The Three Houses tool reference guide

The Three Houses is a practical tool that ensures a child is actively involved with and at the centre of the assessment and planning process. It was designed for use with children and young people, but could be adapted and used equally well as a scribble pad for adults.

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

› What are we worried about?
› What’s working well?
› What needs to happen?

and locates them in three houses to make them more accessible for children.

Where possible, inform parents and obtain permission to interview the child

Sometimes you may need to interview children without seeking permission from their parent or carer. However, where possible the parents should be advised/asked in advance. Show them the tool and explain how the interview works. Tell them that you will ask the child not just about problems, but also good things and their hopes for the future. This creates transparency and sets the context for you to be able to go back to the parents with the information from the child.
Decide whether to work with the child with or without parents present

Sometimes you may need to work with the child without the parent or carer present. However, where possible it’s good to make it a matter of choice for the parents and child. When this is not possible explain to the parent why it was necessary to work with the child on their own.

If there’s more than one child, decide whether to interview them separately or together

More than three children can get out of hand, but it is often valuable to interview children in pairs and this can encourage them to open up.

The interview

› Print and use the A3 or A4 template available at manchester.gov.uk/XXXXXXXXX
› Take one from one of the ready-made A3 pads in your office
› Simply draw your own houses on paper, labelling them ‘Worries’, ‘Good Things’ and ‘Dreams’.

If you use the template, start by drawing over the faint outline of the houses or ask the child to do so. This first interaction should help to break the ice.

Explain what each house is for:

› In the middle house, we’ll put in the things you like that are going well in your life. That’s the ‘House of Good Things’.
› This is the ‘House of Dreams’, where we can write or draw how you’d like things to be in your life if all your worries were solved.
› Let’s write or draw your worries and things that are not going well in this house – the ‘House of Worries’.

Together, choose whether to write words or do drawings (or both)

Ask the child if they want to do the writing/drawing, or if they’d like you to do it. The child should always be the leader on what is drawn. If you’re in charge of writing/drawing, make sure you use the child’s exact words and ideas, but feel free to guide the process, i.e. statements such as ‘Mummy hits me’ may be better written than drawn.

Ask the child which house they’d like to start with

If the child is anxious or uncertain, it’s often easier to start with the good things or dreams, and you could use cues or prompts such as: ‘What is good about where you are living at the moment?’, ‘What is good about school?’, and ‘What is good about your friends?’ Beforehand, try to gather as much information about their circumstances as you can, so you can use conversation cues relevant to that particular child (i.e. for a child you know stays with their dad at weekends ask ‘What is good about staying at daddy’s at the weekend?’).

After exploring positive things, the child will often be ready to talk about what’s not going well. As the child starts to open up, ask them for permission to put what they’re saying into the House of Worries.

Feel free to move back and forwards between the houses as makes most sense in each particular interview. If talking about worries becomes too much at any point, ask them about happy things or their dreams again.
Get the child’s judgement on where life is for them

Once you’ve filled in the three houses you can then get the child’s judgement on where life is for them between a life dominated by worries to a life that is the way they would like it to be. This can be done using a straightforward number scale from 0–10, or you can ask them to point out where they are located on a pathway drawn from the House of Worries to the House of Dreams. If you’re using the three houses template, there is a ready-made pathway drawn on the back.

Explain what will happen next

Explain what will happen next and get their permission to show the houses to others, whether their parents or professionals. If the child feels concerned about their safety in presenting what they have described to others, ask them what they’re afraid might happen and discuss ways to make them safe. This may mean them going into care while the issues are explored with their parents. Try to involve the child and go at their pace, and if you act in ways that go beyond what they’re comfortable with, explain your decision to the child before action is taken.

Present the child’s assessment to parents and others

Taking the child’s words and pictures back to the parents often makes adults see the situation differently and face problems more openly. It’s often useful to start the conversation by talking about the House of Good Things, as it shows the parent you’ve thought about their situation in a balanced way and creates the opportunity to engage with the parents around the positives. A good strategy is to ask them what they believe their child will have said and see what they say before presenting the child’s assessment to them. This will help you to engage the parent further and will give you a sense of the parent’s insight into their child’s perspective.

Finally, make sure (with the child’s permission) that you keep their three houses assessment on file.