

# **Making Sure Children Get 'HELD'**

**Ideas and resources to help workers place  
HOPE, EMPATHY, LOVE and DIGNITY  
at the heart of child protection and support**

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*To all the people who have walked with me on my journey of learning to love,  
and taught me the power of empathy, dignity, and hope*

In these days when children's social care work is so dominated by procedures, targets and systems it is so refreshing to find a book which seriously tries to offer an approach to work with children and their families which is explicitly inter-relationship and which places hope, empathy, love and dignity at its core. But not only are we offered concepts and ideas but clear tools and resources which can be drawn on in day to day practice. This is a rich and very welcome book and will be much read and used by both practitioners and students on a variety of courses where direct work with children and families is central.

Nigel Parton  
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# Foreword

I am proud to have the opportunity to write a foreword for this sensitive, reflective and practical resource. This book is invaluable as a tool for people working to enable children to live with resilience, in environments that better promote their well-being and safety. The content is presented in a way that supports us as practitioners to think about ourselves, and the impact our own life experiences have on our practices. It also reminds us that we need to be able to dream of a positive future. In focusing on this kind of future, we can find the possibilities that are the basis of a belief in change, both for the children and families that we work with, and for ourselves.

The model of Hope, Empathy, Love and Dignity that is the basis of this text can enable us to work to develop relational trust. Alongside the model are the practical tools and supports that link what we do with children to the process of enabling children to manage in the world, through HELD.

This book reminds us that one of the keys to our effectiveness is being sensitive enough, but not co-joined to, the experiences of the children and families we work with. With a focus on the existing strengths of children and families as the starting point, the text supports reflective analysis and review of both these strengths and the hopes and dreams of children and adults in the family. The resource of the Three Houses tool makes sure that we have canvassed vulnerabilities, strengths, and hopes and dreams in any assessment we make.

And throughout the book are inspiring and grounded examples drawn from the author's social work practice. These examples are vivid summaries of features of the HELD model in action and link the model to our own practices. Every reader will

## MAKING SURE CHILDREN GET 'HELD'

benefit from the chance to explore their feelings as well as their thinking about working well with children and their families, recognising again that we are all vital parts of the cycle of hope across generations.

Cathy Diggins

National Programme Manager

Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis Programme

Ministry of Education

New Zealand

# Preface

This resource is designed to be used by social service workers across welfare, health, and education settings to support, strengthen and protect the wellbeing and safety of children. It applies key social and emotional competencies to enable parents, family members, workers, and communities to be actively involved in reducing the likelihood of harm for children. These core social and emotional competencies will also support children and young people to develop resilient traits and enable healthy relationships as they progress on their journey to adulthood.

The main body of the text firstly offers an introduction into the thinking behind this inter-relational way of approaching work with children and their families. Each competency is then defined by drawing on both philosophical and practical constructs. This begins with a broad exploration of what they mean followed by their applicability and relevance for children. Ten strategies for parents, families, workers and communities are provided to support bringing the competency into action, followed by a brief example provided to illustrate what has been discussed.

The resource section at the back of the main text provides a proven information gathering tool (The Three Houses) to help support engagement and enquiry that explores with parents, children and families how these competencies may or may not be present. There is a simple assessment framework provided to help workers analyse the information they have gathered. Finally, a summary sheet of the competencies is offered to give to parents and families as a resource to further support bringing these into action.

Workers are invited to use the text in ways that can help parents, children, and families understand what the competencies are, and to explain why they are

important in helping protect, support and strengthen children's wellbeing and safety. The resource tools are available to support and enhance current information gathering tools, assessment frameworks, and intervention planning that workers may already use. They can also guide workers who work one to one with children and young people, for example in schools or residences.

For workers in education or health settings this work is offered as an early intervention and prevention resource especially for children aged under five. The earlier we can support children to develop these competencies and be cared for in ways that show them, the greater chance we have of increasing their safety and wellbeing. The protection of children and the promotion of wellbeing is the responsibility of all of us, regardless of role or agency.

For defined child protection or welfare agencies, this work and its associated resources are not designed to replace existing tools but to complement and add to these by providing a way to explore the social and emotional inter-relational strengths and needs. It is intended to be a resource that offers ideas about engaging meaningfully with clients in a way that encourages safer outcomes for children. Through this it aims to provide a different way of responding to child safety, along with resilient strategies to offer future protection for children and indeed all of us.

# Copying Permission

This is a valuable and practical resource that has been priced affordably so that individual workers can easily afford their own copy. This is helpful to ensure workers have access to the full context of the work. However, in line with the author's aspirations and with the publisher's goal of making its publications accessible to organisations of all sizes:

**Chapters 1–6, *The Three Houses Information Gathering Tool*, and the assessing HELD checklist for workers** can all be copied for use by staff in developing their work, but only within local teams within any department of a local authority or within local teams within any charity.

**The strategy sheets and examples at the end of each chapter, and the resource sheet for parents,** can be copied by staff in those same teams for use with clients.

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# About the Author

**Nicki Weld, BA (Political Science), MA (applied) Social Work**, is currently a social work professional leader and company director in New Zealand. She has extensive experience in a variety of social service and child protection roles, including senior social worker, supervisor, senior trainer, national social work advisor, and consultant. Nicki has worked primarily in a New Zealand paediatric hospital service, and in the national statutory Child Protection Agency. She co-directs a social services training company and delivers workshops both nationally and internationally, along with the provision of professional supervision. She is co-author of *Walking in people's worlds – a practical and philosophical guide to social work* (Pearson Education, New Zealand 2008) and *The Three Houses Tool: Building Safety and Positive Change* (in *Contemporary Risk Assessment in Safeguarding Children*, edited by Martin C. Calder, RHP 2008). Nicki has also written a number of journal articles. Her Three Houses information gathering tool is used in six countries and has been translated into Japanese and Swedish. Her passion is for child and family work, and she believes in the application of creativity and innovation through connecting head, heart and spirit to inspire people to reach their true potential. She can be contacted on [www.cnzn.co.nz](http://www.cnzn.co.nz).



*The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant.  
We have created a society that honours the servant, and has forgotten the gift.*

Albert Einstein



# 1

## Introduction

*It takes a village to raise a child.*

African proverb

Everyday the media tells us stories about how people have been harmed or are suffering in our world. When this includes issues such as violence towards children, we understandably want to know why this behaviour has occurred. Time is sometimes taken to analyse what has gone wrong especially in situations of child abuse and street violence. Lack of action on behalf of Government agencies, poverty, and scarcity of resources are generally marched out as explanations. These factors, while important to consider and address, only go a part of the way to providing answers about what has occurred.

Sometimes, along with socio economic issues, time is taken to look at the fundamental interpersonal and relational factors that were missing which contributed to the violence and abuse. Unfortunately if these are named they are often framed within responses of blame and outrage. These types of reactions are often used to create distance between ourselves and those who have committed the abusive acts. We confuse understanding what has happened (in order to prevent it happening again) with showing understanding toward the person who did such an act. Society often does not want to find understanding for those who have committed violence because this might be seen as excusing or minimising their behaviour. By not building this type of analysis though, we can end up journeying endlessly through reactions of horror and blame which ultimately only result in increased societal fear and anxiety.

## **Interpersonal and relational factors that contribute to harm**

I have been involved in the area of child and family work for 16 years and in that time I have seen children harmed and killed by those supposedly closest to them. Every time I hear in the media of a child who has been killed or hurt at the hands of their family, I know there are tragically many more whose names do not reach the public press. An example of this is a four year old boy I briefly met when working in paediatrics who had been admitted to hospital with severe bruising to his face, body, and legs. His stepfather had made him stand on a chair for most of the night and repeatedly punched him. In the morning his mother took him to the doctor. The nurse at the clinic described the mother walking ahead of her son down to the doctor's room saying 'Hurry up!' as he painfully dragged his beaten body down the passageway, clutching the walls for support.

After he was admitted to hospital, I happened to come onto the ward where a nurse was gently trying to engage him in an activity. As I walked into the nursing station this little boy with his battered face looked up at me. He then completely froze and for the first time I experienced frozen watchfulness in a child. He went totally still and rigid, and didn't make a sound, just like an animal facing a threat when it knows it cannot out run it. This freeze response to danger is the only remaining option when you can't fight or flee, so you pretend you are dead or sick so hopefully the threat loses interest in you and passes by.

How does a person make a child so afraid to resort to a freeze response when faced with other adults? How do they make him stand on a chair and repeatedly assault him? Why do they not carry him when he is in pain? There are many possible answers for this and we can search the past and present for these. Violence is often a response to 'perceived powerlessness' and is an attempt to regain mastery of a perceived stressful situation (Finkelhor, 1983 cited in Amiel and Heath, 2003). Fundamentally I believe his carers had little or no attachment to him, and that they had objectified him in some way. This may have been as a scapegoat for resentment or hate and for all that was wrong in their world. His parents may have also made him into an object for adult amusement as a way to answer a past or present unmet need for power.

Objectification makes a person 'other' or separate to us allowing us to engage in a process of detachment and disengagement. Labels that de-personalise people are

frequently used to achieve objectification such as 'bitch', 'enemy', 'it' and other names that allow people to experience emotional distance. By making people separate or less than ourselves we can create a situation of 'us and them' classification. This reduces the level of caring or ability to recognise the unique and special traits of the person. Once we objectify a person it makes it easier to say or do whatever we like about and to them. After all, they are just an object and you can do anything you like to an object. We frequently see this happen in situations of sexual and physical violence.

When objectification happens around children it is generally because of the presence of unmet and unresolved adult needs that dominate the relationship with the child leading to abuse. These often stem from experiences of a lack of positive personal power and security and the need to fulfil this. Children's behaviour, through no fault of their own, will be a trigger for adults who carry these unresolved experiences into their parenting. The child is not understood as having different developmental needs, and in times of normal child behaviour that may be stressful, drastic measures can be taken toward the child to essentially emotionally manage what is happening for the adult.

We see this happen when a baby or child is expressing a need through crying, and the adult hits or shakes the child, especially around the head area, to stop where the sound is coming from because the sound of crying is bringing up unbearable feelings for the adult. These feelings may include powerlessness, helplessness, frustration, anxiety, anger, rage or jealousy. The need to silence these feelings as quickly as possible means children are often violently silenced as a consequence. What results is that the child's basic needs remain unseen and unmet and if they survive to adulthood, they too can carry these unmet needs into the wider world and their future relationships. They have also learnt, through these types of reactions from adults around them, that violence is often an effective way of achieving personal power and 'ending' situations perceived as difficult.

We need to understand and learn from what leads to this type of abusive behaviour (although this doesn't excuse it), but we also need to know what can help prevent it. We tend to focus our attention on what is not working when there is a wealth of learning to be had from situations where things are going well despite levels of adversity. For example we can do this by learning from families experiencing poverty who have an absence of crime and violence. My answer to this came predominantly from working with families facing significant difficulty around having children with severe disabilities, especially those families on lower incomes.

## **Interpersonal and relational factors that support safety and protection**

In my experience, often children with especially serious intellectual disabilities would have very challenging behaviour that anyone would struggle with. Yet their families, despite sleep deprivation, financial pressures, and grief and loss, showed absolute compassion and love for the child. They would talk about the personality traits of the child they had taken the time and commitment to see, often through layers of complex needs and behavioural difficulties. They had hopes and dreams for their child and would ensure the child was always treated with dignity and care. They would talk about having difficult days but their determination to ensure their child was loved and accepted kept them going. Working with these families was awe-inspiring and always an honour. Along with many people on my life journey, they taught me the essential interpersonal and relational factors of hope, empathy, love, and dignity which are the foundation of this book.

Hope, empathy, love and dignity are qualities located within the domain of the heart which is closely connected to the spirit or soul. When a person died in Egyptian times, their brain was discarded and their heart preserved in readiness for the afterlife. This was because the pureness of the heart was considered to be more important than the power of the brain. Our world has become dominated by thinking and doing, with intelligence often perceived as linked to cognitive intellect and ability. In my experience the most socially successful people in the world are not necessarily those who attained the highest academic marks at school or university, but those with social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence. If our world is to survive, it is time for our hearts to become our key information source with our heads supporting this, instead of the other way around. A key way to do this is to change the emphasis and the messages of what we value in society, and instead focus on key relational and social interactional factors that support human connection.

## **The importance of connection**

Most people have a need to belong, to have meaning and identity, to feel safe, and to have a sense of connection to each other. While we may want to be seen as individuals in our own right with our own unique characteristics, we also usually want to belong to social groups which offer a reinforcement of our identity, as well as

connection and security. In primitive times it is likely these social groups offered physical protection against harm from predators, hence allowing for the continuation of the human species. In a less socially productive way we can see this being played out in our youth and criminal gang cultures. Safety from harm at a physical level has evolved in humans to also include protection, not only for our bodies, but also our psychological, emotional and spiritual domains. Sadly through technology we are constantly bombarded by images of violence and despair which create fear and anxiety, causing people to withdraw and disconnect from each other.

Also contributing to human disconnection are powerful advertising messages supporting individualism and the desire for material wealth (as often seen in Western societies) which can also lead to a sense of failure and depression. We attempt to seek meaning through the obtainment of possessions to try and find fulfilment. Although offering a brief respite from personal emptiness and doubt, material objects generally fail to answer our deeper needs for security, happiness and meaning. Yet the constant striving and desire for material gain continues to be reinforced by those intent on making their own wealth at the ultimate expense of our planet. The effects of this are currently at their most obvious with the collapse of global financial markets and the impact of recession felt worldwide. Now, more than ever, we are receiving clear messages that we must find alternative ways to operate if we and our planet are to survive.

The impact of technology and media messages has also resulted in our children's role models too often being shallow versions of success symbols in a world that rushes past integrity on a journey to an egoistic nowhere. These include people in entertainment, often actors, who are somehow expected to be what we might aspire to. This is somewhat ironical given their occupation is to act as someone else! The real role models in children's everyday lives – parents, family members, friends, social service workers, teachers, and people in their communities – are sometimes not celebrated or recognised for the essential work they do of teaching the core emotional and social skills required for true success in life.

We know through attachment and child development theory that just meeting the basic physical needs of a child is no longer enough to support their overall development. If we fail to provide for social, emotional and spiritual development, we can contribute to children being unable to cope in a world that demands daily social interactions. A lack of fundamental social and emotional skills, if complicated further by early abuse and trauma, denies children positive ways of managing in the world.

## **A way forward**

As a way to support and strengthen positive relationships and connections in our world, this book offers explanations of key social and emotional competencies Hope, Empathy, Love and Dignity through the acronym of 'HELD'. It includes strategies to ensure 'HELD' are present in all the relationships and interactions children experience. If all people interact from a foundation of 'HELD' with children it is less likely they will experience harm. Children are all of our responsibility as they live in families who form communities of which we are also a part or work within. By ensuring they have hope, empathy, love and dignity in their lives we will give them and the world a more positive future. By interacting with and teaching children these skills we will support them to grow up to not harm others. Through this I believe we will have a chance of reducing abuse and violence in our societies and ultimately contribute to a world where all people can truly live out their potential. We know what goes wrong – it is now time to talk about what makes it go right.