



October 2024

How was Safety Organized Practice implemented in San Diego County?

When concerns of child maltreatment are present, effective family engagement is critical to supporting optimal outcomes, including keeping children safely at home whenever possible. One such collaborative practice approach, [Safety Organized Practice](#) (SOP), emphasizes the importance of engagement in child welfare, building partnerships with the child protection agency and a family by involving natural support networks of friends and relatives.¹ SOP is centered on the beliefs that [all families have strengths](#), the child and the family are central to the partnership between the agency and the family, and the partnership with the family seeks to find solutions that support safety, permanency, and well-being for children.

SOP consists of practice strategies as well as concrete tools for child protection caseworkers to operationalize these beliefs by engaging families, enhancing family participation in case planning, and facilitating shared, equitable decision-making. The primary objectives of SOP are to:

1. Create effective working relationships and a shared focus among all stakeholders, including the child, family, kin, caseworker, supervisor, and extended community.
2. Enhance critical inquiry and minimize the potential for bias by workers through a rigorous “mapping” of safety, danger, and risk, which all stakeholders complete collaboratively.
3. Develop a joint understanding among all stakeholders as to what constitutes dangers, risks, protective capacities, and family strengths, and what clear behavioral changes and goals are needed to create and sustain safety for the child.
4. Utilize research-based tools to enhance consistency, validity, and equity in the key case decisions that child welfare practitioners have to make every day.

“The relationship between the investigator and the family can be an intervention. Healing and change can take place in the context of the relationship.”

—Kimberly Giardina, Director, County of San Diego Child and Family Well-Being Department

Implementing SOP

Safety Organized Practice was implemented in San Diego County in 2010 through a partnership between the County of San Diego Child and Family Well-Being Department (CFWB) (formerly Child Welfare Services), the Academy for Professional Excellence at San Diego State University's School of Social Work, [Evident Change](#) (formerly the National Council on Crime & Delinquency), and Casey Family Programs. After implementing [Structured Decision-Making®](#) (SDM) in 2006, CFWB realized that staff needed an engagement-focused, [trauma-informed practice model](#) to more effectively utilize SDM and other available tools. The department built on the engagement strategies inherent within the [Signs of Safety®](#) model and incorporated the actuarial tools available through SDM to implement SOP.

As one of the pioneers in implementing SOP, CFWB identified 60 staff from various program areas to be trained as the early adopters and developers of SOP. Using a structured method that included coaching along with testing various components of the model each month and providing feedback, the early adopters spent a year carefully refining the SOP model. When it was formally launched, the early adopters also became the first trainers of SOP.

Since then, SOP has been gaining momentum across California and beyond. The state's regional training academies have been working to support counties in their implementation of the practice model, building in part from San Diego County's experience. Lessons learned from San Diego County have contributed to a refined approach toward SOP implementation and practice. When California expanded its Title IV-E waiver in 2014, SOP was one of the integral components of the waiver, and SOP is now embedded in the core curriculum training for all new caseworkers in California.

Key elements

Safety Organized Practice is informed by an integration of practices and approaches, some of which are evidence-informed. They include:

- Solution-focused practice²
- Signs of Safety®
- Structured Decision-Making®
- Risk and safety assessment research
- Group supervision and interactional supervision³
- Appreciative inquiry⁴
- [Motivational interviewing](#)
- [Consultation and Information Sharing Framework®](#)
- [Cultural responsiveness](#)
- Trauma-informed practice

The most critical elements of SOP are a rigorous and balanced assessment, transparency, and making time for [authentic child and family engagement](#). SOP includes a number of tools to support transparency and effective engagement, such as:

- **The Three Questions.** What are we worried about? What is working well? What needs to happen next?
- **Safety Mapping.** This is a facilitated process that helps a group gather information, such as the responses to the Three Questions, organize that information, and create group agreements.
- **Harm Statements, Danger Statements, and Safety Goals.** These statements rely on critical thinking and using behavioral details rather than jargon to keep all stakeholders focused on what happened, what are the concerns, and what needs to happen for the child to be safe now and into the future.

- **The Three Houses.** The House of Good Things, the House of Worries, and the House of Hopes/Dreams are developed with the child and help the worker to learn about danger and safety from the child's perspective.
- **The Safety House.** Developed by the child, the Safety House is a tool to include the child in safety planning, illustrating the child's desired state regarding who lives in the house, what activities go on in the house, the rules of the house, who can visit, who should not be allowed in the house, and the safety path.
- **Circles of Safety and Support.** This is a strategy for identifying and building a family's safety network.

“We wondered, ‘Can families handle us being this direct?’ And you would be surprised by how much families really can handle if you give them the tools to have these types of conversations. Families were more transparent than we ever expected.”

—Kimberly Giardina, Director, County of San Diego Child and Family Well-Being Department

The San Diego County experience

Training

When SOP first was implemented, a robust training curriculum was developed that included a multi-day foundational overview for caseworkers and supervisors, in addition to follow-up training modules. As practice has grown and the majority of staff have been trained in SOP, the training has evolved so that SOP is woven throughout the state training curriculum for new caseworkers, and a one-day comprehensive SOP training is part of the onboarding process. CFWB also partners with [Child Welfare Development Services](#), a child welfare training academy in California, to provide coaching to staff and support the transfer of learning and application of SOP tools with children and families.

Implementation and lessons learned

CFWB built on earlier lessons learned from implementing SDM to improve its implementation of SOP, and experimented with strategies such as:

- Supporting internal trainers so they have the time and comfort level needed to effectively train their peers.
- Utilizing early adopters.
- Using a training module series that allows workers to learn new tools and practice skills, and then incorporate them into their practice at their own pace.
- Providing storytelling to help spread successes and build desire to “try on” the practice.
- Offering coaching to support implementation.
- Structuring supervisor learning to be more heavily emphasized earlier in the implementation process and support ongoing implementation.
- Connecting SOP to other key initiatives and embedding it within all aspects of the agency.

On reflection, CFWB realized it could have engaged other stakeholders better and earlier in the implementation process. For example, SOP has had such a significant impact in reducing the number of children in foster care that San Diego County subsequently has closed some dependency courtrooms, impacting court staff and other legal partners. While this impact was positive for children and families, it also was unexpected. CFWB could have educated its legal partners earlier about SOP, which would have helped them better prepare for the transition. Nevertheless, the legal partners ultimately have responded positively to feedback, especially to the language now used in court reports, such as the Danger Statements and behavior-based case plans.

As the number of ongoing cases decreased, the agency also experienced staffing changes. The time needed for investigations, however, increased in order to allow caseworkers to meaningfully engage families. The agency’s changing needs meant that CFWB had to move staff from program areas at the end of the CPS case continuum, such as adoptions and permanency, to roles that are at the beginning of the CPS case continuum, such as hotline intake and investigations. This shift also required CFWB to be more thoughtful about how to train investigators, as most new staff are now starting with investigations rather than being assigned to ongoing cases.

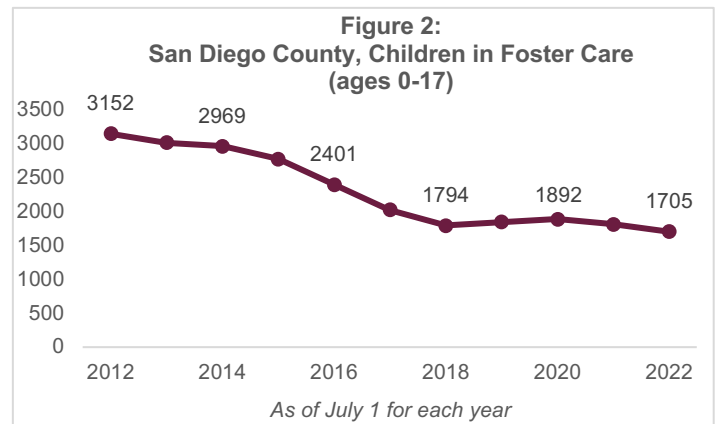
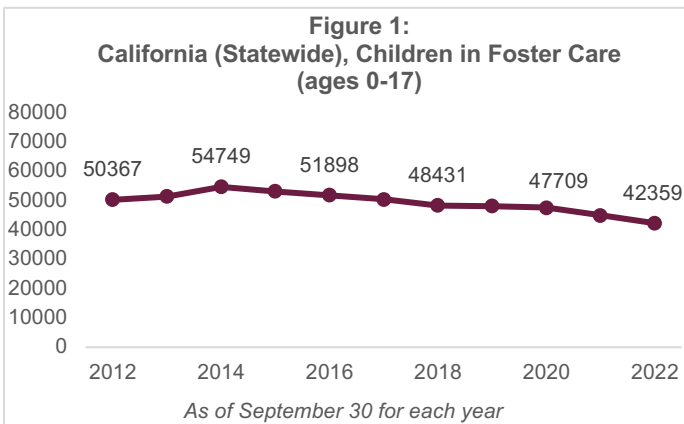
Ultimately, SOP is a system and practice change that takes time, and CFWB emphasizes that jurisdictions considering implementation of this approach need to be invested for the long-term. Since implementing SOP, CFWB has built on its practice by developing the [Safety Enhanced Together Practice Framework](#), which encapsulates the vision and values at the core of the agency’s work.

Outcomes

While it is difficult to attribute changes in jurisdictional outcomes to a single practice or policy change, it appears that SOP has had a significant impact on positive outcomes for children and families in San Diego County. From FY2011-12 to FY2022-23, the number of average monthly referrals remained about the same. However, during that same span:

- The number of average monthly petitions filed decreased significantly, from 163 to 62.
- The number of average monthly removals decreased by 62%, from 207 to 78.

Furthermore, while the number of children in foster care in California remained relatively flat between 2012 and 2022 (Figure 1), **the total number of children in foster care in San Diego County has steadily decreased year after year, resulting in a 40% decrease over 10 years** (Figure 2).



“It takes time to learn the new skills and to get good at using them. And it takes time for the system to change and map to SOP, and for the infrastructure to change to support this new practice.”

—Kimberly Giardina, Director, County of San Diego Child and Family Well-Being Department

¹ This brief, originally published July 1, 2019, has been updated to reflect more recent implementation experiences and current outcome data. The information in this brief was obtained through communication with Kimberly Giardina, then-Acting Director, Child

Welfare Services, County of San Diego Health & Human Services Agency, November 27, 2018. Updates were provided in October 2023 by Sarah Kneeland, Child Welfare Services Policy Analyst, and Laura Krzywicki, Deputy Director of Operations, County of San Diego Child and Family Well-Being Department.

² Berg, I.K. and De Jong, P (1996). Solution-building conversations: co-constructing a sense of competence with clients. *Families in Society*, pp. 376-391; de Shazer, S. (1985). *Keys to solution in brief therapy*. New York, NY: Norton; Saleebey, D. (Ed.). (1992). *The strengths perspective in social work practice*. New York: Longman.

³ Lohrbach, S. (2008). Group supervision in child protection practice, *Social Work Now*, 40, pp. 19-24.

⁴ Cooperrider and David, L. (1990). Positive image, positive action: The affirmative basis of organizing. In S. Srivastva, D. L. Cooperrider and Associates (Eds.) *Appreciative management and leadership: The power of positive thought and action in organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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