

Planning 101: Planning with Children and Their Families (Practice Guide)



Audience

Caseworkers

Outcome

Good child protection work should organize practice at every level of service around building future safety with families and their safety networks. A good outcome of planning allows the agency, the family, and the safety network to share responsibility for the safety of each or youth. Using the guidance provided in the CPS Practice Model, caseworkers ask the family and safety network to create a plan to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being of each child and youth. As part of this outcome, the voice of children will be reflected in the plans. We will do our best to actively listen to what each child, youth and family wants and needs in order to create a safe home. By planning with the family and safety network, we are responding and addressing the identified, present dangers and future risks impacting children and youth. Finally, this outcome will meet the competency framework of the CPS Practice Model.

Why?

In the past, it has been the habit of some child protection workers to overlook family and friends, focusing instead on service plans. The practice model challenges us to shift our practice towards including the decision making skills of the family and their safety network. Planning actively seeks out to engage the safety network as a natural extension of the family and community. By engaging the family and safety network in the planning process, we know it will be possible to find non abusing caregivers and other individuals who are capable of being protective. Ultimately, we want to enable professionals, the family, and their safety network to collaborate within a constructive, future-focused framework that addresses the seriousness of the situation but also work together to make change possible.

When we plan with families and safety networks, we must make our worries about the problems around safety transparent. Next, we establish goals and next steps in collaboration with the family and safety network that will ensure the child or youth's every day safety. When we plan with children and youth, we listen to their worries as well as to what they want now and in the future. It is more than making sure that families follow a list of services or simply

minimizing our involvement with children and youth. Instead, we actively plan a trajectory with all those involved.

If planning goes well and parents are successful with reunification or case closure, we can be confident that they have taken charge and demonstrated the ability to provide care and safety. On the other hand, if in planning for safety, the parents are unable to provide the care that is needed, we know every opportunity has been given to do so. Decisions to make other living arrangements for the children or youth will be based on the behaviors and actions of the parents.

Child abuse almost always occurs in secret. By planning, we respectfully open the conversation to what the worries are. Some families are reluctant to plan with the caseworker because of family conflicts, judgments or shame. However, being persistent about what is expected and keeping the child in the center, not the family conflict, is helpful in bringing everyone to the table.

Planning with families and safety networks is a planning for change and growth. Planning involves moving beyond the present to what future safety will look like. It is a vision all families we work with are capable of seeing.

What I Want to Achieve

The purpose of planning is to create sustainable and forever safety for children and youth with the help of their families and safety networks. Our job is to help the families and safety networks plan and think through what forever safety looks like. We want them to be *the primary drivers* and take ownership for what should happen. Through planning, we strive to achieve a consensus with those involved regarding the harm and dangers that impact the safety of the child or youth. Once we achieve a consensus, our next step is to work towards a set of agreed upon goals, tasks, and time frames for achieving the long-lasting safety, permanency, and well-being of each child and youth.

General Guidance

Planning is meant to be collaborative, rigorous, and action driven. You can do this by:

1. **Describing your worries to the family so you can get to the business of planning.** Be clear and specific about the problems. Use terms that are easy to understand. Make sure that you respectfully convey your interest in partnering and engaging with them.
2. **Believing that safety, permanency, and well-being is driven more by knowing it takes a village to raise a child than believing it is your sole responsibility.** Planning needs to involve the input of every adult person in the child or youth's life who is willing to be part of a network that is child and safety-centered. When this happens, we look to how accountability can be shared by everyone involved.

3. **Expecting families to identify achievable goals that represent the best protective actions they can muster.** These goals will be small, achievable behaviors and action plans that address harm and danger, the reason we are involved in their lives. By being strength-oriented and focused upon solution-building, you will find that plans make good use of what caregivers are already doing to keep the child or youth safe. Our plans will center on strengthening those behaviors at times when the situation is unsafe. We strive to find ways of making the family and safety network's goals compatible with our goals.
4. **Make plans that include your case goals or bottom lines of what you need to see the family and safety network doing that will make each child safe.** This planning includes your skills at recognizing the intuitive judgments you make and also your appreciation of how the structured decision making tools look at safety and risk and contribute to your decision-making process. Both your intuitive judgment and structured decision making safety and risk tools will inform the plans of care for each child and youth.
5. **Appreciating that forever safety is built by going through a journey or process with safety network members.** Planning takes time and may involve an initial meeting with any number of agreed upon meetings but to do this requires a structure or a series of steps. When process is considered you know there are going to be tweaks and adjustments.
6. **Planning makes us more cognizant of history.** Past history of harm and danger is the single best predictor of future harm and danger. In planning with families and their safety networks, we understand this history well and we know the present and future has to be different. We always look for consensus that past behavior cannot continue if the child is to be safe.

Practice Tips for Building Planning Skills with Children, Youth, and Families

1. **Planning with and by families should start immediately.** This conveys the seriousness of why you are involved but also lets them know what you expect. You are conveying a message that says, "Your roles, ideas, and plans for making future safety a reality are important and necessary."
2. **Planning with the family in the short term here-and-now is possible.** Once you have established a goal, the family focus will be how, where, what, and when?
3. **Planning involves supporting the family and network's thinking and development** of steps that are behavioral and address what we are worried about, what's going well and what needs to happen.

4. **Planning with families and networks involves growing a new set of caseworker skills.** Don't be afraid to practice the steps or stages of your planning as much as you can ahead of time. This may be as simple as thinking ahead to the kinds of questions you will ask or might anticipate.
5. **Know your trajectory.** What is your plan? You are the one who will be leading the conversation.
6. **Planning works when you use solution building skills.** Asking questions about the future, relationships, and goals provides information about what is working well and provides and insight to what the family hopes for.
7. **Planning is ongoing and is important until case closure.**
8. **Cultural competency is required in planning.** If you don't understand the culture of the family or network, your planning won't work. For example, knowing the gender roles in some cultures will be essential to moving forward. This does not mean you support how they live out these roles; however it lets them know you appreciate who they are as a group.
9. **When planning, you must be prepared to ask tough questions.** Andrew Turnell calls these "jugular" questions, the hard questions of "what if" or "what are the triggers" or "times when the child will be most vulnerable." By doing this, you are building rigor into planning.
10. **Planning has a different process or a series of steps when bringing committed friends, family, or professionals to the table.** As a note of caution, if there is no safety network with whom to plan for making long term safety a reality, you likely will not have behaviors or actions that reflect the everyday safety that is expected. You cannot fully plan for safety if you are working with family members you are worried about due to danger and risk indicators.
11. **Children and youth need you to listen to their worries, sound off on the good things, and tell you what they think should happen.** Help them plan from their point of view. Use your skills to engage them and then use the information (with their permission) in your planning.
12. **Planning involves lots of questions and lots of answers.** Be prepared to transcribe the conversation. This is a sign of respect and shows that you're good listener.
13. **Learning the how's of planning with children, youth, families, and safety networks comes through your deliberate practice.** Eventually, you will develop an "experience bank" of planning know-how. Identify your goals and take advantage of learning opportunities. Request feedback that includes lessons learned from mistakes made.
14. **Giving ownership to parents and safety networks in planning for forever safety is not naïve practice.** It is based on:
 - our ability to partner with each adult and to
 - the use our clinical intuitive skills
 - a thorough analysis of the circumstances that includes our structured decision making tools

Critical Thinking Skills for Planning

Critical thinking is the process of integrating, analyzing, and evaluating information about everyday planning, work we do with children and youth, families, their safety networks, and other professionals. In the end, critical thinking helps us get better information, be more analytical about the case, and ultimately help us make better decisions.

- The skillful use of your authority is critical. Think of the ways you will assert yourself with honesty and transparency when working with a parent or a family member who requires hard questioning.
- How has your planning ahead of time shaped the outcome? Is it in line with your trajectory of the case?
- What difference do your engagement skills make in planning with one family member or with multiple safety network members? Are you making eye contact or using other non-verbal skills to connect?
- How do you manage conflict or tension, especially when it is clear there is a lot of judgment and blame going around?
- How will offering choices and options as part of planning be helpful?
- What worked to bring the family and safety network to a consensus on what needed to happen to make the child safe?
- What kinds of straight forward and/or solution building questions did you ask that kept all participants engaged?
- If your planning included meeting with a safety network, what were the successes and road blocks and what are your takeaways for any future planning?
- Planning with a safety network where there are multiple players is time consuming, can be exciting, and exhausting. Did you debrief? With who? Was it helpful to talk about it? Why?
- How did you integrate the child or youth's voice into your planning process?
- How did you plan with the family and/or safety network to let the child know what was going to happen?
- If you were nervous about giving a family and/or the safety network ownership for what should happen, how did you manage?
- If in your planning, you talked about your danger statement and case goals, how did you do this in a way that everyone understood? Also, what kind of feedback did you ask for from everyone at the table?
- What was the relationship between your planning and the trajectory of a case that recently went well?