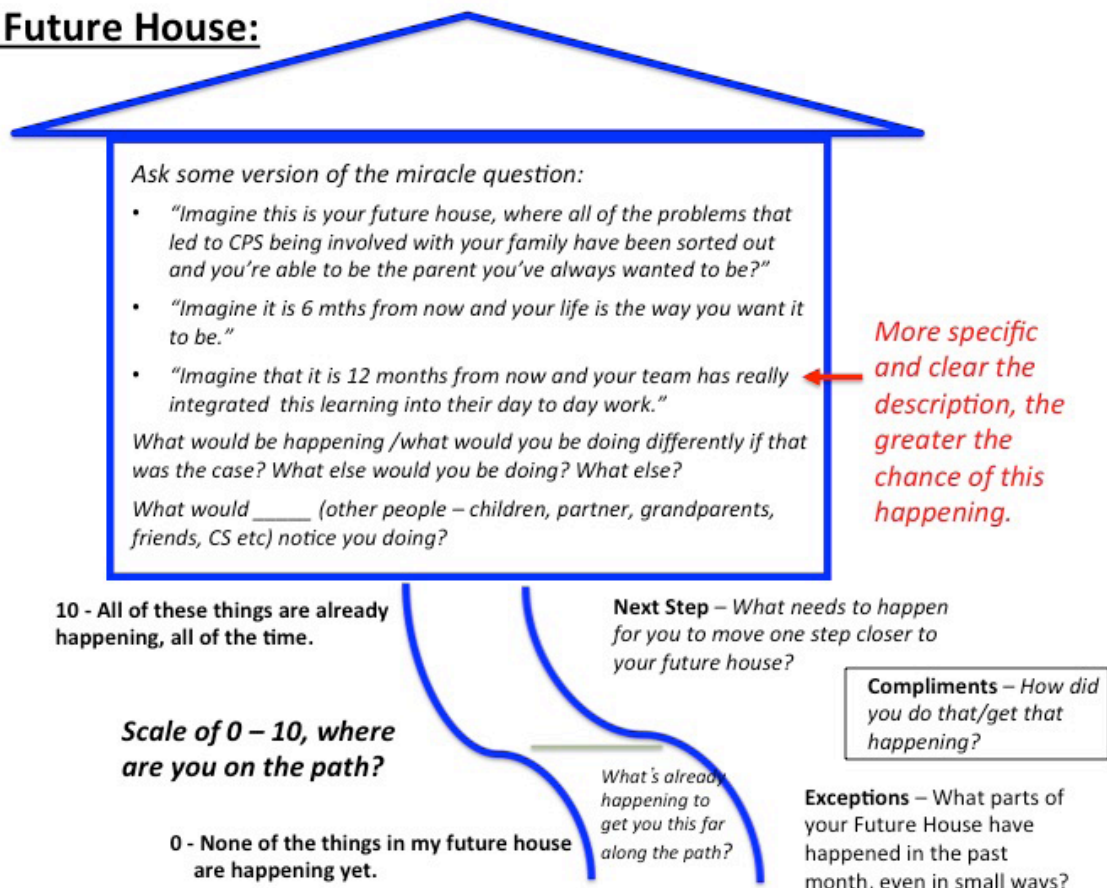
# Eliciting Parents' and Caregivers' Goals

Developing meaningful and sustainable safety action and case plans for children at risk of abuse or harm is a complex and challenging process, which requires child protection professionals to bring their own assessment to the table while remaining open to the views and ideas of family members. Given that it is the family and their network who will be putting the plan into action on a day-to-day basis, any plan that is developed must be meaningful and relevant to the family members and their network. To achieve this, the plan needs to be developed collaboratively with family members and their network and needs to incorporate the family's ideas about what will enhance future safety, belonging and wellbeing.

Gaining parents/caregivers and family members' goals and ideas can be a difficult task for child protection professionals, particularly given that we are working in a context where family members may be angry, may have little trust in professionals and may feel anxious about the possible consequences of speaking openly. The Future House is a visual tool designed to help child protection professionals with this challenging work.

The Future House tool can assist child protection workers in finding out what family members think needs to be happening in their family (what the parents/caregivers will be doing in their care of the children) to show everyone that the children will always be safe and well in the future, in relation to the identified worries. Eliciting the parents'/caregivers' goals is a necessary first step in working with families to develop a joint vision (between caregivers, children, their network and child protection professionals) of what demonstrable future safety for children in this situation will look like, and of the specific day to day behaviours that can achieve this.

## The Future House:



Using a drawing of a Future House to represent a place and time in the future where the children will be safe in relation to the identified worries or concerns, workers then use specific solution-focused questioning to elicit family members' views of what this safe future for their children would look like. The initial question (a version of the solution-focused miracle question) invites family members to identify what would be happening within their family and their home if all of the problems that led to the involvement of The child protection agency had been addressed and resolved.

Follow up questions are then used to identify, in very specific detail, what family members would actually be doing (differently) in their care of the children if the worries had been resolved and the children were safe from any future harm. The person's responses to these questions are recorded in the Future House using words, pictures, or a combination of both.

## *Two powerful assumptions...*

In addition to providing a mechanism for talking with families about their goals and visions for the future as a precursor to collaborative planning, the Future House process can also bring a sense of hope and energy to our work with families. This hope and energy arise from two key assumptions that are implicit in the tool and are communicated to families during the process of creating their Future House with them:

- Child protection workers believe that future safety, belonging and wellbeing is possible for their children.
- Child protection workers believe that family members also want this future for their children.

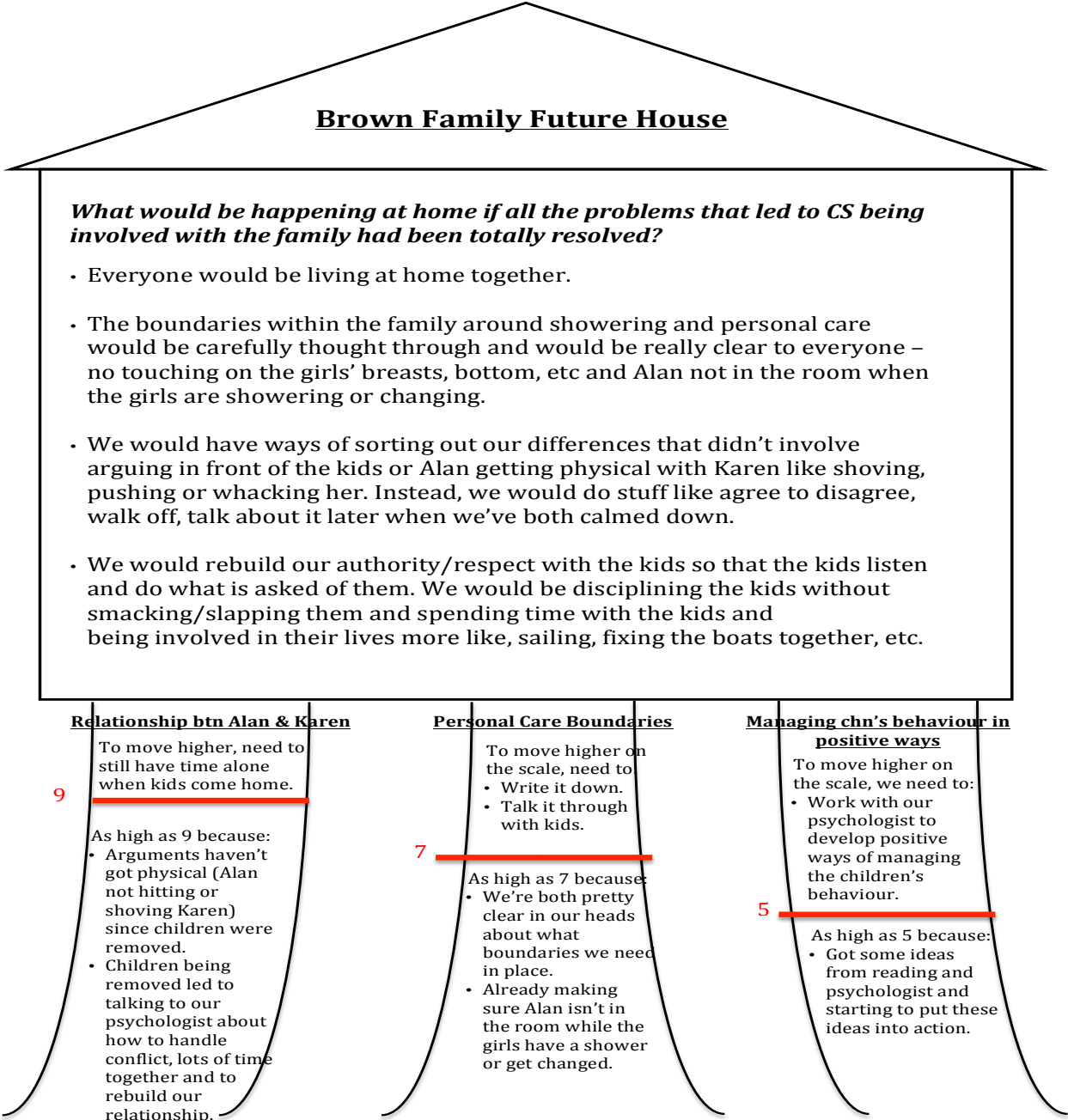
## *Case Example*

### Karen and Alan's Future House

This case example is drawn from work in Western Australia with a family consisting of four children (14yrs, 12yrs, 7yrs and 5 yrs), a mother who we will call Karen and father/stepfather who we will call Alan (father to the two younger children and stepfather to the two older children). The four children had been taken into care by child protection services after the 14 year old girl, who we will call Rachel, told the school chaplain that her stepfather had slapped her across the face, had been poking her in the breasts and bottom and coming into the bathroom and looking at her when she was having a shower. Rachel also told the chaplain that her mum and stepdad were arguing a lot and that stepdad was hitting and pushing mum. Rachel gave the example of an incident the previous night when stepdad had pushed mum over, and when mum and stepdad were yelling at each other. Rachel told the school chaplain that all the kids were really scared and that the little kids were hiding behind the bedroom door.

When interviewed by child protection professionals, the children all described the same incidents but both Karen and Alan said that none of this was happening, despite police records of at least four family violence incidents over the past 4 months that involved Alan hitting and pushing Karen. The children were taken into the care of the department and placed initially in foster care and then with relative carers. Six months later, the parents were continuing to say that none of this had happened and the department wasn't sure how to work with the parents to build future safety given the issue of 'denial'. The children were becoming more and more distressed in care and the department wanted the children home. Sonja was contracted to work with the family to help them create a network and develop a safety plan that would ensure that everyone was confident that the children could be safely returned home.

Sonja used the Future House process during her first meeting with the parents as a way of inviting Karen and Alan’s vision of a safe future for their children and of avoiding a potential ‘denial’ dispute (not wanting to waste time or energy arguing with the parents about whether or not the alleged incidents had occurred). Sonja’s hope was that by focusing on Karen and Alan’s vision for future safety, this would create space for them to talk about how they wanted things to be different in the future for their family, without requiring them to acknowledge how things had been in the past (given that Karen and Alan had maintained, over a period of six months, that none of the alleged incidents had happened). Sonja made the decision to use the Future House process with both Karen and Alan during this first meeting as a way of establishing a joint focus for their work together. Given the alleged domestic and family violence by Alan and the limited referral information about patterns of power and control, Sonja was careful not to place Karen in a vulnerable position or to collude with any shifting of responsibility for Alan’s behaviour. Further information about using the Future House process in situations of domestic and family violence is contained later in this booklet.



Sonja began the Future House process by saying to Karen and Alan:

*I don't want to get into an argument with you about whether the things the department think happened actually happened or not, but instead I want to find out your ideas about the future that you want for your family.*

As Sonja was introducing the Future House process, she drew up a large house on the page and positioned the page so that it was visible to both parents. Given the reports of Alan hitting and pushing Karen and the possibility of coercive control by Alan, Sonja explained that she wanted to hear both parents' views (communicating that both Karen and Alan's views are valued) and then asked if it was okay to begin by asking Alan for his views (inviting Alan to speak first so that Karen is not placed in a position where she is making statements or providing information in front of Alan that could place her at risk of future violence). Sonja asked Alan:

*So let me ask you this question: Imagine this is your future house where all the issues that led to the department being involved with your family have been sorted out. What would you be doing in your future house with your kids if all the problems had been resolved?"*

Alan said:

Everyone would be living at home together.

Sonja immediately wrote this in the Future House, using the exact language that Alan had used and making sure that both Karen and Alan could see what was being written. She then asked "What else would be happening?", again looking to Alan first. Alan said:

The boundaries within the family around showering and personal care would be carefully thought through and would be really clear to everyone.

Sonja wrote this in the Future House and then asked Alan "And what would those boundaries be?" and Alan answered:

No touching on the girls' breasts, bottom, etc and I wouldn't be in the room when the girls are showering or changing.

After writing this down, Sonja then asked Karen what she thought of those boundaries and she said that she was happy with those boundaries and that they had already talked about this and worked this out together. At this point Sonja took the opportunity to compliment Karen and Alan by saying: "You've both obviously been thinking this through and talking this through".

After writing the details in the Future House, again making sure that she was writing it down using Alan's language, Sonja then asked "What else would be happening?" Alan answered:

We would have ways of sorting out our differences that didn't involve arguing in front of the kids or me getting physical with Karen like shoving, pushing or whacking her.

Sonja wrote Alan's exact words in the Future House and then asked: "And if you weren't doing things like arguing in front of the kids and getting physical with Karen like shoving, pushing and whacking her, what would you be doing instead?" Alan said:

Instead, we would do stuff like agree to disagree and talk about it later when we've both calmed down.

You will notice that Alan has answered this question in relation to both his and Karen's future behaviour. To hold Alan accountable for his behaviour and for his choices as a parent, Sonja brought the focus back to Alan's behaviour by asking him: *"And at times when you might be close to getting physical with Karen and pushing or whacking her, and then have the kids be upset by seeing you doing this, what else would you do at those times that would help you not get physical with Karen?"*

Alan said: I would walk off.

You will notice that during the Future House process, Sonja has written down Alan's goals for future behaviour without challenging him about the past or asking him to acknowledge his past behaviour. Given that Alan hasn't acknowledged his behaviour during the previous six months, it is very unlikely he will be willing to openly acknowledge his past behaviour in response to direct questioning. Even at the point where Alan is saying things like "not touching the girls on the breasts or bottom" and "or me getting physical with Karen like shoving, pushing or whacking her" which could be construed as acknowledgement, Sonja is maintaining a focus on the future and asking Alan to be very specific about his goals. It is this focus on the future and specific detail about how things will be in the future that supports the behaviour change process.

Sonja continued in this manner, asking both Alan and Karen for their views on how they wanted things to be in the future, until Alan and Karen said that they had included everything that they wanted in their Future House. Sonja then asked them to have a look at what was written in the Future House and Alan and Karen read it through and said that everything they wanted had been written down. At this point, Sonja wanted to acknowledge Alan and Karen's openness and willingness to work in this way and gave them a compliment by saying:

*You know guys, I'm really impressed that you've been willing to talk with me so openly about where you want your family to get to, especially given that you haven't had such a good experience of working with the Department so far.*

Following this, Sonja moved to looking at the safety path, by drawing a path leading to their future house and asking:

*Okay, so imagine this is the path towards your Future House, with the top of the path being where you would be if you already had all of this stuff in your Future House happening 24/7 (all of the time) and the bottom of the safety path would be you didn't have any of this happening in your family yet. Where would you each be on that path?*

Given the reports of violence in the relationship, Sonja again asked Alan for his views first. Alan answered by saying "Actually we need three paths". Sonja asked Alan to explain and he said:

We need one path for that personal stuff, the personal care stuff. We need one for our relationship and we need one for managing and disciplining the kids. There's three issues so we need a path for each.

Sonja asked them to give a name for each safety path and they said:

- Relationship between Alan and Karen.
- Personal care boundaries.
- Managing the children's behaviour in positive ways.

Sonja then asked them to scale where they thought they were in relation to each issue, starting with the first path they had identified.



In relation to their relationship, Sonja asked (and started by looking to Alan first):

*Where are you on this path if the top of the path means you are always sorting out your differences in ways that don't involve arguing in front of the kids or getting physical with Karen like shoving, pushing or whacking her and you are always doing stuff like agreeing to disagree, walking off and talking about the issue later when you've calmed down, and the bottom of the path is the opposite of that, where are you on this path?"*

Alan said that he thought they were at about a 9. Sonja then asked Karen where she was on this path and Karen said that she also thought they were at a 9. Sonja then asked what was happening that had them as high as a 9 and Karen said:

Because our arguments haven't got physical and there's been no yelling or swearing since the kids were removed 6 months ago.

You will notice that Karen answered this question in a way that mutualised the violence. Rather than challenging Karen about this in front of Alan, Sonja used this as an opportunity to ask Alan for more detail in a way that put the responsibility for the violence back onto Alan.

*So let me check what I'm hearing. Alan, I'm hearing from Karen that for the last six months, things haven't got physical - does that mean that for the past 6 months, there haven't been any times when you've been pushing, shoving or whacking Karen?*

Alan answered: That's right!

Hearing this information gave Sonja an obvious opportunity to compliment Alan and to explore how he had made this change (even if this claim is not true, exploring the vision in more detail will help someone move toward bringing this vision into reality):

*Wow, that's fantastic? You know, for lots of families, having their children removed can lead to relationships breaking down and to more issues, but you seem to have found a way to use such a difficult time to make some positive changes. How have you done that?*

Alan said:

The children being removed meant we were spending lots more time together and needing to really rely on each other and rebuilding our relationship. I realised what was important!

Sonja then asked Karen what she thought had helped Alan to make this change. Karen said:

I think it was spending time together and having to support each other.

Moving back to the safety path, Sonja wrote the information Karen and Alan had provided about what had them that high on the path underneath the line drawn at a '9'.

Sonja then asked "What do you think needs to happen for you to move even higher on this path?" Karen said that she thought that once the kids were back home, they needed to keep spending time alone together and Alan agreed that that was the most important thing to help them move higher. This information was written on the safety path above the line drawn at '9'.

Sonja continued this process for the two other safety paths, asking Alan and Karen where they were on each path, what was happening that had them that high on the path (and complimented

their achievements wherever they were on the path) and what they thought needed to happen for them to move a little further along the path toward their Future House. Sonja used Alan and Karen's language to record the information on the safety paths.

At the end of this process, Sonja discussed with Karen and Alan how the information in their Future House fitted into the overall collaborative planning process. Sonja then showed them the CAP framework, explained how the framework was used and transferred the information contained in the main part of Karen and Alan's Future House into the Goal section of the framework.

Sonja also showed Karen and Alan how the information they had provided about the positive steps they were already taking was recorded as 'Protection & Belonging' and 'Strengths & Resources' under the 'What's Working Well' column. Their position on the paths was recorded on the safety scale and their ideas about what needed to happen to move further along the paths were put under the 'Action Steps'. This then led to a conversation about the Department's position and to exploring Karen and Alan's understanding of the Department's views on what had happened in the past and what needed to happen in the future for the Department to be confident that the children would be safe and well in the parents' care.

As you will see from the process described above, focusing on Karen and Alan's preferred future for their family and using a visual tool to facilitate that process, enabled exploration of some very difficult issues with Karen and Alan, without getting caught in an argument about whether or not the past harm had actually occurred. The outcome of this process was that Karen and Alan had identified their goals for the children/family and their ideas about how to achieve these goals, and had started to have a conversation about the Department's position and what they thought the Department would need to see them doing. This was a very different conversation to the one at the beginning of the meeting, when Alan had said:

Sonja, I know we have to do this but I think it's all bullshit and I'm taking the Department to court as soon as I've got my kids back. I'm getting this sorted. It should never have happened and it's been a huge miscarriage of justice".

This was also a very different outcome than what had been achieved in meetings between Karen and Alan and other professionals during the previous six months, when both Alan and Karen had maintained that none of these things had happened. It is important to note that during the process of creating their Future House, Karen and Alan didn't actually say that the alleged family violence and sexual abuse had happened in the past. What they said instead is that these things **wouldn't be happening in the future**. Focusing on the future in this way provided Alan and Karen with the opportunity to articulate their vision for the future in relation to these allegations, without having to acknowledge that these things had happened in the past. This is a tool that enacts the Strengthening Families Protecting Children Framework for Practice principle - **We seek to understand the impact of the past, but stay focused on the present and the future.**

# Process for using the Future House tool

## 1. Explaining the Future House

The first step in the process of using the Future House tool is to explain the purpose of the Future House, which is to help professionals hear and understand the parents/caregivers/network's views about what needs to be happening in the family to ensure the children's future safety, belonging and wellbeing, as a step toward the development of a joint vision for the future. You might want to introduce the tool by saying something like:

*For The child protection agency to be willing to get out of your life and let you get on with being a family, we need to see that you are looking after your children in ways that make sure that none of the things we are worried about will happen to your children in the future. We need to talk together about your ideas of how you would be looking after your children and our ideas about what we would need to see you doing, so that together we can come up with some really clear goals. I want to start off by asking you for your ideas and finding out what you want your future with the kids to look like.*

## 2. Drawing up the Future House

The next step is to place a large sheet of paper on the table between the worker and the parents/caregivers/network members and to draw the outline of a house on the paper. It is important that the paper is placed on the table in front of both parties, with workers sitting alongside the family members, as this enables everyone's attention to be focused away from any face-to-face confrontation and toward the collaborative development of the future house. This simple act of working on something visual between you can shift the energy from a defensive position to a collaborative process.

## 3. The main part of the Future House

This part of the Future House is where we record the parent's/caregiver's descriptions of what they would be doing in their care of the children in the future to make sure the children are safe. Workers use the main part of the Future House to ask a range of questions (described in detail below) to elicit family members' views. The person's views are recorded in the Future House in either words or pictures or a combination of both.

### The Future House:

Ask some version of the miracle question:

- "Imagine this is your future house, where all of the problems that led to CPS being involved with your family have been sorted out and you're able to be the parent you've always wanted to be?"
- "Imagine it is 6 mths from now and your life is the way you want it to be."
- "Imagine that it is 12 months from now and your team has really integrated this learning into their day to day work."

What would be happening /what would you be doing differently if that was the case? What else would you be doing? What else?

What would \_\_\_\_\_ (other people – children, partner, grandparents, friends, CS etc) notice you doing?

More specific and clear the description, the greater the chance of this happening.

### 3.1 Initial Question

This involves asking the parent/caregiver an initial question (a version of the solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) miracle question) that invites them to describe their vision of what they would be doing with their children if all the problems that led to The child protection agency or the agency being involved had been resolved. Follow up questions are then used to help the parent/caregiver describe their behaviour with the children in specific detail.

The initial (visioning) question you can ask:

*“Imagine this is your future house, where all of the problems that led to The child protection agency (or the agency) being involved with your family (or the children being taken in to care) have been sorted out. What would you be doing in your future house to look after your children and keep them safe if all of the problems had been resolved?”*

Other ways of framing this initial question would be to ask:

- *Imagine this is your future house, where you are able to be the parent you’ve always wanted to be and to look after your children in the way you’ve always wanted to, what would you be doing in your care of the children?*
- *What do you think you would need to be doing in your future house in caring for your children to show The child protection agency that those worries are not going to happen?*

### 3.2 Follow up Questions

#### 3.2.1 Focus on the care of the children

The focus within the Future House is always on the care of the children. If we ask someone a general question such as ‘*What would you be doing?*’, we’re likely to get a general answer such as ‘I wouldn’t be using drugs’. While stopping substance use is definitely something we want parents to achieve, this description doesn’t describe what someone would be doing and what would be different for the children. Use follow-up questions such as the examples below to help the parent/caregiver shift their focus to the children’s care and to describe what they would actually be doing with their children:

- *And if you weren’t using drugs, what would be different in your care of your children?*
- *And if you weren’t using drugs, what would be the first thing your children/your mother/sister/friends/professionals would notice was different in the way you were looking after your children?*
- *And if you weren’t using drugs, what would grandma/the children/The child protection agency workers see you doing differently with your children?*

In working with fathers, it is critical that we acknowledge their equal responsibility as a parent and explore the impact of their behaviour on the children and their role as a parent, as this is an area that is often neglected in child protection assessment and planning. Use questions that invite fathers to reflect on how they want to be as a parent and what parenting choices they want to make in the future. For example:

- *And if you weren’t using drugs, what would be different in your care of your children?*
- *And if you weren’t using drugs, what would be different in your support for Megan and her role as a mum?*
- *What would you be doing as a dad that would show everyone that all the issues had been resolved? What would your children notice that their dad was doing?*

In situations of domestic and family violence, it is important to explore with the person who is being violent and controlling how their change in behaviour will both impact the children directly, and will also support the other parent and that parent's relationship with the children. For example:

- *And if you weren't controlling the money, what would you be doing instead? What difference would this make for Kristy and her ability to look after the kids? How would this help her to be a better mum? What difference would this make for the kids?*

### 3.2.2 Going for Details

SFBT research shows that the more specific and the more detailed people's descriptions are of what they would be doing in the future, the more likely it is that people will actually do this. So it is important to use as many follow up questions as you can think of to help parents/caregivers describe their Future House and their future care of the children in as much detail as possible. The sample conversations below provide examples of the type of follow up questioning you can use to elicit very specific details, that can then be recorded in the Future House.

#### Example One:

- Worker: *Cathy, you said that if you and your partner weren't using drugs, you would have routines with the kids. What sort of routines would you have?*
- Cathy: *We'd make sure they got to school on time and they had their dinner and that we all did things together after school and on the weekends.*
- Worker: *That sounds good. So let's think about the mornings... What would you and their dad be doing in the mornings if you had a morning routine in place?*
- Cathy: *We'd wake them up in time for kindy and school and they'd have clean uniforms and Tom would probably be getting their breakfast ready while I helped them to get dressed?*
- Worker: *And what else would you and Tom do in the morning if you had a routine in place?*
- Cathy: *We'd pack their lunches and put them in their bags and make sure they had brushed their teeth and stuff.*
- Worker: *And if you and Tom were doing all of that in the morning, what difference do you think that would make for the kids?*
- Cathy: *I think they'd feel like we were actually caring about them and looking after them rather than just thinking about how to 'get on'.*
- Worker: *That sounds really great. Can we write all of that down in your future house?*
- Worker: *If Tom was here, what sort of routines do you think he would say were important? Is that something that you're happy for me to talk with Tom about when he and I work on his future house?*

#### Example Two:

- Worker: *Greg, you said that when you get angry with Tracy, you'd make sure that you didn't lose it around the kids because you don't want them to be upset and scared by your losing it anymore. What would you do to make sure that you weren't losing it around the kids?*
- Greg: *When I get pissed off with Tracy, I'd make sure that I didn't end up yelling and screaming at her.*
- Worker: *How would you do that? Imagine if you were starting to get pissed off with Tracy, what is the first thing you would do to make sure you didn't end up yelling and screaming?*
- Greg: *If we started arguing, I'd tell Tracy that we need to calm down so we don't upset the kids.*
- Worker: *And then what would you do?*
- Greg: *I'd go out for a bit of a walk. That's what I've been doing sometimes.*
- Worker: *You've already been doing that? Fantastic! Tell me about one of the times when you were able to do that.*
- Greg: *I don't know... a couple of weeks ago I guess. I was really pissed off with Tracy because she was going on and on at me about something and I told her to back off and she*

wouldn't and I was getting really riled up and then I just thought "F@@@ it! I'm not doing this" and I walked out of the house and went for a walk.

Worker: *And how long did you walk for?*

Greg: I don't know – about 20 minutes or something...

Worker: *And what did you do on your walk that you think helped you to calm down?*

Greg: I swore a lot!!! (laughter) And I just walked and had a bit of head space and got away from what was going on with Tracy.

Worker: *And when you went for that walk and calmed down, what difference did that make?*

Greg: When I got back, Tracy and the kids were watching TV and I just came in and sat down and then after a little while, Casey came and jumped on my lap and we kept watching TV.

Worker: *And what was different about how you were handling things with Tracy?*

Greg: I didn't lose it with her. We just watched TV and then put the kids to bed and then we talked about it a bit later and even had a bit of a cuddle... That was nice!!!

Worker: *So in the future, in your future house, when you are pissed off with Tracy and thinking that you might start to lose it and yell and scream at her, the first thing you'd do is tell Tracy that you both need to calm down and if you couldn't calm down, you'd go out for a walk?*

Greg: Yep!

Worker: *Can I write that in the future house?*

Worker: *What else do you think might help in that situation? Say for example, if you did go for a walk but it didn't help, if you got back and you were still really pissed off with Tracy and on the verge of yelling and screaming at her?*

### 3.2.3 Asking questions from other people's points of view

Some people may find it difficult to imagine or describe what they would be doing in their Future House so it can be helpful to use relational questions, which ask what they think other significant people in their children's lives would see them doing. For example:

- *What do you think Tracy would say would be helpful in that situation?*
- *What do you think the kids would want you to do?*
- *If your mum was there, what would she notice you doing (differently) with the children?*
- *What would the kids notice you were doing?*
- *If I put a video camera in your future house and then watched it later, what would I see you doing in your care of the kids?*

If there is another parent/caregiver involved in caring for the children, then it is important to ask their view of what the other caregiver would be doing in their care of the children in the future:

- *What would you want \_\_\_\_ (the other parent) to be doing in your future house to make sure that the children are always safe?*

### 3.2.4 Covering all the identified worries

If the parent/caregiver doesn't cover all the areas that have been identified as future worries for the children, then use further questions to ask for their ideas about what they would be doing in their care of the children to make sure that these worries didn't happen. For example:

- *One of the things we are worried about is that your boyfriend, Craig, might try to touch the girls on their private parts. What do you think you would need to be doing in your future house to make sure that the girls felt safe and protected?*
- *In the past, you have had some times when you were feeling really depressed and you weren't able to get out of the bed in the morning and look after the kids. In your future house, what would you be doing at times like that when you were feeling really depressed to make sure that your kids were still looked after?*

## 4. The Safety Path

The next part of the Future House process involves the safety path, which invites the parent/caregiver to:

- Identify how much of this preferred future (described in their future house) is already happening
- Reflect on how they have been able to achieve these changes
- Describe what needs to happen next for them to create more of this preferred future (next steps).

### 4.1 Exception Question

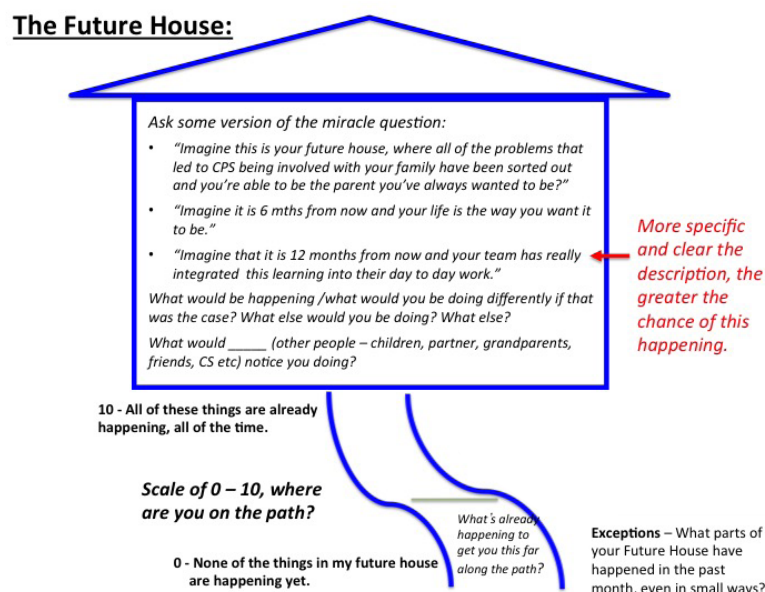
Before using the safety path to ask the scaling question, it can be helpful to ask a question which invites the parent/caregiver to think about times when some of this preferred future might already be happening (an exception question in SFBT terms), such as:

*So all of this is what would be happening in your future house with your kids. Fantastic! So let me ask you this question... In the last month (or whatever time period you think is most appropriate), have there been times when some of what you have described in your Future House has already been happening, even if it's just in small ways?*

The information provided by the parent/caregiver about the parts of their Future House that are already happening can be recorded below the Future House (off to the side) so that once the safety path has been drawn, this information can be linked to the safety path.

### 4.2 Scaling Question

The worker then draws a 'safety path' leading to their Future House and explains that the path represents how much of their Future House is already happening for their family, from 0 at the beginning of the path where none of what is described in their Future House is happening yet to 10, where all of what they described in their Future House is already happening, all of the time. Once the parent/caregiver identifies where they are on the safety path, a line or some other mark (some parents draw a stick figure of themselves) is put on the safety path to represent the parent's position on the safety path.

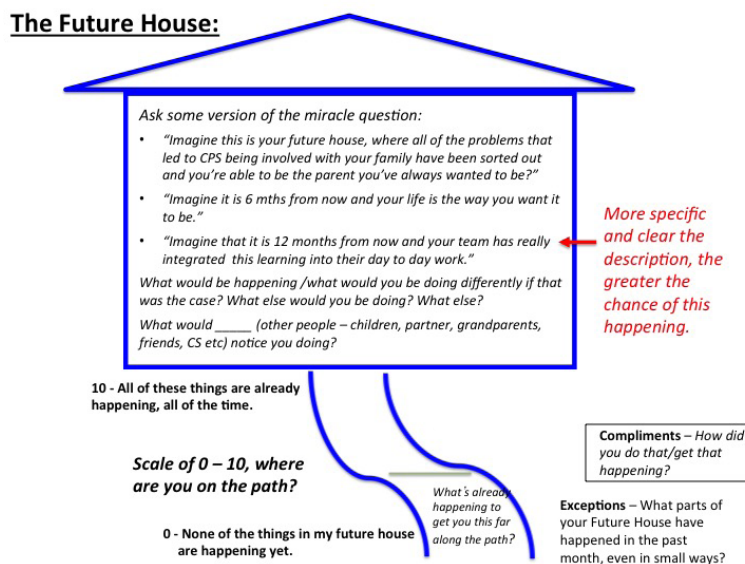


### 4.3 What has them this far along the path?

The worker can then ask: *What's already happening or what are you already doing that has you this far along the path?*

This question is an important one as it invites the parent/caregiver to describe the good things that are already happening in their care of the children, which The child protection agency may or may not be aware of. These things may be strengths that can be built upon in the process of building safety for the children, or they may be examples of actions of protection, which are times when the parents/caregivers have been able to keep the children safe in relation to the identified worries. Once again it is important for the parent/caregiver to describe what is happening in specific detail. We need to use follow up questions (who, what, where, when) to elicit the specific details that will help parents/caregivers reflect more on what is already happening and be more likely to repeat these behaviours in the future.

Everything that the parent/caregiver identifies as already happening is recorded on the safety path (or next to the safety path if there is not enough room), as a way of recording and acknowledging the positive things that are already happening. The previous information about what has been happening in the past month is also linked to this part of the safety path, as these exceptions also describe the good things that have been happening in the family that have the parent/caregiver scaling themselves this far along the safety path.



### 4.4 Giving Compliments

Focusing on what is already happening provides an opportunity for the worker to compliment the parent/caregiver on the changes/positive outcomes that have already been achieved and to provide further opportunities for reflection by enquiring into how the person achieved those outcomes/changes.

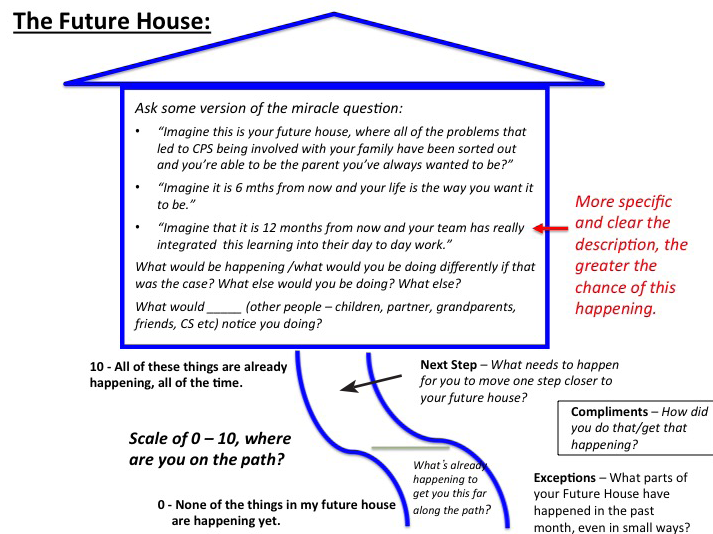
### 4.5 Next Steps

Workers can then use the safety path to invite parents/caregivers to describe what they see as the next steps in working toward their preferred future/safety goals for their children, by asking:

*You have said that you are here on the safety path right now. What needs to happen for you to move one step closer to your future house?*



What the parent/caregiver identifies as the next steps can then be recorded on the safety path above their position, as shown in the diagram below.



## 5. Getting permission to show their Future House to others

After the Future House has been completed, you can then have the conversation with parents about who they are willing to show their Future House to. It is important that you involve the parents/caregivers in the decision about who sees their Future House and how they would like the information presented to others. You may need to proceed slowly and sensitively at this point as this may be the first time that parents/caregivers have expressed their views to professionals (or other family members) about what they want for their children in the future. Acknowledge that they may feel vulnerable and cautious about showing their views to others.

## 6. Revisiting the Future House over time

The Future House can be revisited in future sessions with the parents/caregivers to have ongoing conversations about the progress that is being made in working toward future safety for the children. Place the Future House on the table in front of the parents/caregivers and ask:

- *Okay, here's what you said you wanted to have happening in your Future House. Two weeks ago this is where you said you were on the path. Where are you now?*
- *You've moved up a bit – that's great! What's been happening that has you a little higher on the path? Fantastic! And what needs to happen next for you to move a bit further along the path?*
- *So you've moved down a little bit... okay, well all of us have times when we feel like we go one step forward and two steps back. So what's been happening that has you a little lower on the path? And what do you think are the next steps so you can move a little higher on the path? What do you need to do to move a little higher? What support do you need from others to help you move a little higher?*

# Process considerations

In using the Future House tool, the following process considerations are important:

## 1. The importance of giving compliments

The fact that parents are describing how they want their care of their children to be in the future provides the opportunity for lots of compliments. As well as recording the parents' ideas within the Future House, it is also important that you are acknowledging their ideas/visions/dreams by compliments; as many and as often as you feel you can genuinely provide. Compliments not only communicate that you are paying attention to the good stuff that is happening in their life and that they want to have happen in their life, but also brings a sense of positive energy to the work that you are doing together.

## 2. Paying attention to good questions

As you are using the Future House tool, please pay attention to the questions that you use. As soon as you can after using the Future House with parents/caregivers, write down the questions that you used that you thought were effective. Or if you have a colleague with you, ask them to write down every single question you ask and then reflect with you later on which questions were most effective. You can share those questions with your colleagues, perhaps sending an email to everyone saying: "Just used the Future House tool and here are some of the questions that I used that worked really well".

## 3. Working with couples individually or together or in a group

As the case example in this booklet demonstrates, you can use the Future House tool with a couple or with people individually. It is also possible to create a future house with a group (for example, creating a combined Future House in a family group meeting). If this is the case, it will be important to ask questions of all people to elicit their individual points of view and to acknowledge that they may have different opinions and different perspectives that they bring. It may also be helpful to create people's individual Future House before the FGM (particularly if there are dynamics that make it difficult for people to speak up in a group context). There may be situations (for example, where there has been violence or where power and coercion are being used by one person against another) when it will be safer and more meaningful to meet individually with someone to create their Future House. This is explored further below.

## 4. Using the Future House tool in situations of domestic and family violence

If there have been allegations or a history of domestic and family violence, or if you have concerns that what one person may say in the session may place them at risk of harm from another person, then it is critical that the future house process is carefully managed so that individual family members are able to share their views without placing themselves at risk of further violence or control. This may mean, for example, that in a situation where there are allegations or knowledge of violence by the father towards the mother, that you hold individual sessions with each of the parents and plan carefully with the mother about how to share her views with the father, the network and other professionals in ways that will not put her in a vulnerable or dangerous position. This is an opportunity to hear about and support the mother in her efforts to keep her children safe. It is also fair to tell her that she cannot control his behaviour and that the responsibility to stop the violence sits clearly with the father. It will be helpful and re-assuring to the mother to discuss how you are going to speak to the father about his responsibilities as a parent in your planning with him.

At the end of the process of creating a future house with a vulnerable parent or young person, it will be important to carefully manage how their views are shared, particularly with the person who is responsible for the violence. You can ask them to think about:

- Who else needs to see the ideas that they have expressed in their future house?
- What needs to happen for this to be managed in a safe way?

It is also important to create a future house with the person who is responsible for the violence, both to be clear that the responsibility for changing their behaviour rests with the perpetrator, as well as providing an opportunity for that person to think through their behaviour, the impact it is having on their children (either directly and/or through impacting the other parent's capacity to parent), and how they want things to be in the future for their children and their family. The respectful and curious solution-focused approach that is central to the future house process will often create space for offenders or perpetrators to explore the meaning and impact of their behaviour and to move beyond superficial or defensive responses to begin envisaging the possibility of change.

## Locating the Future House information within the CAP framework/collaborative planning process

The future house tool can also be a very useful tool for helping family members to understand the CAP framework and collaborative planning process. Showing parents/caregivers how the information from their Future House fits within the CAP framework can help them to make sense of the framework and participate in the collaborative assessment and planning process. Connections between the future house and the CAP framework are explored below:

### 1. *Goal statements*

As described earlier in this booklet, the Future House is a tool for identifying the family member's goals (what family members think they need to be doing in the future in their care of their children to show everyone that the children will always be safe in relation to the identified dangers).

The information that is recorded within the main part of the Future House can therefore be transferred to the goal statements section of the CAP framework. The family's ideas about the goals can then be considered alongside The child protection agency's goals, to develop and identify clear statements of what everyone (professionals, family members, network members) would need to see happening to be confident that there was enough safety for the children in the care of their family to close the case.

Working from these goal statements, the detailed action plan is then developed with the family and the network to provide detailed descriptions of HOW the family will achieve these goals. The action plan describes the day-to-day behaviours of the parents/caregivers and day-to-day arrangements within the family to achieve these goals and to show everyone that the children will always be safe in the family's care in relation to the worries.

### 2. *Scaling*

The parent/caregiver's position on the safety path is their scaling of how they assess the family situation, in relation to their preferred future (goal statements) for their children. Talking with parents about where they have scaled themselves in relation to the goals they have identified

can help them to understand the different but related scaling question being asked in the CAP framework (with 10 being that everyone is confident that there is enough safety to close the case and 0 being that things are so worrying for the children that they are not able to live at home at the moment).

Asking parents/caregivers where they think other people would put them on the safety path leading to their Future House will also help them to understand that other stakeholders may hold different views and may scale the situation differently.

### *3. What's Working Well*

The information provided by the parents/caregivers about what is already happening that has them this far along the safety path, and what aspects of their Future House are already happening, can be recorded directly within the "What's Working Well" (right hand) column of the CAP framework, either as actions of protection and belonging, or as strengths and resources. Remember to record this information with as much specific detail as possible and in the language used by the family.

### *4. Next Steps*

What the parents/caregivers identify as the next steps in moving closer to their Future House can be directly recorded under the 'Action Steps' section of the framework (bottom of the framework) as the parents/caregivers ideas for what needs to happen next in working toward building future safety for their children.

### *5. What We're Worried About*

While the Future House tool is not designed to identify what the parents/caregivers are worried about, once parents/caregivers have been able to articulate what they want for their children in the future and to identify which of these actions they are already taking and achieving, they are more able to talk openly about what is not going so well in the present. So spending time exploring what the parents/caregivers want for their children in the future (goal statements) can then make it easier to talk through the worries (harm statements, complicating factors and worry statements).

Some workers have then talked with families about including the worry statements within the Future House and have done this by writing the worry statements at the bottom of the safety path or by doing things like drawing clouds and recording the worry statements within the clouds.

## **Conclusions**

For our interventions to make a positive difference for children and families, we need to find ways of working with families that make sense to them and that help to bring a sense of hope and energy to the incredibly difficult terrain of child protection. The Future House tool provides child protection workers with a practical, positive way of eliciting parents' ideas about what they need to do to ensure future safety for their children and including these ideas right in the centre of the collaborative planning process.

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