

The Three Houses Assessment Tool

The Three Houses method mimics the three key assessment questions of the Signs of Safety Framework:

- What are you worried about?
- What's going well?
- What needs to happen?

Locating the questions within the three houses makes them more accessible for children.

Introducing the Three Houses to the child

Practitioners can either use the tools provided or encourage the child to draw an outline of three houses on separate pieces of paper. The practitioner can use the following explanation to the child

“in the first house we will write your worries, so that's the house of worries, the second we'll put in the things you like in your life, that's the house of good things and then we will have a house of dreams where we can write and draw how you would like things to be in your life if all your worries were solved”

Offering the child choice is always a good strategy, so most practitioners ask the child which house they would like to start with, the house of worries or house of good things. Often it is easier to start with the good things, particularly where the child is anxious or uncertain, or the worker is concerned the child has been told by the adults not to speak. Focussing on the good things is a good place to start as it would be unusual for a child to be told not to talk about things they are happy with in their life and family.

The child and practitioner can use words or drawings as seems most appropriate to the situation and the child. If writing, the worker can offer the child the choice of whether they write or want to do the writing. Sometimes the child will ask the worker to do the writing but will end up speaking faster than they can write, in which case the worker can offer to take over the writing process. If drawing the worker will probably want to guide the process a little about what the child draws in the house of worries, it will usually be better to write rather than draw things such as “Daddy hits Mummy”, “Mummy hits me”. In using the three houses with children, always make sure to use the child's exact words and ideas.

Where the worker is doing the writing, always read everything back to the child before finishing. This gives the worker an opportunity to ensure that they are accurately reflecting the child's views, and it also provides an opportunity to dig further into an issue that the child has raised, but the worker feels they may benefit further exploration.

In situations where a child may be finding it difficult to participate in the conversation, it is often helpful to provide prompts or cues to assist the child. For example: ***What is good about where you are living at the moment? What is good about school? What is good about the friends you have? What is good about your visits with mum?*** Exploring things the child feels are positive in their life often provides an entry to explore what is not so good, and what they are worried about. As the worker opens up a child's worries, always check with the child whether his/her responses should go in their house of worries. For example a child might say ***“I wish mummy and daddy didn't fight so much at home”*** or ***“I wish I wasn't being bullied”*** the worker can then amplify this statement by

asking ***“It sounds like you are worried about being bullied at school (or mummy and daddy fighting), should we put that in your house of worries?”***

Drawing upon the three houses session, the child can easily be asked to give their judgment about where life is for them, between a life dominated by their worries, to a life which is the way they would like it to be. This can be done using a straight forward number scale from 0 to 10 or can also be done using a pathway drawn from the house of worries, to the house of dreams and invite the child to locate where they are on that path.

Children may also take a while, or will even need until the end of a conversation to bring up the things they are most worried about. To give the child every chance to express what they want to say, it's always a good idea before finishing the interview to ask the child if there is anything they want to add to any of the houses.

Explain to and involve the child in what will happen next

Once the three houses session is finished it is important to explain to the child what will happen next, and obtain permission of the child, to show the three houses to others whether they be parents, extended family, or professionals.

Usually children are happy for others to be shown their three houses assessment of their situation. For some children there will be concerns and safety issues in presenting what they have described, to others. In these situations it is important to talk to the child about what they are afraid might happen and discuss ways to make them feel safer. Involving the children in this process will sometimes slow down how the professionals act, but if at all possible, it is important to go at a pace that the child is comfortable with. Where the worker makes the decision to act in ways that goes beyond what the child is comfortable with, these decisions need to be explained to the child before action is taken.

Presenting the child's views to parents and others

Workers often find that taking the child's words and pictures back to the parents/carers, is often the catalyst that makes the adults see the situation differently, and to face the problems more openly. When bringing the child's three houses to parents it is often useful to begin with the "house of good things" as this shows the parent that the worker is able to see things in a balanced way and creates an opportunity to build engagement with the parents around the positives. A good strategy in bringing the information to the parents is to ask them what they think the child would have described as good in their life and seeing what the parents might expect the child to say, before presenting the child's house to them. This same process can be followed with the house of worries and dreams.

This strategy can serve to engage the parents in the process further and also gives the worker a greater sense of the parent's insight into their child's perspective.

Make sure the child's Three House assessment is put onto the child's record

The three houses tool, though it seems simple, is a mechanism for enabling the child to provide their assessment of their life. Some workers wonder whether the three houses assessment is too childlike to put it on the case file, or include it in something like a court report. The child's own assessment is very often, far more powerful and revealing than a professional assessment of that child, and very often, has far greater effect on adults involved with the child than professional assessments.

The three houses style assessment can be impressive, since it directly communicates the child's voice and perspective, and demonstrates the worker has engaged with the child.