

# Children and Family Services

A Framework for Practice with Children & Families  
Signs of Safety, Stability and Success

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*In Leicestershire we want to work with families in ways that ensure more and more children can live within their own support networks and communities*

# Children and Family Services

## A Framework for Practice with Children & Families Signs of Safety, Stability and Success

This paper describes our practice framework which underpins our work to improve the lives of children and families living in Leicestershire. The framework will be relevant for all those practitioners who work directly with children, young people and their families and with their wider networks of support. The framework provides an evidence based methodology for work with families across the continuum of need. It will help ensure that all teams and services are working coherently and more consistently as families move between teams. It is intended to be used as part of the induction process for new or returning workers, in workforce development, in the shaping of policies and procedures and in our quality assurance systems. In short it is written to remind all workers and managers of our ambition and our collective responsibility to develop and strengthen our practice based on evidence of what works and what families tell us works for them.

### **Departmental Vision:**

Leicestershire is the best place for all children, young people and their families

### **Mission:**

Children and young people in Leicestershire are safe and living in families where they can achieve their potential and have their health wellbeing and life chances improved within thriving communities

To deliver our mission we believe that children and young people, their parents and their natural networks of support need to be at the centre of all aspects of our work.

# Family Work: The Departmental Philosophy

## **Working to keep families safely together where ever possible**

Children must be protected from harm and neglect and children's safety remains our priority. For a small minority of children and young people, we know that it will not be safe for them to live with their families. Children and young people who are living away from their families need stability and permanence in their lives. Current departmental policy sets out our principles in this matter: 'All children have a right to experience family life, and wherever it is consistent with their health and welfare this should be with their own families (LCC Permanence Policy 2013 Revised 2016).

The Munro Review of Child Protection (2011) highlighted the importance of building resilience and reducing risk for families. We know that for the vast majority of children, growing up in their family networks and being close to their own communities is far better for them than living with strangers. In Leicestershire we want to work with families in ways that ensure more and more children can live within their own support networks and communities.

## **Proportionate and tailored responses**

Children need to receive the right help, at the right time. This means providing the lowest level of intervention necessary to meet need, working with families to help them resolve their issues and support them to get back on track as quickly as possible. Workers need to be 'risk savvy' and robustly monitor the changes that families and their networks put in place. We believe that almost all families are the experts on their own lives and most want the best for their children. However we will continue to check and challenge families so that children are safe, can achieve success and have stability in their lives.

## **Constructive working relationships are key to achieving lasting change**

The department will work with the child's wider family and their supportive networks and connections to help families do their best for their children and achieve the changes that will work for them in the longer term. The strengths, skills and knowledge of families and their networks will help build solutions and support the family's capacity to change and keep children safe. Sometimes referred to as 'restorative practice' – our focus is on building, maintaining and restoring relationships. It is not so much a model or a tool, more a way of working with families.



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We know from both national research and our own practice experience that the children living in **families who are isolated with few or poor social networks** are at higher risk of poor outcomes, of neglect, abuse, and poor mental health. Helping parents identify and seek support at the earliest point from within their neighbourhood or naturally occurring networks can help strengthen families and support parents when they are struggling or feel overwhelmed. Working in this way helps to build solutions owned by families, providing greater safety for children and young people.

### **Development of a practice framework**

The practice framework described here expresses the departmental commitment to high quality practice in our work with families. In developing the framework the goals are to;

- Identify and adopt a clear methodology for working with families across the continuum of services across the department.
- Identify and adopt a tested approach which equips practitioners to more effectively work with risk in families so that children are safe and protected both immediately and in the longer term.
- Harness the families' strengths as well as identifying concerns, risks or worries and developing shared goals and clear plans to create change.
- Provide high challenge and high support to our staff teams
- Be explicit and consistent in the way we make decisions – we must be able to show our analysis and evidence our rationale for all decisions taken including how we have taken into account the family's views.
- Ensure that practice is compassionate and based on working with families to help them change – not doing to families. The plan for achieving change is the family's plan. They describe the steps they will take to improve their situation.
- Enable practitioners to engage successfully with all families – even when there is denial of harm, or families are wary or fearful of professionals.

## The Practice Framework

The practice framework is made up of 3 elements. These are set out below;

### (a) Principles for excellence in practice

- The quality of the **workers' relationship** with the child/family is essential in a process of change.
- Children need people in their life who care for them who are invested in them and want the best for them. The people who give them positive doses on a daily basis.
- Children and families are more likely engage in a plan they helped to develop. Plans and decisions affecting children and families should be made in a meeting that includes the **family support network** as well as the professional network.
- Separating children from their families is often traumatic for children. Their distress can be lessened when they can safely stay close to their own communities and **maintain their relationships** with schools, friends and other natural connections.
- Assessments should focus on **underlying needs**, (as opposed to symptoms), as this promotes more effective intervention and lasting change.
- Success in school is a reliable predictor of child well-being. Planning for the **safety, stability and success** for children should be fully integrated with school support plans so that children can continue to make progress in their education.
- Services should be provided as close to the place where the child and family live and find most **accessible**.
- The role of line **managers and supervisors** is critical in ensuring plans are robust and effective in positively changing children's lives.

### (b) The practice methodology: Signs of Safety, Stability and Success

- The Signs of Safety (Stability and Success) methodology is a '**strength based**' model characterised by an **inclusive partnership approach** – work is undertaken collaboratively with children, families and their naturally occurring networks of support. Ownership of change rests with the family – who are seen as the experts on their own lives. Their networks of support are a cornerstone for effective change – workers help **to build capacity** in families to secure safety, stability and sustained success for children living in challenging circumstances.
- The methodology offers a 'fit for purpose' practice model which takes a stance of **critical enquiry**. This means workers must take a **questioning, curious approach** to fully explore risks dangers or worries, distilling these into succinct and clear statements using plain language so they are fully understood by everyone involved.
- There is equal commitment to identifying what is **already working well** in the network and identifying strengths and existing safety which could be built upon to secure increased safety, stability and success.
- There is a set of processes which are clear for both workers and families. Engaging children is central, ensuring their **voice** is brought into the assessment and the plan. Parents are supported to explain events and plans to children using a technique known as 'words and pictures' to help children understand and make sense of what is happening in their lives.
- The methodology provides a range of **effective analytical tools** to support assessment and planning, decision making and the engagement of children and families. Practice disciplines support workers to be specific and precise about their concerns. They involve workers and managers using plain language, focusing on specific observable behaviours as well as the skilful use of authority.

### (c) Practice depth

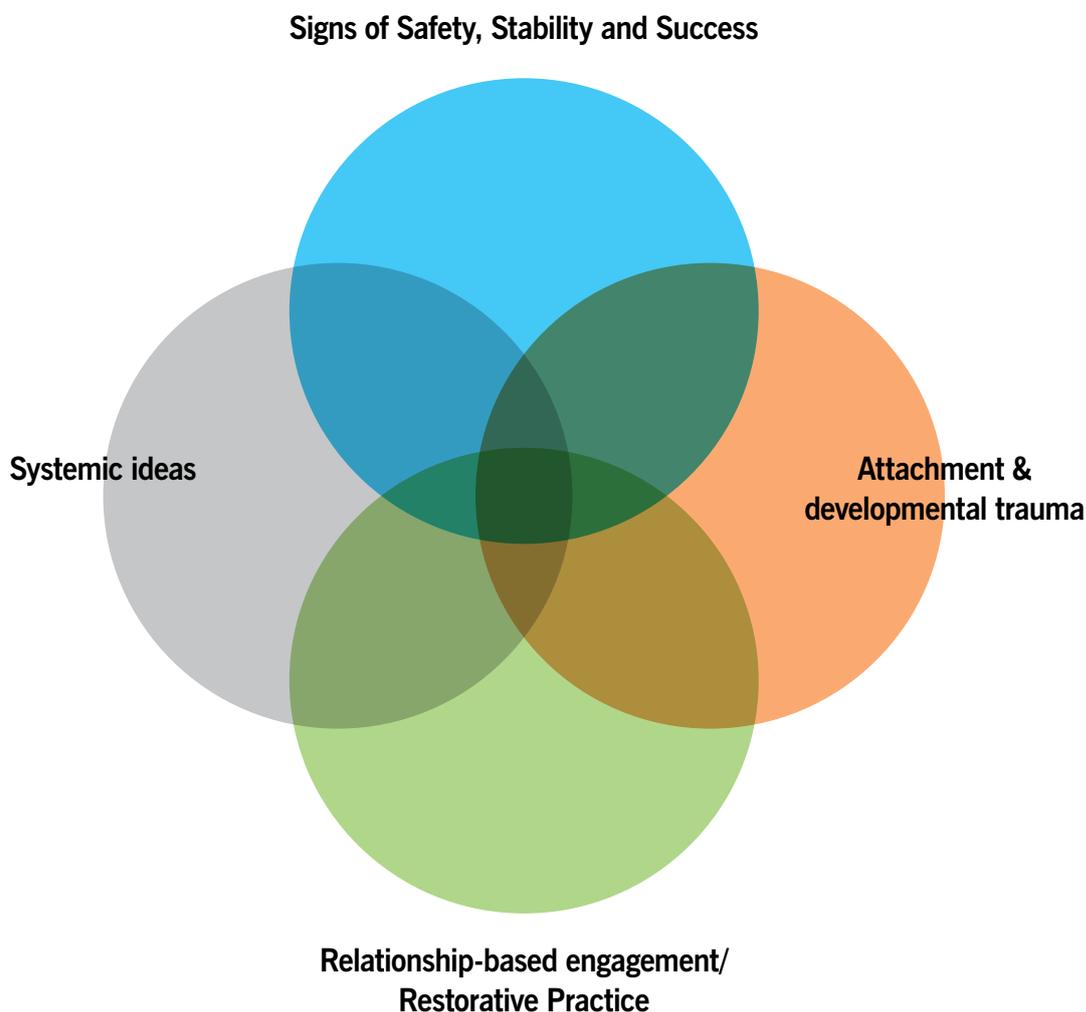
An understanding of the term 'practice depth' is shown in the diagram below:



This methodology is not a stand-alone approach. The application and integration of professional knowledge is essential in the delivery of high quality practice. The knowledge and expertise gained through professional training, development and practice wisdom that are relevant to the complexity of each family's situation must be woven into the application of the methodology. For example:

- In situations of neglect or cumulative harm the long term impact of chronic behaviours such as low warmth/high criticism parenting is considered
- In domestic violence the psycho-social effects of witnessing and hearing domestic violence and abuse for children is demonstrated
- Careful consideration of the impact of relevant complicating factors such as trauma, mental illness, substance misuse, developmental delay, fear of professionals etc.
- Clear evidence that the cultural context is considered so that the family members/people from that culture would say their culture has been respected.
- An understanding of the significant role that good attachment and healthy child development plays in early brain development of babies and children.

The diagram below seeks to demonstrate this integration of thinking we want to see in practice. We have emphasised the key practice models which we believe help ground our practice with children and families.



**Systemic Ideas** have long been part of our tool kit – working with the wider system in which children, young people and families live their lives. This way of working tries to understand the context of families and will consider how relationships in families are influencing things. We use the whole system to generate solutions and to think about the patterns which may have developed and led to unhelpful behaviours.

**Attachment and developmental trauma** are theories which have huge influence in our understanding of childhood life experiences and adult parenting styles where trauma remains unresolved. All practitioners know the critical importance of early brain development and the detrimental long term impact on children's future life chances when care is unsafe, unpredictable or significantly disrupted. We know the long term impact of **ACES and toxic stress**.

**Relationship based engagement** (sometimes referred to as restorative practice): Like the models described above, this is a strength based approach which places great importance on the quality of the relationship built with families by workers to build capacity, resilience and develop people's potential.

## Implementation

The implementation of this practice framework is central to consistent high quality practice. Supervisors and managers are critical to leading on the implementation. Our shared focus is to continue to help our workers make the connections between the different models of practice, with research and professional wisdom so that practice has a richness and depth.

The approach to implementation of the practice framework is focused across four areas:



### a) Learning

Staff groups have access to a range of formal training and workshops on a range of practice issues to grow confidence in the application of the Signs of Safety methodology, other **practice models** and to develop **critical thinking and analysis** skills in our teams.

### b) Leadership

We have a strong departmental commitment to this framework. We want our managers to feel confident in their leadership of this framework to transform our practice with families. They will continue to lead services and teams in ways that model the ethos and principles outlined in this document.

### c) Organisational Alignment

This refers to the alignment with practice of all policies, procedures and forms. The Practice Development Group has worked hard to influence and shape these and we have made steady progress in this area over the last eighteen months. The planned adoption of a new case management system aligned with Signs of Safety practice will significantly enhance our alignment during 2019/20.

#### **d) Meaningful Measures**

The department continues to use data and key performance indicators to manage and monitor operational performance. In addition, we have made good progress in shaping our departmental quality assurance and improvement framework to more closely align with our practice framework. The four critical domains are:

- understanding and using data,
- qualitative analysis of practice through audit and practice observation,
- the voice of staff (staff wisdom)
- the voice of children and families themselves.

#### **Summary**

The Children & Family Services department has adopted a shared practice framework to underpin all of its direct work with children and their families. We believe this will support the effective delivery of high quality services. The successful application of this framework in day to day practice will strengthen the capacity of parents and families to give the best care they can for their children and deliver improved outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Heads of Service





