



Signs of Safety: It's in Your Hands Now

Speech by Andrew Turnell on behalf of himself and Steve Edwards to formally acknowledge the end of Resolutions Signs of Safety implementation role with the Western Australian Department for Child Protection and Family Support

To the fourth Western Australian Signs of Safety Gathering

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Technology Park Bentley Western Australia

Dr Andrew Turnell gave the following speech in response to CPFS Director General Emma White giving a speech acknowledging and thanking Andrew for his and Resolution's work in assisting CPFS implement the Signs of Safety since 2008.

Thank you Emma for everything you have said. Before I respond directly to you, I want to say that I stand here representing both myself and my dear friend and colleague Steve Edwards. This is important because the fact is without Steve's sixteen years' work in this department, none of us would be here today. I would love to be giving this speech today together with Steve, unfortunately that is not possible since Steve is travelling in Africa with his wife.

So speaking for myself and for Steve, I acknowledge that we know that all of us in this country stand on aboriginal land. I want to state very clearly, I know that Perth is first and foremost Noongar Wadjuk land and declare my gratitude to Noongar people and leaders past and present for constantly nourishing the traditions and dreaming of this land and offering welcome for all of us who live here. I travel the world often, and it is an absolute privilege to be able to live in a country that is home to probably the oldest human culture on the planet. For me as a whitefella born here, it is humbling, daunting and inspiring to live my life, work, play, love and raise my own children on aboriginal land.

From that acknowledgment, I want to say what everyone knows; the care and raising of children is sacred business. It is in fact the most sacred task for every culture, anywhere in the world. The BIG problem we are all struggling with in our work, whether it's in CPFS or any child protection system is the fact is that western children's services systems operate from the youngest tradition of child care on the planet.

Our western children's services systems perpetuate a hierarchical system of knowledge, privilege and power that disempowers all of us working inside them. Inside our organisations



we all become anxious in our work and relationships, and that happens way before we start working with the most disenfranchised people in our communities.

While western culture and its left brain excellence offers amazing knowledges and opportunities, its systems are also singularly unsuited to dealing with sacred tasks like raising, loving and the passing on of culture to our children. The reality is however that our western child protection systems are the primary vehicle through which we care for the most vulnerable children in our societies. So we can't walk away, we have to work to transform our systems to do better for our most vulnerable children.

At the core of the problem is that we in the whitefella, overdeveloped world have the arrogance to somehow think we invented child abuse and child protection. As evidence of this assertion I tender one fact that points to the broader problem. Around the world Dr Henry Kemp from Denver is often feted, with no sense of irony as having discovered 'shaken baby syndrome'. Can we in the west seriously assert that no culture, no community had any idea about injured babies and what to do about them before 1960?

Why do I say all these things? One simple way to understand the work Steve and I have done, is to say that at our best, we have channelled traditional ways of caring for children into a model that fits late modern western child protection systems. I say this because I am clear and so is Steve, that he and I do not in any way own Signs of Safety for ourselves.

Steve and I, living in the most isolated city on the planet, somehow received the gift and opportunity of drawing together our professional and personal experiences to create the Signs of Safety. We did this at a privileged time, both of us having come of age in the 70s when Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam declared to Vincent Lingiari, traditional Gurindji elder that Australia always was and always will be aboriginal land! (To learn more about this seminal moment in Australian history go to: www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/58.2000 and for the story in song listen to Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody's *From Little Things Big Things Grow* www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_ndC07C2qw).

Steve and I were led and inspired in our whitefella journey by a spirit that drew us together and that led us to draw together a vision of our best ideas for doing child protection differently. We were determined to work together with anyone we possibly could to build this vision. Most particularly, we were determined to stand alongside the practitioners doing the direct work of knocking on doors, removing children and moving kids from placements that have broken down. The people who live the everyday experience, distress and exhilaration of child protection work. We were also determined to always listen to children and parents on the receiving end and to make them the final arbiters of whether we were successful.

We were also determined to always acknowledge failure and our vulnerability, because it's impossible to get this work right, in exactly the same way that it's impossible to get being a parent right. The fact is, you always just do your best.

Knowing these things, we were inspired by a spirit of gratitude and a theology of blessing. We set out on our journey, wrapping ourselves in a western therapeutic tradition of forensically paying attention to human intentionality and vision, always building hope in that conversation by drawing on anything that's already working. I speak of course of solution-focused brief

therapy brought to us by our colleagues Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and Eve Lipchik. In 1988 and soon to be accompanied by these international colleagues, we set out with two young men's hopes. We started drawing together our ideas rather like a mother magpie building a nest. First and foremost, we built our nest from the local knowledges and lived experience of those doing child protection work. In creating the Signs of Safety, we were hoping to shift the whitefella system a little, to maybe offer something different to better help practitioners be able to actually work alongside children, parents, families, neighbours and everyone with natural connections to the children. The aim being to get the children listened to, loved and cared for by the people they belong to. This was and always will be the traditional way that human beings raise children. Our western child protection systems constantly need to relearn how to foster the traditional ways, providing family with every possible support and opportunity to succeed before professionals offer or impose professional solutions.

I and Steve are the co-creators of Signs of Safety – and that's an unbelievable privilege! I am deeply grateful, as is Steve, for the opportunity we've had to co-create this approach and for all the learning, richness, challenge, trauma and as Steve would say the fun it has brought to our lives along the way. I want to say again that both of us know that while we are the co-creators we also know very clearly we are NOT the owners of Signs of Safety. In *exactly* the same way that aboriginal peoples everywhere in the world know they don't own the land. For Steve and I, these ideas, this approach, is gifted to us.

What we are saying is this, I stand here like Gough pouring the red sand into Vincent's hand, saying if this approach was ever useful it always was and always will belong to the practitioners. This approach is dead in a book, this approach is dead in a video, in a lecture or in a presentation. We absolutely must create these records and stories so we can better understand our own work and to help those who follow and want to learn from us. At the same time, we must also know that what's on the record is not the thing itself. What's written or presented or recorded is some sort of approximate representation of the lived experience that happens between practitioners, vulnerable children and families. Please excuse the sporting metaphor for those of you that hate them, but it's exactly as Greg Chappell observed *you're only as good as your next hundred*.

By this we mean to say that the Signs of Safety approach is only alive when it is owned by practitioners and it improves life for children, parents, families and everyone with any natural connection with the kids. Again, we want to be very clear about this, it's the people doing the direct work who the Signs of Safety approach belongs to – always was, always will be!

Right now, my business, Resolutions controls the approach internationally. Having said that, it's important to say here that earlier in the year I signed over my own, Steve and Resolutions' intellectual property rights for all the work we have done with CPFS during the past 8 years into the ownership of CPFS.

At its simplest what that means is that CPFS can define Signs of Safety however it wants. I will certainly seek to influence and guide but I don't and won't define what the department does or does not call Signs of Safety. That's a vulnerable place for me as a co-creator of this work. I of course wonder what will you do with our baby?

I want you all to also know that while right now my business, Resolutions, controls the approach this is only very temporary. This approach was never mine to own, so in 2020 the whole

leadership and control of the Signs of Safety approach and its intellectual property will all be handed over to a Signs of Safety International Board of Management. The most likely CEO of that international board will be Joke Wiggerink from the Netherlands, who many of you know well. That means, after 2020 I can move on, I can perhaps pretend to be a wise old man of the field, I can establish the clinical service with the highest risk cases I've always want to lead and I can write a series of books that are backed up in my brain, heart and soul. So for Steve and I, we wonder not just what will CPFS do with our baby but what will the world do with it?

Fact is though, this is a really good place to be, because if child protection teaches us one thing it's the wisdom of vulnerability. Since we can never get what we do right and since we're always carried pell-mell and anxiously into the next situation involving the most vulnerable children, in this business we are always taken to our next level of incompetence.

If we relish that vulnerability, child protection work can transform us. Children's services work is rightly addictive because it always offers us a sacred path of personal, professional, organisational and social transformation. This is so, precisely because child protection work always focuses on the most iconic and sacred being in any culture – the vulnerable child.

This is what life's like and this is where Steve and I are at with the Signs of Safety too. Life's always a risk, children do die and kids in the worst circumstances also do thrive – we all have to find the courage to think, work and live in that space. So, what I'm saying is, no expert whether it's me or Steve Edwards, Emma White or Mel Samuels, Professor Eileen Munro at the London School of Economics or Professor Fiona Arney from the University of South Australia, no Department, University or institution define what Signs of Safety is – full stop!

The people who ultimately define what Signs of Safety is, to the extent that it is anything at all, the people who make it real, always were and always will be the practitioners who go use it with parents and children.

I will, probably till I die, continue to throw my professional energy, vision and passion into the journey of building the Signs of Safety and the community of professionals and agencies it belongs to. I'll keep plugging away at keeping the rumour of the Signs of Safety alive – that has been my calling for many years.

I want to thank so many people for the opportunity to be giving this speech right now, here in my own state to my own child protection department at a Signs of Safety Gathering. If I started in on that task of thanking everyone I would be here till sometime next week and I think everyone would actually like to get out of here in the next little while.

So, before I do offer just one vote of thanks I want to make an apology. I want to apologise to anyone over the journey that has been offended by anything I have done or said. I have never set out to offend anyone in anything I have done. I throw everything I have into my work in a way that led my mother to call me a 'hound of heaven'. When you feel called and driven you do your best, and you sometimes also do and say stupid things. That is my experience of what it's like to live my life on the edge with child protection practice and organisations. I want to say very clearly to anyone I have offended, anywhere, at any time I welcome feedback from anyone, if you want me to hear something I have done that has offended you, I will listen.

So in the spirit of gratitude I mentioned earlier and because I can in no way thank everyone I would want, I will follow Paul Kelly (paulkelly.com.au) and let the part reflect the whole. I want to acknowledge one person to whom every one of us in this room owe a debt – Terry (Murphy) will you please stand up and take a bow and receive a round of applause.

As Vincent said simply to Gough all those years ago – *‘we’re mates now!’*

To finish, I want to ask Emma to receive this copy of Steve and my Signs of Safety book. In 1999 we gave copies to every one of the 17 West Australian practitioners whose work is in the book including three who are still with CPFS – Kay Benham, Vania da Paz and Andrea Nixon. I give this copy to Emma White now in her role as Director General of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. Thank you for the privilege of working with CPFS for the past 8 years in the journey of implementing Signs of Safety into the West Australian child protection system. I give you this book now stating, the Signs of Safety approach is indigenous to this state and this department and *it’s in your hands now!*

Thank you.