Chair’s Handbook

A Guide for Chairs of Child Protection Conferences and Family Support Conferences and Meetings To Using the Strengthening Families Framework In Those Meetings

Introduction

Strengthening Families Framework

- **Danger/Harm**
  - Detail re: incident(s)
  - Bringing the family to the attention of the agency.
  - Pattern/history

- **Risk Statements**
  - Risk to child(ren)
  - Context of risk

- **Complicating Factors**
  - Condition/behaviors that contribute to greater difficulty for the family
  - Presence of research based risk factors

- **GENOGRAM/ECOMAP**
  - (Grey Area)

- **Safety**
  - Strengths demonstrated as protection over time
  - Pattern/history of exceptions

- **Safety Statement/Outcomes**
  - Description of the child’s care experience in positive terms

- **Strengths/Protective Factors**
  - Assets, resources, capacities within family, individual/community
  - Presence of research based protective factors

Outline Plan

1. Keyworker
2. Visiting frequency
3. Core Group – who?
4. Core Group dates
5. Safety bottom lines
6. Review CPC date

The purpose of the Strengthening Families Framework – SFF hereafter - in Child Protection and Family Support Meetings and Conferences is to enhance the objectives of the Conference or meeting itself, which is to build safety for children at risk of harm. There are more similarities with than differences from the traditional business meeting format of Child Protection Conferences but
CHAIR’S HANDBOOK

the SFF approach is designed to help families participate more easily and to help all participants assess risk better.

The guidance in this handbook should be read in conjunction with the HM Government guidance on child protection conferences contained in ‘Working Together To Safeguard Children’ (2006), with which it complies and accords.

This first, main section of this guide is descriptive, with a ‘how to’ emphasis. The second section of Notes provides background, commentary and additional practical advice. Throughout the guide the terminology ‘Child Protection Conference’ is used, rather than ‘Child Protection Conference or Family Support Conference or Multi-Agency Casework Meeting’, which would be unwieldy. However, except for the detail about what must / must not be in a child protection plan, which is prescribed by ‘Working Together’, the guidance applies to all these meetings.

Preparation

As soon as possible after the decision has been taken to hold an Initial Child Protection Conference, the social worker meets with the family to do the following:

- to inform them of this and to explain why the decision to hold an ICPC has been taken;
- to inform family members what the meeting is for and give written information;
- to discuss who from the family (in its widest sense) should be invited to the meeting, including the children and how they might be supported, advocacy, transport, childcare etc.;
- to consult with the family about the venue for the meeting. It will not always be possible for families to be able to choose the conference venue for practical reasons, but any strong objections to particular venues should be noted and every effort made to find an alternative;
- to identify what practical and emotional help – including advocacy – the children and adults will need to help them participate effectively in the Conference.

During the week preceding the ICPC, the Chair of the meeting also meets with the family. Ideally this takes place a few days before the ICPC at a venue of the family’s choosing. The purpose of this meeting is

- to go over again the above issues already raised by the social worker;
- to give the family the opportunity to raise any issues of concern with the chair;
- for the chair to explain in detail how the ICPC will be run; to clarify how difficult or sensitive information will be shared; to work out with the family how their participation can be best facilitated; and to put them at their ease as far as is possible.

Because of resource implications, this meeting will often have to take place immediately before the ICPC itself. Whilst acceptable, wherever possible families should be given the opportunity to meet sooner, as this affords an increased likelihood of facilitating their best possible participation.

Prior to the ICPC beginning, the professionals and family will have read any written reports for the Conference. In the case of the family these reports will have been shared with them by their authors at least 48 hours before the ICPC. If professionals have not been sent the reports in advance, an opportunity will be made available for them to do so before the meeting begins. Often this happens in one room whilst the Chair meets with the family in another.

Venue, layout and refreshments
Wherever the ICPC is held, the room must have either a large whiteboard or at least a blank wall onto which the Strengthening Families Framework (SFF) can be projected or drawn on flipchart paper or Magic Whiteboard paper. The chairs and tables are arranged in a horseshoe shape facing the whiteboard or screen with the SFF headings written on it. The chair stands or is seated in front of the whiteboard or screen.

Tea and coffee is made available to all participants and squash or juice, particularly for children and young people.

**The Initial Child Protection Conference**

**Family Tree**

After brief introductions, the chair invites the family members to volunteer information about themselves and their family and friends network – names, ages, relationships, addresses. The Chair assembles the information into a genogram or family tree, drawing it on the whiteboard or on an adjacent flipchart. Other information about key individuals, organizations, services, community supports etc can be added where appropriate. At this stage of the meeting only family members contribute. The Family Tree will clarify who is in the extended ‘family’ system (and this should include important / supportive friends and non-blood ties) and will establish who lives where and with whom.

‘Danger/Harm’

Once the family tree has been constructed, the Chair asks the social worker to outline, in ‘distilled’ form, the key danger/harm factors. Another way to elicit this information is for the Chair to ask ‘why has this conference been called?’ What is sought here is

(a) key facts about recent events or incidents which have brought the case over the ‘significant harm’ threshold; and

(b) other relevant information indicating a possible or actual pattern or history of significant harm.

The Chair records each relevant piece of information in ‘distilled’ form in the Danger/Harm section of the SFF in bullet point form.

This information will usually be only a part of what the social worker has to report to the meeting – the rest will be requested later.

The chair may also ask other meeting participants to contribute here e.g. the police representative where the key incidents of danger/harm have involved police; or medical staff where children have sustained documented injuries or there is medical evidence of assault(s).

If it is not a Child Protection Conference and there is little or no ‘Danger/Harm’ in the situation, then ‘Key Concerns’ or a similar heading can be substituted.

**Other Information**

After establishing the key Danger / Harm factors, the remainder of the information can be shared in a variety of orders, according to what the Chair thinks will work best: The remaining information about the parenting and environment which is of concern could be requested next from the social
worker (this is recorded by the Chair in the ‘Complicating Factors’ section of the SFF) and then the same from the other professionals or alternatively the social worker could share information about strengths and safety aspects of parenting and environment before other professionals are consulted. It will usually be important, however, to be child focused when sharing information about the children. This means that each child is taken in turn and each professional and family members contribute what they know - about what is going well as well as what the concerns are - as is common practice in the conventional methodology for Child Protection Conferences. This is important because it enables an holistic of each child picture to be drawn up by and for conference members.

Whatever the order, the Chair will record each piece of ‘distilled’ information in bullet point form in the relevant section of the SFF.

‘Complicating Factors’

These are pieces of information which add to the overall picture of concerns, but which, if considered separately from the Danger / Harm factors, do not of themselves individually or together indicate significant harm. They are contextual factors and some may trigger danger and harm incidents e.g drug and alcohol abuse. As well as information about family members, it is important to remember environmental factors, which often complicate abusive environments, particularly poverty, unemployment, housing and debt.

‘Safety’

This is information which directly mitigates or fully addresses the danger/harm factors. It is defined as ‘protection over time’. It is unlikely that there will be very much in this part of the SFF at an Initial Child Protection Conference – if there was, the meeting should not be taking place as all the danger/harm factors would already have been addressed. Some of the factors in the ‘Strengths’ section may become ‘elevated’ to safety at subsequent review conferences when they have persisted over a significant period and/or become established as a consistent pattern of exceptions to the maltreatment. Examples might include consistent sobriety, where drunkenness has triggered the abuse or neglect; successful completion of treatment programmes accompanied by prolonged absence of maltreatment and positive professional prognosis.

Where ‘Safety’ is not the ultimate goal because of the absence of ‘Danger/Harm’ where the meeting is not a Child Protection Conference, then ‘Well Being’ or another similar phrase can be substituted.

‘Strengths’

Strengths are the positive equivalent of ‘complicating factors’ – they help the situation to be safer but in and of themselves they do not bring about enough safety to counteract or address the ‘Danger/Harm’ factors. They are contextual and may provide some of the ‘seeds’ of future safety if they can be developed and brought to bear directly on the danger. For example, a strength might be a positive relationship between a child who has been sexually abused and a trusted, non-abusing adult within their family network. This could be elevated to the ‘Safety’ section through the operation of a child protection plan plan, which has demonstrably enabled the child to confide in that adult whenever he/she has felt uncomfortable or at risk.
‘Grey Area’

This section of the SFF can be used quite flexibly to record or note relevant matters or issues about which there is insufficient detailed information for conference members to attach risk value, making it difficult to record in one of the other sections above. Noting these is important as they will often highlight areas for further information– gathering / assessment.

The ‘Grey Area’ can also be used to record information which is in dispute as to its factual content; and information to which different members of the meeting attach different risk value e.g. a family member may see a child’s classroom experience as a complicating factor or even a danger factor, where they consider a teacher is picking on the child. However, the school may consider that the teacher is providing firm boundaries, which the child needs, and see this as a strength.

‘Risk Statement’

Once all of the information has been shared in the Conference, the chair will ask the participants to develop a risk statement, which is the collective or predominant view of the group about what specific danger(s) the child is facing, its extent, context and consequences. Good questions to elicit this would be:

“If things carry on the way they have been lately, how and when will Serena be affected?”
“If professionals/family don’t step in, will Riven be safe enough?”
“Have enough steps been taken already to ensure that Jade will be safe, at least until the next conference?”
“What are the dangerous times and places for Marvel and what might happen to him/her?”
“Who, in what situation, poses a risk to Li and what are they likely to do?”
“When children suffer abuse/neglect of the sort facing Meera and Robert, what does research and experience tell us about what damage is caused to them?”

The chair may want to ask conference members to rate their estimates of the danger level using a numerical scale, usually between 0 and 10, where 0 equals no danger at all and 10 equals the most dangerous situation for a child that the agency has ever seen.

‘Safety Statement’

Having described and measured the danger to the child(ren) in the ‘Risk Statement’ (the danger/concern departure point), the Conference now needs to describe the improved outcomes (the safety destination) for the children which the plan needs to aim for. Like the risk statement, these need to be specific to the child and the harm which they are vulnerable to, but unlike the ‘risk statement’ they should not be specific to the child’s current circumstances. Examples might include

“In Hella’s home the family will show love and support; nurture her; and make sure she does not experience or witness violence or lots of shouting. She will go to school on time every day (unless she is unwell); she will be clean and dressed in clean clothes which are suitable for the weather, fit her and are in good repair.”
“Tia will be kept safe from sexual assault, fear, threats an worries at home and anywhere she goes; she will feel safe and will have trusted a trusted circle of support containing adults she feels relaxed and confident about talking to if she is troubled.”
‘Outline Plan’

The risk statement informs the conference’s decision whether the situation merits a child protection plan or a family support plan. This decision can be taken either before the plan is formed or after.

Whichever it is, the plan needs to address the following:

- the ‘mechanics’ of the plan implementation – who will be the key worker or lead professional; how often the child and family will be visited by the keyworker and how often seen alone; who will be part of the Core Group; when the Core Group will meet; who will arrange meetings, chair and take notes; how progress and safety will be monitored;
- the safety ‘bottom lines’ which the Conference needs to see to provide for the child(ren)’s immediate safety. These may focus on living arrangements and contact with the perpetrators of abuse; and/or on services which actively monitor danger e.g. unannounced visits. In neglect cases sometimes timescales for immediate actions may be specified such as for making living conditions hygienic;
- from the information available, identify the assessments needed and an outline of the actions most likely to achieve the ‘Safety Statement’ outcomes and who will be responsible for them, taking into account the willingness, confidence and capacity of family and professionals in relation to each action;
- where appropriate contingency plans may be outlined if the ‘bottom lines’ are transgressed e.g. ‘If any of the random drug testing indicates that Mr Smith has taken drugs, he will have to move out of the family home immediately or the children will need to live elsewhere, which in the first instance would be with Mr Smith’s sister.’

Usually during a Conference, steps which have already been taken to make the children safe, plus services already being provided will be mentioned, along with ideas and suggestions for more action. These should be noted by the chair and listed in the outline plan for potential inclusion in the action plan, which is not usually drawn up in the Conference, but subsequently by the Core Group. The first Core Group meeting will take the outline plan and make it into a viable action plan, again considering willingness, confidence and capacity.

The Review Child Protection Conference

Review conferences using the SFF are conducted in broadly the same way as Initial Conferences with a few key differences:

- Preparation: Having experienced one or more conferences already, family members are likely to be in a more informed position and can have more say about how and when preparation meetings between themselves and the Chair will take place;
- Family Tree: Unless there have been significant changes in the family structure or living arrangements since the previous meeting, it is unlikely that constructing a family tree again will be useful and so usually this step can be omitted at review conferences. However, the Chair should consult with family about this in the pre-meeting and if family feel strongly that it should be repeated, then in the absence of strong reasons not to, it should be repeated;
CHAIR’S HANDBOOK

- **Previous SFF:** Along with reports for the Conference, participants should be given a copy of the SFF which was completed at the previous meeting (the Chair should have copies of the SFFs of all previous meetings available for reference if needed);

- **Risk & Safety Statements:** The ‘blank’ SFF on the whiteboard should not be completely blank: It should retain the ‘Risk Statement’ and the ‘Safety Statement’ from the previous meeting. The ‘Risk Statement’ serves to remind the meeting what the plan has been trying to prevent; and the ‘Safety Statement’ are the outcomes which the child protection plan has been trying to achieve. In this way and through reference to the previous meeting’s SFF, progress and deterioration can be measured. Each should be erased at the point of the Conference when the new, current version is agreed;

- **Outline Plan:** When considering what should go in the new plan, it is important for the meeting to discuss what did and did not work from the previous plan so that the new plan can contain more of what works and less of what doesn’t.

NOTES

**Introduction**

The Child Protection Conference came into being in the UK in the 1970s following the death of Maria Colwell. Originally, its purpose was for professionals to meet to share information and it assumed a traditional business meeting methodology well suited to this purpose. However, the purpose of conferences has since expanded. ‘Working Together’ now tells us that Conferences should achieve their child safety aim by sharing information, assessing risk and making a plan. In addition family members are now invited to participate in conferences. Despite these key changes to the conference’s objectives and membership, little or no consideration has been given to the question of whether the traditional business meeting format is well suited to getting the best outcomes. If we reflect on this we may come to the same conclusion as the hill farmer asked for directions by the lost motorist “…if I’d wanted to go there, I wouldn’t be starting from here.” Clearly, the format of the Child Protection Conference has evolved rather than been designed. The SFF methodology is not, however, suggested because the traditional business meeting approach never works. Thanks to the efforts of skilled practitioners and chairs and co-operative families, many conferences are very successful. However it may be that aims and objectives are achieved, despite rather than because of the meeting format. Despite a body of evidence which highlights some of the problems with Child Protection Conferences (insert references), no previous attempts have been made to design an alternative format.

There is no equivalent meeting in the U.S. Child Protection system, so when, 7 or 8 years ago, practitioners in Olmsted County, Minnesota determined a need for family and professionals to meet to resolve disagreements about child maltreatment issues, they had the opportunity to start from scratch. Sue Lohrbach and Rob Sawyer drew on practice knowledge and experience from several sources. Perhaps the most influential was their work with Andrew Turnell, co-author with Steve Edwards of ‘Signs of Safety’, a solution focused child protection casework model; it is Turnell and Edwards’ assessment and planning form with danger on the left and safety on the right which forms the basic structure for the SFF. Other influences in the SFF design are restorative approaches, including Family Group Conferencing; research findings, particularly the UK ‘Messages From Research’; and knowledge of the UK child protection conference system.
Lohrbach and Sawyer came up with a methodology which actively assists the Conference in 2 key ways, which traditional UK Conference methodology does not: Firstly it enables information to be shared in such a way that it is ‘sifted’ and organized to help participants attach risk value/meaning to each piece of information, and ultimately the whole picture. Secondly, the process of the meeting and its impact on participants is attended to so that the key tension of the conference – between professional concerns about child safety and family fears of child removal – is eased as much as it can be through a structure which is family friendly and respectful on the one hand; and rigorous about identifying and addressing danger to children on the other.

**Preparation**

Good preparation is vitally important to achieving successful outcomes from any meeting and is arguably the most important aspect of the whole process. McKeowan (2000) has shown that 4 factors have the most influence in determining good outcomes for children in social care interventions:

- The resources which the family/service user itself brings to bear on the problems/issues – 40%
- The relationship between the professional(s) and the service user/family – 30%
- Client/family hopefulness – 15%
- Method of intervention – 15%

The preparation for the conference should focus on helping to maximize the potential of the first 3 of these.

The social worker should ask the family if they need help and support to attend the meeting and all reasonable requests should be agreed by the Unit Manager.

The ‘pre-meeting’ between the Chair and family members, particularly before initial or first Conferences, is extremely important for family members in establishing (a) the chair’s neutrality/disinterest and lack of bias or partiality towards any agency or family member; (b) that family members will be listened to; and (c) a relationship of trust with the chair based on fairness.

Although it may be difficult to achieve in practice because of a shortage of time and resources, holding the ‘pre-meeting’ between family members and the Chair a few days ahead of the Conference on the family’s ‘territory’ maximizes the likelihood of reassuring the family that they will be treated fairly, with respect and will to some degree looked after through the process of the meeting.

A successful ‘pre-meeting’ will usually be enormously helpful in helping family members to sit through and hopefully participate effectively in, for them extremely difficult discussions about the most difficult and often shameful aspects of their lives. If support of this kind is omitted or neglected, in some cases families will resort to ‘fight or flight’.

**Venue, layout and refreshments**

Families need to be consulted about the meeting venue because the wrong venue for them might hamper their participation and so damage potential partnership in safety planning; Sometimes if families are in conflict with an agency in whose premises the meeting is being held or if they have
had bad experiences in a particular building, they will be unable to function well in that environment.

Venue availability will sometimes make it hard to meet all the needs of the meeting and some compromises will usually have to be made. However, venues should be chosen for both practical reasons and their convenience and ‘easiness’ for participants. Practical reasons include

- at least one other room available for the pre-meeting or for professionals to read reports in;
- enough space for participants, whiteboard etc.;
- not conjoined to or overlooking/overlooked by public access spaces.

Convenience and easiness factors include

- an environment in which participants can feel relaxed & comfortable;
- a situation in the family’s locality wherever possible and at least not difficult for them to get to;
- tea and coffee making facilities.

Whilst it may seem a trivial point, the availability of refreshments is important in offering normal hospitality to participants and making them feel welcome. Moreover, the experience of Family Group Conferences takes this point further in acknowledging that it is normal to expect that groups of people when they assemble, will function better when they share food and drink. As one chair put it… “It’s hard for mum or dad to treat me like an uncaring bureaucrat when I have just made them a cup of tea.”

The Initial Child Protection Conference

Family Tree

There are several reasons for inclusion of a family tree or genogram in the conference, at this point and in this way. Research (McKeowan 2000) indicates that family resources have the biggest single impact (40%) of all factors contributing significantly to improved outcomes for children in social care interventions. It is therefore crucial that knowledge of family in its widest sense is available to the conference. Research into Child Protection Conferences indicates that families feel at a disadvantage in conferences and less well heard and included than professionals. By encouraging family members to speak first, family voices are privileged and greater balance is restored. This is further enhanced by the affording of expertise to family members through the exercise of constructing the family tree, this being their knowledge of their own family. The Chair is also able to model a respectful, collaborative approach with family at this point which sets the right tone for the meeting, and this will assist with discussion of hard issues and challenges later on. Perhaps, though, the most important reason for constructing a genogram ‘live’ with family at the start of the meeting is that the process very often puts the family more at ease and therefore better able to contribute constructively to the meeting.

Danger/Harm

In restorative meeting scripts, the first stage of the meeting is concerned with ‘what happened?’ (to bring about this meeting). In the Child Protection Conference, this is the information about harm which the child has experienced and/or events which put the child in direct danger.
The danger / harm factors are usually the ‘elephant in the room’ in a Child Protection Conference - the hardest thing(s) for all participants to talk about and so the meeting needs to do this without delay to avoid building tension until they are covered. More importantly, however, just as the genogram exercise models respect for family, the juxtaposed focus on danger/harm factors gives the clear message that there will be no shying away from or avoidance of the hard facts of the specific abuse or neglect, which is the core business of the meeting. In this way the conference, in its first two agenda items, establishes a ‘high support, high discipline’ ethos. The Chair needs to be skilled in eliciting the right information from professionals here. Experience indicates that sometimes individual professionals struggle to be able to ‘sift’ the key danger / harm factors from other more circumstantial concerns and so may be tempted to offer most or all the information that they have at this point. This needs to be avoided because the key purpose of the ‘Danger / Harm’ box within the framework is to clarify what constitutes the direct risk of danger to the child, comprising therefore, the most worrying aspects of the scenario. It should be remembered that participants will have already read the report(s) for the conference and do not need to have every element repeated. Useful questions to respectfully help individual professionals to stay on the right lines might include the following:

‘We have read your very helpful report and are aware of how events unfolded. From that, can you pull out for us the key facts which indicate danger?’

‘What are most worrying facts in this situation?’

‘What has happened here that must stop happening for the children to be safe?’

‘What made you worried enough to request this meeting?’

The ‘Danger/Harm’ information will usually comprise recent events which have happened unexpectedly, or tipped the scales of a case which was already causing concern. It is worth noting however, that there is a well documented phenomenon relating to neglect, whereby incidents of neglect which are reported at intervals are not considered cumulatively and significant harm through neglect can be overlooked until a precipitating event such as an incident of physical abuse or domestic violence triggers sufficient additional concern that a Conference is called. In such cases, the key danger harm factors will be or include the patterns and accumulation of incidents of neglect rather than just the recent precipitating incidents.

The idea or purpose of ‘distilling’ information is to strip away everything but the relevant facts; ‘distilled’ information contains relevant detail, but only as much as enables participants to attach risk value to it. It is not a summary or a generalization, neither of which create enough of a concrete picture in the mind’s eye to convey the child’s experience and therefore for risk value to be ascribed. An example would be “Mr Smith has assaulted Mrs Smith 4 times in the last six weeks: Each time he kicked her in the ribs; twice he punched her in the face causing bruising. Tom and Mary saw and heard this twice and twice they heard it from upstairs.” A summary would not do the same job in helping convey the experience of Tom and Mary: “There have been four incidents of domestic violence in the past six weeks involving physical assaults on Mrs Smith by Mr Smith, witnessed by the children.” A generalization is even less helpful: “A pattern of domestic violence has recently developed, witnessed by the children.”

‘Distilling’ information in conferences in this way is valuable, not only in focusing the Conference’s attention on what is relevant, but in bringing and modeling a disciplined approach to managing information for practitioners which effectively teaches them how to pull the relevant facts from a bundle of information.
When the plan is being considered later in the conference, the ‘Danger/Harm’ factors are the things that the plan must prevent – the ‘what’ which the plan must tackle.

Other Information

A number of factors need to be considered by the Chair in determining the order of sharing the remaining information. The sheer amount of information will have a bearing as will the complexity of aspects of it, such as the history of previous involvement or one or more agency’s recent involvement. If the Chair decides that the concerns (left side of the SFF) should be aired before the strengths and safety (right side of the SFF) are explored, then they should be confident that the family are able to sit through an extended period when they will have to listen to all of the negative information, without becoming angry, defensive or defeated; if they cannot, then a ‘herringbone’ approach may be more favourable which switches from left to right sides of the SFF, taking some concerns and then some strengths. Chairs also need to be aware that sometimes it will be difficult for an anxious individual to visit one side of the SFF ahead of the other. For example a professional carrying a lot of anxiety about the safety of a child will usually need to share the information provoking that anxiety – and have it acknowledged by the Chair by recording it on the whiteboard - before they can usefully reflect and offer information about strengths / safety elements. Similarly a parent who is anxious that strengths are not overlooked may need to describe them and have them acknowledged before they can talk about risks and complicating factors. The process of having information acknowledged by being written up on the whiteboard achieves two additional purposes: Firstly, it enables the accuracy of the record of the contribution to be established straight away (chairs should ask or check out with participants that the ‘distilled’ information as they have written it conveys the contributor’s meaning). Secondly, by the immediate record of the contribution being made, the contributor is able to more easily consider and focus on the contributions of others. As in restorative meetings, when one feels on has had one’s say and been heard, one is able to hear others’ having their say in a less defensive way.

As well as the order of information sharing, Chairs need to ensure that contributors share their information in a disciplined way, particularly distinguishing between fact and opinion. The sharing of opinions is perfectly legitimate for participants and sometimes essential to the conference, but they must be labeled as such and the evidence base, or lack of one, for the opinion made explicit. So, for example, if a professional or family member said that they thought that there was a very good relationship between a parent and child, they should be asked respectfully for evidence; a good question would be ‘what have you seen, heard or been told which has led you to form that view?’ This is important because there is no ‘filter’ or test of veracity for recording contributions onto the SFF. It is important both that the evidence base for an opinion is sought and that, where presented, opinions are recorded even if the evidence to back up the opinion is scant. In this way both evidence and individuals’ ‘position statements’ are shared, acknowledged and recorded – both are important information for the Conference in assessing risk and making a plan. For example, if a parent says they see the couple relationship as a strength (in a case where domestic assaults constitute part of the danger), then this attributed opinion should be recorded either under ‘Strengths’ or in the ‘Grey Area’, but the parent should also be asked for evidence to back the opinion up. Of course in such a case there is likely to be other evidence in support of the opposite view, which should be made conspicuous by the Chair’s questions to the parent and to other conference members rather than the Chair offering a judgement. In this way the use of the framework accommodates differences of view and conflicting evidence and holds everything up for scrutiny in a fair and transparent way. And as the information is recorded onto the framework the
CHAIR'S HANDBOOK

visual record becomes, less a ‘see-saw’ of objective truth about danger and safety and more a visual tool which the meeting uses to record and test all known, relevant facts and views and which, at the ‘Risk Statement’ discussion part of the meeting, each individual and the collective group can then use to help determine their view about danger and safety and so what action will be needed to keep the child(ren) safe.

Complicating Factors

Complicating factors are usually things that are not going well for a child, parent or family but which contribute to, rather than constitute, the key risks to the children. A typical example might be a parent’s alcohol or drug misuse problem: The problem in and of itself does not pose a risk to the children but concomitant danger / harm behaviours might e.g. poor/non supervision due to depression; assaults triggered by alcohol or drugs; a parent’s own neglectful upbringing/lack of a good role model which leads to emotional and physical neglect. The behaviours belong in the Danger/Harm box and their probable or assessed root cause in the Complicating Factors box. The distinction is important because the child protection plan will need to distinguish ends from means – the ends / what must change is found in the Danger / Harm box. The means – how to make it happen – is often suggested by what is in the Complicating Factors box. It is reasonable for professionals to insist on the cessation of behaviours / events in the Danger / Harm box but not always on the means. Making these distinctions promotes useful risk discussion within the meeting and helps Conference members to unpick and analyse the information presented. This analysis will be greatly assisted by a skilful Chair who ensures the maintenance of an evidence base for these discussions by

- Ensuring that participants distinguish between fact and opinion;
- Ensuring that participants back up their assertions and opinions with evidence;
- Establishing the relevance of the information shared, through a child focus e.g. by asking participants, where it is not explicit, how the child is / will / might be impacted or affected by it.

When the plan is being considered later in the conference, the complicating factors are not in themselves the things that the plan must prevent or stop, but remedial attention to them may lower, reduce or stop the danger/harm factors from occurring; they are not the ‘what’ which the plan must tackle, but some of them may need to be targeted as part of the ‘how’ to reduce/stop the danger/harm.

‘Safety’

The judgement about whether a piece of information should go in the ‘Safety’ section is helped by the chair referring to the ‘Danger/Harm’ section and asking whether and how this reduces, mitigates or removes some or all of the danger. This is helpful in clarifying and distinguishing between co-operation and progress, which can become confused, particularly at Review Conferences. For example, if a participant informs the meeting that a parent who poses a sexual risk to a child has attended all of the sessions of his treatment programme, this is a strength but does not constitute safety. If, however, there is accompanying evidence of reduced risk through professional assessment which took place as part of the programme and evidence over time of changed behaviours which also lower the risk, the some safety is established.

‘Strengths’
It is important to remember that all families and situations have strengths; even the most abusive and dangerous environments do not pose a risk 100% of the time. Recording and acknowledging strengths, therefore, is not just a matter of making families feel better about themselves and acknowledging that the picture is not exclusively one of problems, although this is important, but also one of identifying exceptions to the maltreatment:

- times, places and situations when the danger is lowered or absent;
- safe, protective or non-abusing parents, carers and adults;
- previous periods of time when the danger has been low or absent.

Through identification of these exceptions, it may be possible to help families find ways of extending or building on them, thus reducing the harm. To make improvements, the conference needs to know both the ‘who, what, when, where, how?’ of the danger, and the ‘who, what, when, where, how?’ of its absence.

‘Grey Area’

This section can be very useful for the Chair to ‘park’ an issue whose risk value is uncertain and so it does not seem to fit into any of the other sections of the SFF. This is particularly useful when the Chair thinks something has had enough ‘airtime’ in the conference, but participants seem reluctant to stop discussing it.

‘Risk Statement’

The risk statement goes further than the traditional conference question about whether there is enough risk to ‘register’ by being specific to this/these child(ren); what the risk would look like; and contextual - when and where it might be manifest. As well as assessing the level of risk, therefore, the meeting at this stage is also trying to crystalise the risk specifics ie the who, what, when, where, how of the danger. Examples of a risk statement would be

“If things carry on as they have been recently, it is likely that Mr Larsson will hit Mrs Larsson again every 3 or 4 weeks and that Hella will see and hear at least some of this. This is very likely to cause her significant emotional and psychological harm which will show, as it has been showing, in her being clingy, crying a lot, hiding under the table at nursery and hitting other children. In addition, without some change in the current pattern of childcare, Hella will carry on missing 40% of school and being late each day that she does go. She will also carry on being avoided and teased by the other children because she smells bad and is wearing old, dirty, ill-fitting clothes which are not warm enough. This is likely to make her not want to go to school, to feel bad about herself and to carry on being disruptive in class; and so she will probably underachieve and develop more and worse behavioural problems.”

“The future risk to Tia is that her father will indecently assault her again when the opportunity presents itself, which would cause her significant and serious emotional harm. As well as her being uncommunicative and ‘lacking a spark’ on a day to day basis as she has been, research shows that sexual abuse victims are much more likely to underachieve, self-harm, and develop drug, alcohol and mental health problems when older.”

‘Safety Statement’
This contains the ‘safety destination’ or long term goal/outcome which the meeting is seeking. It is worthwhile being explicit in the meeting about what the achievement of this goal will mean for the agencies involved – no further need for a child protection plan; close the case etc. The reason why the ‘Safety Statement’ should not describe the child’s specific, current living circumstances is that part of the purpose is to set an objective standard for the child’s care – the child will need this standard wherever s/he lives.

‘Outline Plan’

Whilst making the decision about whether the plan should be designated Child Protection or Family Support, after making the plan itself, may seem counter-intuitive, sometimes working out what actions are necessary to counteract the danger so that the children are safe enough, will help determine how much danger there is. In addition, because a decision that the plan should be for child protection will sometimes be received as stressful and stigmatizing by the family, at least in the short term, they can become ‘paralysed’ or at least disabled from contributing to the drawing up of the outline plan if it comes afterwards because of the emotional burden which they are suddenly having to carry.

Whereas the ‘Outline Plan’ agreed at the conference will identify some or many of the actions needed, the detail of who will do what to implement the actions and how the different strands of the plan will fit together to achieve the outcomes described in the Safety Statement is usually not the remit of the Conference but determined in the first Core Group meeting following the Conference. This is not unique to the SFF methodology, but national practice guidance (‘Working Together’ 2006 pp 129-130).

The role of the chair in drawing up the ‘Outline Plan’ is a facilitative one i.e. to respectfully ask and require professionals and family members to state what they will do to address the ‘Danger/Harm’, prevent the outcomes described in the ‘Risk Statement’ and achieve the outcomes described in the ‘Safety Statement’. The chair should resist the temptation to suggest or prescribe what needs to be in the ‘Outline Plan’ because the plan stands more chance of having the ‘ownership’ of those responsible for implementing it if they have conceived it.

However, the chair can and should take a lead in testing willingness, confidence and capacity. When doing this family unwillingness to participate in/with some particular activities or services should not be misinterpreted as poor co-operation; partners ought to be able to disagree, negotiate and compromise as long as the likely achievement of the outcomes is not jeopardized. However, some actions which are ‘safety bottom lines’ will be non-negotiable and the chair should help make this explicit and explained.

The Review Child Protection Conference

- **Preparation**: The Chair should consult with the Keyworker prior to the review conference to discuss what preparation, particularly relating to family participation but more widely also, is needed to make the Conference work as effectively as it can;
- **Family Tree**: Although the Family Tree will probably not be constructed ‘live’ in the Review Conference as it is in Initial Conference, a copy of it from the last Conference or elsewhere should be available for the meeting to consult, if needed;
• **Previous SFF:** Having the SFF which was completed at the last meeting available enables comparison of the current picture with the previous picture and the Chair should encourage participants to do this, both in terms of the overall picture and in relation to their individual contributions/updates.

• **Risk & Safety Statements:** It is important that the Chair encourages and ensures that the Conference measures progress / deterioration against these yardsticks and not against compliance with the plan; and although compliance may well have played an important role in improvement, compliance and deterioration/increased danger are not mutually exclusive, and nor are non-compliance and improvement/increased safety.

• **Outline Plan:** The Chair should adopt a ‘critical friend’ role in relation to the previous plan, effectively leading a quality assurance review of it before the new plan is formulated.