Fathers Voice

SOCIAL SERVICES

Beyond the Referral

Referrals, assessments, plans and child protection

Written by a father, for fathers.
Lived experience, peer support and practical guidance for England and Wales. Not legal advice.

fathersvoice.org.uk

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A note before you begin

This guide comes from lived experience, peer support and research into how children's social care works in England. It isn't legal advice, and it can't tell you what will happen in your family. Local procedures vary, and law, guidance and services change.

If your situation involves police restrictions, court orders, being asked to live away from home, pre-proceedings or care proceedings, get advice from a qualified solicitor.

A word on names

Most people say social services. The official name is children's social care (CSC), and that's mostly what this guide calls it, or just social care. They mean the same thing.

What this guide is, and isn't

It doesn't assume the concern about you is false, or that the professionals or the other parent have acted unfairly. It asks you to engage honestly, think about what your child is going

through, follow any safeguards and push back calmly when you disagree.

The aim is simple: stay focused on your child, understand the process, and take the next useful step without losing your voice.

It's written mainly for fathers who are the subject of a concern. If you're the one raising concerns about your child, parts of it will still help, but you may need separate advice about reporting and following those concerns up.

Keep case papers private

Social care records, family court papers, recordings and messages can hold confidential information about children and other people. Don't publish or share them, including on social media, without checking what the law, any court order and your solicitor allow. [12]

Urgent checklist

Use the parts that fit your situation. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 999.

1

Understand what's happening

Ask what the concern is, which process has started, what happens next and when. Check whether there's a safety plan, a section 47 enquiry, a police investigation or a court application.

Check whether you have parental responsibility. It affects what you're told and consulted on.

2

Start a record

Write down names, roles, contact details, dates and the exact wording of any restriction or urgent request.

Keep original messages, emails, photos and documents. Don't edit, crop or delete them.

3

Protect your child

Your child may be confused, worried or overwhelmed. Tell them they're safe to talk, listen without pushing for details, and keep adult worries and paperwork away from them.

Don't question or coach them, contact witnesses or argue by message.

4

Get the right help

Police: If you're arrested or invited to an interview, ask for a criminal solicitor. Read every bail notice and follow every condition exactly, even if someone invites contact.

Court or PLO: If you get a Letter Before Proceedings, a PLO letter, a care application, a hearing notice or any other court papers, contact a solicitor straight away.

Where your child lives or contact: Ask for the legal status, the reasons, the review date and the contact arrangements in writing. Get family law advice before agreeing to anything open-ended.

5

Ask for what you need

Tell social care about any disability, language, literacy or communication need. Ask for the adjustment or interpreter you need.

6

Look after yourself

Talk to someone today: a friend, your GP, a peer group or a helpline. Keep your normal routines going. If you're struggling to cope, call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option, any time.

Your rights as a father

IN SHORT

1. Check your parental responsibility, and make sure social care has recorded it correctly.
2. Working Together expects local authorities to involve fathers. Ask how you will be included, in writing.
3. Objecting to section 20, contact, court and school rights all apply to dads too. Get advice before acting.

This page sets out what the law and the statutory guidance actually say. It's here so you can point to it, calmly, if you need to. It isn't legal advice, and how it applies to you depends on your situation, so check with a solicitor before relying on it in a serious dispute.

Parental responsibility

Parental responsibility (PR) is the legal rights, duties and authority a parent has for a child. A mother always has it. A father has it if:

- he was married to, or in a civil partnership with, the mother when the child was born, or later
- he's named on the birth certificate, for a child registered in England or Wales from 1 December 2003
- he and the mother signed a parental responsibility agreement
- a court has given it to him, including through a child arrangements order. [10]

If you're not sure, check. If social care has it wrong, ask them in writing to correct it.

Not having PR doesn't make you irrelevant. You're still your child's parent, and many of the rights below apply to every parent, not just those with PR.

You should be involved

Working Together to Safeguard Children is the statutory guidance local authorities must follow. It says practitioners should:

- work in partnership with parents and carers as far as possible, adapting how they work to meet the needs of different parents, "including fathers and male carers"

- involve parents in decisions wherever possible, because parents are often the experts on their own children
- make sure every assessment is informed by the views of the child and the family
- tell parents who will be at meetings, and let them bring a family member, friend or supporter
- think about the specific needs of fathers and male carers when assessing. [1]

Under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities must support children in need and, where it's consistent with their welfare, promote their upbringing by their families. [17]

You can't be treated worse because you're a man

Sex is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. A local authority must not treat you less favourably than a mother because you're a man, and it has a duty to think about equality when it makes decisions. You can also ask for reasonable adjustments if you have a disability. [2]

Local authorities must also act in line with the Human Rights Act 1998, including your right to respect for family life and to a fair process. [18]

Being treated differently for a real safeguarding reason isn't discrimination. Being left out, or assumed to be the problem, just because you're the dad can be.

If your child might be accommodated

If social care wants your child to stay somewhere else under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, the local authority can't do it if you have PR, you object, and you're willing and able to look after your child or arrange care for them. That applies even if the other parent agrees. There are exceptions, for example where someone else has a court order saying the child lives with them. [5] [6]

Anyone with PR can remove a child from section 20 accommodation at any time, subject to the same exceptions. [6] This area gets complicated quickly, so get family law advice before you act.

If your child is looked after, the local authority must find out the wishes and feelings of each parent, and anyone with PR, before making decisions, and take them into account. [17]

Contact with your child

If your child is in care under a care order, the local authority must allow reasonable contact with each parent unless a court orders otherwise, or it needs to refuse urgently to protect your child, and then only for up to seven days. For a child who is looked after, the local authority must try to promote contact with parents and family, as long as it's consistent with the child's welfare. [17]

Meetings and conferences

All parents and anyone with PR should normally be invited to child protection conferences. Excluding a parent should be exceptional. It's usually decided by the chair, under local procedures, for reasons such as a serious risk to the child or to people at the meeting. [9]

If you're excluded, ask for the reasons in writing, ask how your views will be heard, for example in writing or at a separate meeting, and ask whether you will be invited to the next one. Exclusion from one conference shouldn't automatically mean exclusion from the next.

Most local procedures also say you should see the social worker's report before the conference, and that you can bring a supporter or advocate.

If it goes to court

If the local authority applies for a care or supervision order, every parent with PR is automatically a party. A father without PR must be given notice of the proceedings and can ask the court to join him as a party. [19]

Parents and anyone with PR are normally entitled to free legal advice when they get a Letter Before Proceedings, and to legal aid in care proceedings, whatever their income. [7]

Your child's school

Schools must treat all parents equally, unless a court order says otherwise. That includes a dad who doesn't live with his child. You can ask for school reports and to be told about meetings involving your child. [20]

Your records and your voice

- You can ask the local authority for the personal information it holds about you with a subject access request. [3]
- You can complain about how you have been treated, including not being involved, and go to the Ombudsman if that doesn't fix it. [11] [16]
- You can ask for an interpreter or communication support if you need one. [2]

If you're being left out

Start calmly, in writing.

TRY SAYING

I'm [child]'s father and I'd like to be involved in the assessment and any meetings. Working Together to Safeguard Children says practitioners should work in partnership with parents, including fathers and male carers. Could you tell me how you will include me, and if there's a reason I'm not being involved, could you put that in writing?

If that doesn't work:

1. Ask the social worker's manager to look at it.
2. Ask for the reasons to be recorded on the file.
3. If you're still left out, make a complaint. Not involving a father is a recognised ground.
4. If you think you're being treated worse because you're a man, say so, and mention the Equality Act.
5. Get advice from the Family Rights Group or a solicitor.

If there's a genuine safety reason you can't be involved alongside the other parent, ask to be seen separately. Being seen separately is fine. Being left out isn't.

Introduction

> FROM PEER SUPPORT
>
> *I remember the exact call. It was an ordinary Tuesday evening. Nothing about the day marked it out until the social worker introduced herself and my stomach dropped. Before I properly understood what was happening, I feared losing my child, my place in their life and any chance of being heard fairly. I barely slept for the next week. Looking back, I understand how easily that fear can take over and shape everything that follows.*

This guide carries pieces of that case, and of the cases I've sat alongside since as a peer supporter. It isn't the story of one family. It's a pattern I see again and again: fear arrives first, then a choice about what you do with it.

Why it feels like this

Words like referral, assessment, risk and safeguarding land before anyone explains them. You might be scared of losing time with your child, of being judged, or of an allegation being believed before you have had a chance to speak.

You might feel angry, frightened, ashamed, numb or unable to think straight. None of that means you're guilty or unsafe. It means something at the centre of your life feels under threat.

Your response matters

Professionals form a view not just from the concern, but from how you handle it. How you communicate, whether you turn up and how you behave under pressure all tell them something about how you would cope, work with others and keep your child in mind.

You can disagree with a concern and still respond in a way that shows you're safe, reliable and protective. That's what the rest of this guide is about.

What you will find here

- What to do in the first couple of days
- How to stay steady, and the mistakes that make things harder
- What social care is actually trying to work out, and how to read what they write
- Plans, meetings and conferences, and how to prepare for them
- Allegations, the police, and keeping your child out of the middle
- Keeping a record that helps without taking over your life
- Complaints, the wider system, and life after the case closes

There are words you can use throughout, and they're all collected in Scripts at a glance at the end.

> You're still their dad. The process doesn't change that.

CHAPTER 1

The first 48 hours

IN SHORT

1. Listen, take notes and ask for the concern and next steps in writing.
2. Check your parental responsibility and ask for any support you need to take part.
3. Don't react in anger, go quiet or involve your child.

The first call or letter is often the worst moment. You're shocked, you want answers, and you may want to defend yourself straight away. What you do in the next couple of days sets the tone for everything after it.

You don't need to have it all worked out. You need to understand what's happening, write things down and stay calm enough to take the next step.

On the first call

You will probably be caught off guard. That's normal. You don't have to explain everything there and then. Listen, take notes and ask a few simple questions.

TRY SAYING

Thanks for letting me know. I want to work with you on this. Can you tell me what the concern is, what happens next, and when? Could you also send that to me by email so I have it in writing?

Write down the social worker's name, team, phone number and email, the date and time of the call, and anything you have been asked to do or not do. If they mention a restriction, write down the exact words.

If you need time to think before answering a question, say so. "I'd like a moment to think about that, can I come back to you today?" is a perfectly reasonable thing to say.

Questions worth asking

- What's the concern, in plain words?
- Which process is this: an assessment, Family Help, or child protection enquiries under section 47?
- Is there anything I need to do, or not do, right now? Is that a request, an agreement or a legal requirement?
- Will you be speaking to my child? When, and where?
- How will I be involved, and when will we meet?

- Who else is involved, such as the police or school?

You might not get every answer straight away. That's fine. Ask when you can expect them.

If the police are involved, or you have been sent a Letter Before Proceedings or court papers, get legal advice now. Don't wait to see how it goes.

Check your parental responsibility

Checking parental responsibility Your rights as a father in Beyond the Referral. Ask the social worker to confirm how yours is recorded.

Make sure social care has recorded it correctly. If it's wrong, ask them in writing to correct it. Parental responsibility affects important decisions and access to information, but it doesn't guarantee contact or full access to your child's records. It also isn't the test for whether you should be involved. Fathers should be part of the assessment either way. [1]

Tell them what you need to take part

If disability, neurodivergence, mental health, literacy, language or anything else makes it harder for you to take part, tell the social worker early. Ask for the support you need, such as written questions, an interpreter, more notice before meetings or a supporter with you, and ask for it to be recorded. You may be entitled to reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. [2]

Make time for it

Social care may need to talk to you, visit your home or arrange meetings, sometimes at short notice. Make a reasonable effort to be available. You may need to ask your employer for some flexibility. Tell them only as much as you're comfortable with.

What not to do

- Don't fire off a long email or text tonight. Draft it, sleep on it and send something shorter.
- Don't contact the other parent to have it out, or post anything online about the case.
- Don't question your child about what they have said, or ask them to take sides.
- Don't go quiet. If you can't face a call, reply by email.

What to tell your child

Keep it simple and calm, and keep adult worries out of it. If they know someone is coming to see the family, something like this is usually enough:

TRY SAYING

Someone called a social worker is going to come and chat with us. Their job is to make sure children are OK. You can tell them anything, and you won't be in trouble for anything you say.

There's more on this in Your children through this.

Finding support Stay steady under pressure.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Do you know exactly what the concern is, and what happens next?
2. Who can you talk to this week who will help you think clearly?
3. Is there anything you have been asked to do, or not do, that you need in writing?

CHAPTER 2

Stay steady under pressure

IN SHORT

1. Protect your child from the weight of adult fear and conflict.
2. Look after yourself and get support before the pressure gets too much.
3. Keep what you do and say calm and focused on your child.

Fear, anger and uncertainty will pull you in different directions. You can't stop feeling them, but you can stop them running the show. Keep five things in mind:

1. Find the right support
2. Bring the focus back to your child
3. Keep parenting well
4. Check progress every week
5. Keep a life outside the process

Find the right support

A lot of dads try to carry this alone. The pressure then leaks out in meetings, in angry emails, by going quiet, or in conversations with the kids. None of those is a safe place for it.

Talk to someone you trust today. That might be a friend, a peer group, your GP or a counsellor. Pick someone who helps you think clearly and keeps the focus on your child.

For free, independent advice on children's social care in England, see Family Rights Group in Contacts and resources.

PRACTICAL TEST

If the only people hearing how scared or angry you are right now are your child, the other parent or the social worker, find somewhere safer to put it.

Bring the focus back to your child

When it gets confusing, or the adult conflict starts taking over, ask yourself what your child is going through. Not just whether the allegation is fair, or whether the professionals agree with you. What would help your child feel safe and settled this week?

In meetings, link what you say to your child's day-to-day life.

INSTEAD OF

~~"Nobody listens when I say contact isn't working"~~

TRY

My son gets anxious when contact changes at short notice or doesn't happen. What can we put in place to make it more predictable for him?

It moves the conversation away from the adults and back to your child's routines, relationships and sense of security. It's also much harder to ignore.

Keep parenting well

Don't wait for social care to sort out every bit of help. Social workers coordinate assessments and plans. They don't replace everyday parenting.

Take a bit of initiative:

- Talk to the school, GP or health professionals involved.
- Learn about your child's health, needs, disability or neurodivergence, if that applies.
- Look at parenting support that fits, and keep routines strong around sleep, school, behaviour and contact.
- If your child is struggling, ask what you can do while you're waiting for a referral.

- Lean on trusted family where it's appropriate, and deal with practical pressures that are getting in the way.

Doing a course or accepting support isn't the point on its own. What counts is using what you learn day to day. That shows you can reflect, change and respond to what your child needs.

Check progress every week

Plans drift when actions, referrals and deadlines aren't followed up. Once a week, take five minutes. What was agreed, what's been done, what's late, and who needs a nudge?

Progress isn't measured by whether every professional agrees with you. It's measured by whether your child is safer and better supported, agreed actions are getting done and everyone knows what happens next.

Keep a life outside the process

Keep doing the ordinary things that keep you steady: work, exercise, sleep, proper meals, faith, time outdoors, hobbies and time with people who are good for you.

Stay away from drink, drugs, social media posts and emotional messages to the other parent. Don't spend hours going over the allegation or drafting replies while you're upset. Put a gap between feeling and sending. Write it, leave it, and read it again when you're calmer.

A GROUND RULE YOU COULD SET

I won't send anything important about the case on the same night I write it.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Who are you leaning on at the moment, and are they helping you think clearly?
2. What does your child need from you this week, whatever the process is doing?
3. Which ordinary routine has slipped that you could pick back up?

CHAPTER 3

The mistakes that make it harder

IN SHORT

1. Anger and going quiet both hide your parenting. Avoid both.
2. Respond to the concerns that matter and keep a short written record.
3. Keep work, support and ordinary life going alongside the case.

Nobody sets out to damage their own case. Most mistakes come from fear, or from trying to protect your child. Some come from anger. Whatever the reason, professionals will look at what you do and how it affects your child. Knowing the reactions that tend to backfire gives you a chance to choose differently.

Point scoring

This is the urge to answer every criticism with one about the other parent, correct every line and prove who behaved worse. It usually comes from wanting to protect yourself.

But social care is trying to understand your child's safety and needs, not decide which adult wins. A running scorecard makes the conflict more visible and your parenting harder to see.

INSTEAD OF

~~"She's the one who started all this, and look at everything she's done"~~

TRY

I disagree with parts of what's been said and I'll put that in writing. What matters most to me is that my daughter's routine is stable. Can we talk about how we make that happen?

Going quiet

The opposite reaction, from the same place. Meetings feel like ambushes, so you stop replying, cancel or let calls ring out. It's usually exhaustion or dread, not defiance, but silence can be recorded as not engaging, and that adds to the concern.

If you're overwhelmed, say so in writing, and ask for what you can manage: written questions instead of a call, more notice before meetings, a supporter in the room. That's not weakness. It keeps you in the process instead of absent from it.

TRY SAYING

I want to take part properly, but I'm finding calls hard at the moment. Could you send questions by email and give me a few days' notice of meetings? I'll reply in writing.

Replying while upset

Writing a calmer reply Communicating with the other parent in Parenting Apart.

Unless it's urgent, write it and wait. Take out the accusations, keep the facts and say what you need to happen. Don't post about the case, the allegation or anyone involved. If you're too upset to reply calmly, save it and come back to it.

INSTEAD OF

~~"(11.40pm) I can't believe you have written this about me. You haven't even met my son properly and you have just taken her word for everything. This is a joke."~~

TRY

(next morning) Thanks for sending the assessment. There are a few points I disagree with and I'd like to respond to them in writing by Friday. Could we also arrange a time to talk about my son's routine?

Keeping everything verbal

After any call or meeting that decides something, send a short summary by email. Even if it's only for your own notes, write it down.

INSTEAD OF

~~"hanging up after a call where the social worker said contact could restart next week, and leaving it at that"~~

TRY

Thanks for the call today. Just to confirm, my understanding is that contact will restart next Saturday at the family centre, and you will send the details by Wednesday. Please let me know if I've got anything wrong.

Not keeping your own record

Some dads don't write anything down until they badly need to. By then, details that mattered have gone. Decisions are made on the information available, and an account that isn't written down is harder for anyone to check or use.

A simple record you can keep up with Keeping a record in Beyond the Referral.

INSTEAD OF

~~""Contact keeps getting cancelled and it's been going on for months.""~~

TRY

"Contact didn't go ahead on 6 July, 20 July, 3 August and 17 August. I emailed the social worker each time. Copies are attached."

Assuming the truth will speak for itself

When something's wrong, it's tempting to think it will become obvious in the end. But assessments rely on what's recorded. If nobody challenges a point, it can stay in the picture and shape later decisions.

Say the record says you didn't go on a recommended parenting course. In fact, the sessions clashed with work, you asked for an evening course and you're on the waiting list. Unless you explain that and send the email, later reports may describe you as unwilling to engage.

Reply briefly and accurately. Say what you dispute, what can be checked, and send the evidence. If you can't do something you have been asked to do, explain why and suggest something that would work.

INSTEAD OF

~~"saying nothing about the course, because you know you asked for an evening place and assume someone will check"~~

TRY

The record says I didn't attend the parenting course. The daytime sessions clashed with my shifts, so I asked for an evening place on 3 March and I'm on the waiting list. I've attached the email. Please could the record be updated?

Letting the case take over

This one creeps up over months. It's easy to let every conversation and every waking thought get pulled into the case. You imagine the worst, check your phone constantly, replay meetings in your head, or avoid friends because you don't want to explain. Work, exercise, meals and ordinary time with your child start to slip.

When that happens, it's harder to stay steady for your kids, and harder for professionals to see the ordinary parenting going on alongside the process. Protecting some normal life isn't avoidance. It keeps you well enough to respond properly.

INSTEAD OF

~~"cancelling football with your mates again, and spending the evening rereading the assessment for the fifth time"~~

TRY

going to football, then giving the case ten minutes when you get home: check for anything urgent, note what's due this week, and close the folder.

Focus on what you can control

You can communicate, turn up, prepare, keep a record, follow any restrictions, ask questions, ask for support and look after your child. A social worker once said this to me, and it stuck.

> You can't control the behaviour of others, but you can choose how you respond to it.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which of these are you most likely to fall into when you're under pressure?
2. Is there a message you have been meaning to reply to that you have been avoiding?
3. What's one thing you can control this week?

CHAPTER 4

After a referral: what happens first

IN SHORT

1. A referral starts a process. It isn't a finding against you.
2. Ask which route you're on: no further action, an assessment or child protection enquiries.
3. Ask how you will be involved. The guidance supports fathers being part of it.

A referral is information sent to children's social care because someone thinks a child may need help or protection. It might come from the other parent, a school, a GP, the police, a family member or a member of the public. It's the start of a process, not a verdict.

The process matters

It helps to know the steps, because each one leads somewhere different. A referral doesn't automatically mean a big investigation. Many end with no further action, and many lead

to an assessment and some support.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN AFTER A REFERRAL

A referral is made

It is looked at, and a decision is made
within one working day

No further action

The referral is closed. You may be pointed to other support.

An assessment

A social worker works out what help, if any, your child and family need. It may lead to Family Help.

Child protection enquiries

Held where there is reasonable cause to suspect significant harm. Often called section 47 enquiries.

⇄ The routes are not fixed. A case can move from one to another as more is known.

Many referrals end with no further action, or with an assessment and some support.

Who looks at it. The team that takes referrals may be called the front door, MASH or another local name. They gather information, sometimes from school, health or the police, and may contact you. A social work manager should make, or oversee, a decision within one working day. It should say what happens next, whether your child needs urgent protection and whether an assessment is needed. [13]

No further action. The referral is closed. The family may be pointed to other support.

An assessment. A social worker gathers information and works out what help, if any, your child and family need. This is a common outcome, and it may lead to Family Help.

Child protection enquiries. If there's reasonable cause to suspect your child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, a strategy discussion is held and section 47 enquiries may start. These can go ahead without your agreement.

Some areas now run these enquiries through new multi-agency child protection teams, bringing social care, police, health and education together, and every area should have them from 2027. If yours does, a lead child protection practitioner may lead your child's case. [14] [15]

The routes aren't fixed. An assessment can end with no further action, lead to Family Help, or move to child protection if new worries come up. A section 47 enquiry can also end with no further action, or with support.

Ask which route you're on. It changes what to expect and what you need to do.

TRY SAYING

Can you tell me which route this is on: no further action, an assessment, or child protection enquiries? And what happens next?

If it's an assessment

The social worker will look at your child's needs, how each parent meets them, and the wider family picture. The next chapter explains what they're looking for.

What the assessment is called

Working Together to Safeguard Children sets out how the assessment should be done, but local authorities give it different names. You might hear it called a single assessment, a child and family assessment or a Family Help assessment. They all mean the same thing. [1]

If the paperwork uses a name you don't recognise, ask.

How long it takes

An assessment should reach a decision on next steps within 45 working days of the referral at most. Some need to be done sooner, and support can start before the assessment finishes. If it goes over 45 working days, the reasons should be recorded. [13]

Family Help

If your family needs support, you may be offered Family Help. It's the newer name for what used to be called early help and support for children in need under section 17, so you may still hear the old names in some areas. It's meant to give your family one lead practitioner and one plan.[1] It's voluntary, so you can choose whether to accept it. In practice, saying yes and taking part usually helps your child and shows you're working with people.

You should be part of it

As your child's dad, you have a lot to offer an assessment. You know your child's routines, moods, health, friends and what helps when they're struggling. Being involved means the social worker hears that from you, not just from other people.

The rules back this up. Social workers are expected to work in partnership with parents, and the national guidance they follow names "fathers and male carers" specifically.[1] In practice, that means:

- you should be involved in decisions wherever possible, because parents are often the experts on their own children
- the assessment must take your views into account, and your child's
- it should look at what each parent can offer, including a parent the child doesn't live with

- you should be told who will be at meetings, and you can bring a family member, friend or supporter[1]

The law also expects local authorities to support children to be brought up by their own families, where that's right for the child. That includes you.[17]

You don't need parental responsibility to be involved. It affects decisions and access to information, but it isn't the test. Dads who don't live with their child, or don't have parental responsibility, should still be part of the family picture.[1]

Asking to be involved

If you haven't heard how you will be included, ask. Keep it friendly and put it in writing. If you're not sure who someone is or what they can decide, ask that too.

TRY SAYING

I'm [child]'s dad and I'd really like to be part of the assessment. I know her routines and what helps her, and I think I can help you get the full picture. Could you let me know how you will include me, and when we can meet?

If there's a reason it isn't safe for you and the other parent to be involved together, ask how your views will be gathered. Being seen separately is fine, as long as you're still part of it.

For more on where you stand, see Your rights as a father.

What to expect from an assessment visit

The social worker will want to meet you and see your child, within a timescale that matches the concern. They may visit your home, talk to your child and family members separately or together, and get information from school, health, police or other services. How it plays out depends on local practice and what your child needs.

If your child doesn't live with you, ask how you will be included. Most assessments should still involve both parents, even where one has little or no contact.

Turning up matters. Missed visits and unanswered calls are usually recorded by date, and a run of them can be written up as "limited engagement", even with good reasons. If you can't make an appointment, say so beforehand, give the reason and offer another date. Keep your own note of each visit and message.

Your home doesn't need to be perfect

Social workers look for good enough parenting, not a show home. They want to see that your child is safe, fed and warm, has somewhere to sleep, and that the home is reasonably clean and free of hazards. Routine, stability and whether your child's needs are met day to day matter far more than tidiness or decor.

Before a visit, it can help to:

- make sure your child's bed and belongings are there and in order
- have any medication stored safely, and any hazards dealt with
- jot down a few notes about your child's routine, school and health
- think about two or three things you would like the social worker to know

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Do you know which route your case is on: no further action, an assessment, or section 47?
2. Has anyone told you how you will be involved? If not, have you asked?
3. What two or three things would you want a social worker to know about your child?

CHAPTER 5

What social care is actually trying to decide

IN SHORT

1. Ask which process applies, what's being decided and what's expected of you.
2. Use specific examples of your child's needs, your parenting and your real support.
3. You can challenge an assumption calmly and still stay involved.

Social care is working out what your child needs, and whether help or protection is needed. It isn't there to decide criminal guilt, or to settle an argument between parents. Knowing what they're looking at helps you give them what's useful.

The three areas of an assessment

Whether it's Family Help under section 17 or child protection enquiries under section 47, the assessment looks at three connected things:

- your child's developmental needs
- how well each parent or carer, and any other adult in the household, can meet those needs and keep your child safe
- wider family, community and practical circumstances

Section 17 asks what support your child and family need. Section 47 also asks whether your child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, and what protection is needed. It may involve other agencies and immediate safety arrangements.

Your child's needs

This covers your child's physical and emotional health, education, any additional needs, behaviour, identity, relationships and sense of belonging.

You can speak to this from what you actually know: their health, medication, school, routines, friends and moods. Going to appointments, helping with homework, noticing when they're down, and supporting their culture, faith, disability or identity all count. They're evidence, not just being a good dad.

Specific beats general every time.

INSTEAD OF

~~"I'm a good dad"~~

TRY

When my son gets overwhelmed, I give him a bit of space, talk to him calmly and help him come back to it when he's ready.

Say too how you support your child's relationship with the other parent and wider family.

Questions you might be asked:

- Tell me about your child. What are they like? What are they into?
- How are they getting on at school? Who are their friends?
- Do they have any health needs, medication or additional needs? Who takes them to appointments?
- What worries them, and how can you tell when something's wrong?
- What's their relationship like with their mum, brothers and sisters, and grandparents?

Your child's voice

Every assessment should take account of your child's views. Where possible, the social worker should see your child alone. If your child wants a trusted adult with them, that should be

supported, and their age, understanding and communication needs should be taken into account. [1]

You can tell your child a social worker may chat with them on their own, and that it's fine to be honest. Don't rehearse answers with them, ask what they said afterwards or make them feel responsible for what happens.

Parenting capacity

This is about whether each parent can provide basic care, safety, warmth, reliable routines, sensible boundaries and stability.

The focus is on day-to-day life. Where does your child sleep? How are meals and school mornings managed? Who else comes into the home? How are health, online and household risks handled? How do you comfort your child, support their learning and handle difficult behaviour without fear, threats or humiliation?

Questions you might be asked:

- Talk me through a normal day when your child is with you, from getting up to bedtime.
- Where do they sleep? Who else lives at or regularly visits your home?
- How do you handle it when they misbehave? What do you do when you're losing patience?
- What do you do together? How do you comfort them when they're upset?

- How do you keep them safe online, and with things like medicines in the house?
- What do you understand the concern to be, and how do you think it might affect your child?

Your own background

Expect questions about your own childhood and history, not just what's happening now. It helps the social worker understand experiences that may affect parenting. It isn't automatically an accusation. It's part of the full picture.

Questions you might be asked:

- What was your own childhood like? How were you parented?
- Have you had any past relationships where there was conflict or violence?
- How is your mental health? Have you had any support for it?
- How much do you drink? Do you use any drugs?
- Have you had any involvement with the police or social care before?

Answer honestly. If something from the past comes up, it usually goes better coming from you, with what's changed since, than being found in a record.

Two households

If you have separated, the assessment also looks at how the two homes interact: conflict, contact and handovers. That applies to both parents.

The social worker may also look at whether you understand the concerns about your child, and whether you can act protectively while things are being assessed. That's about responding safely to a possible risk. It doesn't mean you have to accept something you say didn't happen.

Questions you might be asked:

- How do you and your child's mum communicate about the children?
- How do handovers go? Where do they happen, and has there ever been an argument in front of the children?
- How do you talk about the other parent when your child is with you?
- What arrangements do you think would work best for your child, and why?

Wider family and circumstances

This can include separation, relationships between adults, housing, work, money, debt, trauma, discrimination, isolation, how safe the area is and access to services.

Money worries, poor housing or a lack of local services shouldn't be treated as poor parenting in themselves. But they can still affect family life, so say what practical help would make a difference as well as what you can change yourself.

Questions you might be asked:

- Tell me about your home. Is it settled? Is there anything about your housing that worries you?
- What hours do you work, and who looks after your child when you're at work?
- Are there money pressures at the moment that are affecting things?

Your support network

Think about relatives, friends or services that can genuinely help. For each person, be ready to say how they know your child, what help they can safely give and whether they understand the concerns. One reliable person is worth more than a long list of people who aren't available.

Questions you might be asked:

- Who could help you if things got difficult? How often do you see them?
- Do they know about the concerns? Would they be willing to talk to me?

You won't be asked everything

These are examples, not a script. Social workers ask different things depending on the concern, and some questions will feel personal or uncomfortable. That doesn't mean they have already made their minds up. It's how they build the full picture of every family.

If you don't understand a question, or why it's being asked, it's fine to say so.

TRY SAYING

I'm happy to answer that. Can you help me understand how it relates to the concern, so I can give you the most useful answer?

Take part without losing your voice

A safe, involved father is a source of stability for his child, not a complication. Taking part properly, not just turning up, helps the social worker get an accurate picture of the concerns, the strengths and what you can offer.

Cooperating isn't the same as agreeing with everything. You can challenge an assumption and still work constructively. Say why you disagree, show what supports your view and keep bringing it back to your child.

TRY SAYING

I understand why that's a concern, and I want to help you look at it properly. My view is different, and here's why. Can we talk about what would reassure you, and what my son needs while this is looked at?

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. What specific examples could you give of how you meet your child's needs?
2. Who in your life could genuinely help, and do they understand the concerns?
3. Is there a concern you disagree with that you could still help them look at?

CHAPTER 6

Reading the assessment without it flooring you

IN SHORT

1. Read the conclusion first, and put it in your own words. It often says less than you feared.
2. Separate allegations, observations and opinions, and check each has a source.
3. Correct factual errors, and put your effort into the ones that could change risk, the outcome or the plan.

There's a particular kind of quiet when you open the document and see your name next to someone else's account of you. Take a breath before you start. You don't have to read it all in one go, and you don't have to reply tonight.

Your local authority may call it a single assessment, a child and family assessment or a Family Help assessment. Whatever the name, this chapter applies. The same approach works for a

parenting assessment written for a court, including one by an independent social worker.

Why it can be a hard read

A social worker has to record what they're told, including things you don't agree with. If they heard from the other parent first, the early pages may hold more of that account than yours. That's about timing, not about taking sides, and writing an allegation down doesn't mean it's been accepted as fact.

It does mean your account matters. The more clearly you have given it, the fuller the picture becomes.

You may feel angry or flattened. That's understandable. How you respond still matters. Professionals will notice whether you handle the pressure, communicate safely, follow the plan and keep your child in view.

How to read it

When you're frightened, you read for the worst. Many dads finish an assessment sure it says something it doesn't. Reading it in this order helps.

Start with the ending. Go to the conclusion and recommendations first, and read what they say in their own words. What's being recommended is often a long way short of what you feared.

Then read it all the way through, without a pen. Put it down. Come back to it the next day.

Find what it says you do well. Most assessments record strengths too: how your child is with you, what you know about them, how you handle routines and boundaries. Write those down. They're in writing now, and they count.

Treat the hard parts as a list, not a verdict. For each concern, ask three things. What exactly is the worry? What is it based on? What would they need to see change? The answers usually tell you what's holding things where they are, and what would move them on.

Talk it through with someone steady. A second pair of eyes sees what's on the page, not what you're afraid of. An assessment holds private information about your child and other people, so keep it to one person you trust, like a peer supporter, or your solicitor. Don't send copies around or post anything about it online.

On the second read, you're checking five things:

1. Are accounts and allegations clearly marked as someone's account?
2. Are records and observations accurate?
3. Is the professional analysis explained?
4. Is anything important about your child missing?
5. Do the conclusion and plan follow from the information?

The rest of this chapter takes those in turn: the wording, the conclusion, the detail, and then what to do about anything that's wrong.

Understanding the wording

Assessments are read by managers, other agencies and sometimes a court, so social workers tend to write carefully. You will see phrases like "it is reported that" or "concerns have been raised". That careful wording isn't a finding against you. It's often a sign the social worker is recording what they were told, not what they have concluded.

The words worth checking are the ones that sound like conclusions.

If it says	It usually means	What to ask
"It's reported that…"	Someone told them this. It's an account, not a finding.	Is my response recorded next to it?
"Presented as…"	The social worker's own observation.	When, and what did they see?
"Lacks insight" or "minimises"	A professional opinion.	What's that based on, and what would show insight?
"Concerns remain"	Something isn't resolved.	Which concerns, and what would resolve them?
"Limited engagement"	They feel contact has been patchy.	Which dates? Have my replies and attendance been recorded?
"Disguised compliance"	They think someone is going along with the plan without real change.	What specifically, and what change would they expect to see?

Understanding the conclusion

The analysis, conclusion and plan pull together what the social worker thinks it all means and what should happen next. They may decide whether the case closes, carries on under Family Help or moves to section 47 enquiries.

A conclusion can be dense. Break it into four questions. Most are answered somewhere in it, even if not under these headings.

The question	What to look for
What do they think is happening?	What the social worker found, as opposed to what they were told.
What are they worried about?	The risk to your child: what could happen, how likely it is and how serious.
What's going well?	Strengths, including what you do that keeps your child safe and settled.
What do they want to happen next?	The recommendation, the plan and what's being asked of you.

Then put it in your own words. Try writing it as three plain sentences: "They think... They're worried that... They want...". If you can't, that isn't you being slow. Ask the social worker to go through it with you.

TRY SAYING

I want to make sure I've understood the conclusion properly. Could you talk me through what you're most worried about, what's going well and what you're recommending?

Check that every concern, recommendation or restriction is linked to the information, its effect on your child and the assessment of risk. The next chapter covers what the outcomes mean.

Two things are easy to misread.

A recommendation isn't always a verdict on you. It may rest on something else, like keeping a child's school, home or routine settled. Don't guess the reason, and don't put words in the social worker's mouth. Ask what the recommendation is based on.

"Not now" isn't the same as "never". Look for what would need to be different, and when it will be looked at again. If the assessment doesn't say, ask. That's your route forward.

TRY SAYING

I've read the recommendations and I want to work with them. Could you tell me what you would need to see from me for this to be looked at again, and when that review would be?

Checking the detail

Allegations, facts and opinions

Watch how things are worded. The same event can be written in very different ways.

HOW IT MIGHT READ IN A REPORT

The other parent reports that you are controlling.

The source is clear. This is the other parent's account, an allegation, not an established finding. Assessments can include allegations, but they should say who made them and keep them separate from records, observations, analysis and conclusions.

HOW IT MIGHT READ IN A REPORT

There have been incidents of domestic violence between the parents, which the children witnessed.

This reads as an established fact. If the incidents, or the children being there, are disputed, ask what information supports it and why it's been written that way.

HOW IT MIGHT READ IN A REPORT

Parental conflict is having an impact on the child's behaviour.

This is a professional conclusion. The assessment should explain what information or observations link the conflict to your child's behaviour, and whether other causes or needs have been considered.

TRY SAYING

On page [number], the assessment says "[short quote]". This is the other parent's account and I dispute it. Please could the assessment make clear that it's an allegation, and record my response: [brief facts].

The picture of your child

Ask yourself whether it gives a fair and complete picture of your child. Check that their health, education, additional needs, wishes and feelings are right. It should describe their relationships, the care they get and any support they still need.

Check that your part in their life is there too: the school runs, appointments, routines and time together. If something important about your child, or your role, is missing, add it. This is often the most useful correction you can make.

How you took part and came across

An assessment doesn't only record what you said. It records how you took part, and how you came across. Look for what it says about:

- **Turning up.** Appointments missed, calls not answered and sessions rearranged, often listed by date. A run of them can be written up as "limited engagement", even with good reasons.
- **How you were in the room.** Whether you stayed calm, listened and answered the question, or came across as angry, defensive or overwhelmed.
- **How you spoke about the other parent.** Whether you could talk about your child without it turning into the dispute.
- **How you took the concerns.** Whether you could hear a worry and think about it, or brushed it off. This is usually what "insight" means.
- **How you were with your child.** Warmth, attention, routines and boundaries, if the social worker saw you together.
- **Whether you did what was agreed.** Keeping to the plan and to any arrangements.

Some of it may be fair, and some of it may sting. Sort it the same way as everything else.

A wrong date or event is a fact, and you can ask for it to be corrected. Check it against your own messages and diary first.

A description of how you came across is the social worker's observation. You can't argue it away, but you can ask what it was based on and ask for your view to be added. Then show something different next time. If it's right, say briefly what got in the way and what you have put in place since.

Pick your battles

Not every mistake needs the same response. Before you challenge a point, ask whether it could realistically affect:

- **the assessment of harm or risk**, because everything else is built on it
- **the conclusion and outcome**, which follow from the risk
- **the actions in the plan**, which follow from the conclusion

Put your effort into errors that touch one of those. Note a minor correction briefly if it matters for accuracy, then move on.

Putting your response in writing

Keep it short, calm and organised. For each point:

1. the page and the exact words
2. whether it's a factual error, a missing fact or an opinion you disagree with
3. what's accurate, in a sentence or two
4. any evidence, such as an email, a school report or an appointment letter.

Start with anything you agree with, or anything the social worker got right. It shows you have read it fairly, and it makes the rest easier to hear.

Facts and opinions are corrected differently

A factual error can be corrected. If a date, a name, an event or who said what is wrong, ask for it to be changed. Under data protection law, you have the right to have inaccurate personal information corrected. The local authority should normally respond within one month.[23]

An opinion is harder to change. A local authority doesn't have to change a social worker's professional view just because you disagree with it. But the record should show clearly that it's an opinion, and you can ask for your view to be added to the file so both are there for anyone reading it later.[23]

You don't need to mention the law or use legal words. A clear, friendly request to correct something still counts, and it keeps the relationship with your social worker on a good footing.[23]

TRY SAYING

Thanks for sending the assessment. I've read it carefully and I appreciate the work that's gone into it. There are a couple of things I think aren't quite right, and I'd like the record to be accurate for [child]. On page [number] it says [quote]. That isn't right because [brief facts], and I've attached [evidence]. Could this be corrected? If there's anything you don't feel able to change, could my response be added to the file alongside it?

If the local authority refuses, it should tell you why. You can then complain to the local authority, and to the Information Commissioner's Office about the data protection side. [23]

What you're entitled to expect

When you ask for a correction, you aren't asking for a favour. Social workers must keep clear, accurate records, weigh up different explanations and be open and fair. [22] Assessments must take account of the child's views and the family's, fathers included. [1] And the local authority must keep personal information accurate, and correct it when it's wrong. [23]

In practice, a good assessment should:

- say where each piece of information came from
- keep allegations, facts, observations and opinions separate
- include your views, and your child's
- look at strengths as well as worries
- consider other explanations, not just one
- show how the social worker got from the information to the conclusion

If yours doesn't, you can ask for that to be put right.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which points in the assessment could genuinely change the risk, outcome or plan?
2. Which are factual errors, and which are opinions you disagree with?
3. Is your part in your child's life properly described?
4. For each concern, what would they need to see change?

CHAPTER 7

The conclusion and what happens next

IN SHORT

1. Get the outcome, the reasons, the dated plan and review dates in writing.
2. Ask what would need to change for the plan to end.
3. For any restriction, know whether it's voluntary or legally required. Follow binding ones exactly, and get advice before agreeing to anything open-ended.

The assessment ends with a decision. It should say what social care has decided about your child's needs and safety, the reasons, and exactly what happens next. [1] [13]

This chapter covers what that decision can be, what you might be asked to do, and how to work with a plan, even one you don't fully agree with.

The three outcomes

Outcome	What it means
The case closes	Social care isn't going to stay involved. You may be pointed to other support.
Family Help	Your child and family are offered support, set out in a plan. It's voluntary.
Child protection	Social care has reason to think your child may be at risk of significant harm, and has to look into it.

Child protection doesn't have to wait for the assessment to finish. If there's reasonable cause to suspect significant harm, section 47 enquiries and immediate safety steps can start straight away.[24]

If the case closes

Social care has decided your child doesn't need its help. That isn't the same as saying nothing happened, and you may still be pointed towards other support, like early help or a service at school.

Ask for the decision and the reasons in writing, and keep them. If anything in the assessment is wrong, ask for it to be corrected now, because the assessment may be read again if social care is ever involved in future. After the case closes covers what comes next.

If it's Family Help

Your child has needs that social care thinks your family should have support with. You will have one lead practitioner and one plan. If the support is provided under section 17, you may hear it called a Child in Need plan.[17]

It's voluntary. You can say no, but think about what that would mean for your child, and ask what happens if you do. In practice, taking part usually helps your child and shows you're working with people.

If it's child protection

This is the serious one, and the one where you most need to stay steady.

Professionals hold a strategy discussion, and social care carries out section 47 enquiries. These can go ahead without your agreement. You should be told what the enquiries are for, how they will work and what could come out of them.[1]

Enquiries don't always lead to a plan. They can end in one of three ways:

- **The concerns aren't borne out.** The enquiries end. You may still be offered support.
- **There are concerns, but your child isn't thought to be at continuing risk.** You may be offered support through Family Help.

- **Your child is thought to be at risk of significant harm.** A child protection conference is held, normally within 15 working days of the strategy discussion. It decides whether your child needs a Child Protection Plan.[9]

Get advice early. The Family Rights Group runs a free advice line, and a solicitor who does public law children work can tell you where you stand. Meetings and conferences covers the conference itself.

What you should come away knowing

Whatever the outcome, make sure you know:

- what was decided, and why
- what's expected of you, and what support you will get
- when it will be reviewed, and who to contact

You're entitled to clear information about the process, what's expected of you and your rights.[15] If you don't have it, ask for it in writing.

TRY SAYING

Thanks for going through the outcome. Could you send me a written summary of what's been decided, the reasons, what's expected of me, and when it will be reviewed?

If a safeguarding concern is identified

Don't skim this part. A recorded concern can affect support, safety arrangements, contact and later decisions.

A concern is usually recorded under one of four headings: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse or neglect. Domestic abuse counts as a concern in its own right, including where a child has seen or heard it.[25] Worries about a parent's mental health, drinking or drug use are usually recorded because of their effect on the child, not as a concern in themselves.

Ask which heading it falls under, what evidence supports it and how it affects your child. Correct any mistakes in writing, and keep the focus on your child's safety.

If a restriction or safety arrangement is proposed

You might be asked to accept supervised contact, no overnight stays, not being alone with your child, handovers somewhere neutral, no direct contact with the other parent, or staying away from the family home. These are usually part of a safety plan or a Child Protection Plan.[9]

Ask three things:

- Is this a request, a voluntary agreement, a bail condition or a court order?
- What's it for, and what needs to change for it to end?
- How long will it last, and when will it be reviewed?

Follow bail conditions and court orders exactly. Get legal advice before agreeing to anything major or open-ended.

TRY SAYING

I want to keep my son safe and I'll work with this. Could you confirm in writing what the arrangement is, whether it's voluntary or legally required, what needs to change, and when it will be reviewed?

If specific work is recommended

You might be asked to do a parenting course, domestic abuse work, a behaviour change programme, or to get help with your mental health, drinking or drug use. These are usually actions in a Family Help or Child Protection Plan.[9]

Ask which concern the work is meant to address, and what change they expect to see for your child.

A recommendation isn't a court order, but how you respond to it can affect later decisions. If you're unsure, take advice before you agree or refuse.

Know which plan you're on

A plan turns the assessment into action. Always ask for the current, dated version.[1]

Plan	What it is	Is it voluntary?
Family Help plan	Support for your child and family. If services are provided under section 17, ask whether it's also the Child in Need plan.[17]	Yes.
Temporary safety arrangement	Short-term steps to keep your child safe while concerns are looked at.	Ask. It may be voluntary, or part of bail conditions or a court order.
Child Protection Plan	A formal plan made at a child protection conference, where there's a risk of significant harm.[9]	It isn't a court order. But if things don't improve, the local authority can consider going to court.

What a good plan looks like

Whichever plan it is, it should tell you:

- what needs to change for your child, by how much and by when
- what support will be provided, and by whom
- what's expected of you, and of the professionals

- how progress will be checked, and when it will be reviewed [1] [15]

It should build on what your family already does well, not only list the worries. [1]

If your plan just says "Dad to engage with services", ask what that means in practice: which service, what it's for, and how you will know it's working.

When a plan ends

A plan isn't meant to last for ever. A Child Protection Plan should end when your child is no longer thought to be at risk of significant harm. [1] It may then step down to Family Help, or close altogether. A Family Help plan ends when the outcomes have been met, or the family no longer needs or wants the support.

From the first meeting, ask what would need to be different for the plan to end. It gives you, and everyone else, something specific to work towards.

TRY SAYING

What would need to be different for this plan to end? I'd like us to be clear on that from the start, so I know what I'm working towards.

Family group meetings

At any stage, you can ask about a family group conference. It's a meeting led by your wider family and support network, not professionals, to agree how to keep your child safe. It's voluntary, and can run alongside a professional plan or instead of one.

It's a good way to bring in grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends who can help. Local authorities are expected to offer it wherever it's in the child's best interests.[15]

Many already offer one before going to court, and that's becoming a duty. Under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, a local authority that's seriously considering court will have to offer a family group meeting in its Letter Before Proceedings, unless that wouldn't be in your child's best interests.[14] Don't wait for that point. Ask early.

TRY SAYING

Could we have a family group conference? There are people in our family who want to help, and I'd like us to agree a plan together.

If you disagree with the outcome

You can disagree and still work with the plan. Say what you disagree with in writing, ask for your response to be added to the file, and keep doing your actions.

If you want to challenge the outcome of a child protection conference, ask the chair how. Local authorities have their own process for this, which may be different from the usual complaints procedure. Feedback and complaints has more.

Plans are set and reviewed in meetings. The next chapter covers how to prepare for them.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Do you have the current, dated plan? Do you know what's expected of you, and by when?
2. Is any restriction you're under voluntary, or legally required?
3. Do you know what would need to be different for the plan to end?
4. Is there anyone in your family who could be part of a family group conference?

CHAPTER 8

Meetings and conferences

IN SHORT

1. Ask who will be there, get the papers in advance and bring one page of notes.
2. Speak to the meeting, not the other parent, and don't agree to anything under pressure.
3. Read back the actions before it ends and confirm them by email.

Meetings are where plans are made, checked and changed. They can feel like an ambush, especially the first time. A bit of preparation makes a big difference, and so does knowing you're allowed to say "I need to check that."

Which meeting is it?

- **Review or planning meetings:** for children on a Family Help or Child in Need plan. Usually less formal, and chaired by your child's lead practitioner or social worker.

- **Initial child protection conference:** decides whether a Child Protection Plan is needed. Bigger and more formal. It should normally happen within 15 working days of the strategy discussion.[9]
- **Core group meetings:** smaller, more frequent meetings between you, the social worker and key professionals to check progress on a Child Protection Plan. The first should be within 10 working days of the initial conference.[9]
- **Review conferences:** the full chaired meeting where a Child Protection Plan is reviewed, and can be stepped up, stepped down or ended. The first is within three months, then at least every six months.

Who's likely to be there

It might include the social worker, a safeguarding lead from your child's school, a health visitor or other health professional, a family support worker and sometimes the other parent. Not everyone goes to every meeting.

Child protection conferences are usually chaired by someone independent of your case, not your child's social worker. They may also include police, a GP or a paediatrician.

If you're not sure who will be there, ask beforehand. It's a reasonable question, and Working Together says parents should be told.[1]

All parents and anyone with parental responsibility should normally be invited to a child protection conference, including a dad who doesn't live with his child. If you're told you can't attend, see Your rights as a father.

Before the meeting

A few days before, ask for the current plan and any reports that will be discussed. For a conference, ask when you will see the social worker's report, and whether you can bring a supporter or advocate.

The night before, give yourself half an hour. Make one page of notes:

- what has got better for your child
- what's still difficult or unsafe
- which actions or promised support haven't happened
- what your child needs next

Pick two or three clear examples. Don't stay up all night trying to answer every sentence. Get your notebook or laptop and charger ready, then stop and try to sleep. You will think more clearly if you're rested.

TRY SAYING

Before the meeting, could you send me the current plan and any reports that will be discussed? I'd also like to bring someone with me for support. Is that OK?

Recording the meeting

FROM PEER SUPPORT

From experience, most social workers are fine with a recording when you ask politely before the meeting. I'd ask whether it can be recorded. You will be listening, talking and answering questions all at once, and it's easy to miss things. A recording helps you stay focused and finish your notes afterwards.

What the guidance says

The Family Justice Council published guidance on recordings in 2025. It recommends that local authorities and other agencies have clear policies on when meetings can be recorded openly, with everyone's agreement. It notes that agreeing to recordings can help where trust between parents and professionals has broken down.[21]

It also says recording shouldn't become the default, and doesn't replace professionals' own notes and minutes. Many local authorities now have a policy, so ask to see yours.

TRY SAYING

I'd find it really helpful to record today's meeting so I don't miss anything. It would only be for my own notes. Is that OK with everyone, and does the local authority have a policy on it?

Record openly, not secretly

Ask first and record openly. The same guidance warns that secret recordings cause problems:

- Data protection law can apply once a recording is used outside your own home life, such as in meetings with professionals or in court.
- A court may not accept a secret recording as evidence. Arguing about it takes time and money, and how you made it can count against you.
- Secretly recording your children is very rarely in their interests, and a court may see it as a welfare concern in itself.
- Recording a court hearing is never allowed and can be contempt of court. [21]

Keep it private

Don't publish or share a recording, including on social media. It contains confidential information about your child and other people. [12] If you think it's needed as evidence, talk to your solicitor first.

If recording isn't agreed, ask whether a supporter can take notes, and ask when the minutes will be sent.

If the other parent is there

Don't let it turn into an argument or a point-scoring match. Speak to the meeting, not to the other parent. Stay calm and keep coming back to your child and the plan.

If being in the room together would make it hard or unsafe for you to take part, raise it with the chair beforehand. You can ask to attend separately.

When you're put on the spot

You may be asked to agree something there and then. Don't guess, and don't agree just because you feel pressured. If you're unsure, or your answer could affect your legal position or arrangements for your child, say you need to check or take advice, and give a realistic date.

TRY SAYING

I understand why you're asking, but I don't want to guess or agree before I understand what it means. Please record the question and the proposed action. I'll take advice if I need to and reply in writing by [date].

If you're asked whether you finished a course or an action, don't just say yes. Say what you learned, what you do differently now and what's changed for your child.

Before it ends

Read back what you understand has been agreed: each action, who's doing it and by when. Ask when you will get the minutes and the updated, dated plan.

Afterwards, send a short email confirming your understanding. Then put it away and do something ordinary.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. What are the two or three examples you most want the meeting to hear?
2. Who could come with you for support?
3. What would you say if you were asked to agree something you weren't sure about?

CHAPTER 9

When concerns or allegations are raised about you

IN SHORT

1. Respond briefly and factually, and ask which incidents and evidence are relied on.
2. Separate what's untrue from what's uncomfortable, and recognise your child's experience.
3. Never coach, question or involve your child in the adult dispute.

Having something said about you can leave you angry, frightened and pushed aside, especially when it affects time with your child. You might believe it's untrue, recognise some truth in it, or remember it differently.

Your first job isn't to win the argument between adults. It's to state your position clearly, help professionals look at the facts and keep your child out of it.

What the record should show

An allegation can be included in an assessment or a record. That's allowed. What matters is how it's written down. Social workers must keep clear, accurate records, show where each piece of information came from and work in partnership with parents, including fathers.[1] [22] In practice, that means an allegation should be recorded as someone's account, not stated as an established fact, and your response should be recorded alongside it.

If an allegation is written up as if it's already established, or your side isn't recorded, ask for that to be put right.

TRY SAYING

I understand this allegation has been included. Could you record it as [name]'s account, and record my response alongside it: [brief facts]?

Your position and your child's experience

You can deny an allegation and still understand that what happened may have affected your child. Arguments, police at the door, missed contact or sudden changes at home can upset a child, whether or not the allegation is accurate.

TRY SAYING

I deny the allegation that I threatened my partner. My account is that [brief facts]. The original messages and [any independent record] may help. I recognise that the argument and the police coming to the house may have frightened our son. I'll use written communication, follow the agreed handover arrangements and keep to any restrictions while this is looked at.

Don't get dragged into defending everything

When concerns shift or new ones appear, you may feel you have to answer every point. Some will use broad words like "controlling" or "aggressive". Calmly ask which incidents, behaviour and effects on your child are being relied on.

Defending yourself over and over pulls attention away from the evidence and your child, and can come across as reactive. Give one clear response, then go back to what can be checked and what your child needs now.

TRY SAYING

I don't agree with that description. Please tell me the specific incidents, dates and evidence being relied on, and how it's said to have affected my child, so I can respond accurately.

Keep your child out of it

Don't question your child, tell them what to say, ask them to record the other parent or show them adult messages.

If your child tells you something important without being asked, listen calmly. Afterwards, write down their words as closely as you can, with the date, time and what was happening.

When some of it is true

So far, this chapter has assumed you dispute what's been said. Sometimes that isn't the whole picture. You might read the assessment, recognise a pattern rather than one bad moment, and feel the pull to explain it away.

It helps to separate what's unfair from what's just uncomfortable. Being described in a way that stings isn't the same as being described wrongly. Your intent doesn't change the impact, either. You may know exactly why you raised your voice, but that doesn't change what your child saw and heard.

If a course or piece of work is recommended and it lands close to something real, doing it honestly isn't admitting guilt. It shows the opposite: that you can hear something hard and do something with it.

TRY SAYING

Reading this back, I recognise that some of it is fair. I have raised my voice during difficult handovers and when things got stressful at home, and I'm not proud of that. I've started a parenting course and I'm working on responding differently. There are other concerns I don't recognise, and I'd like the chance to respond to those separately.

This isn't about accepting everything to look cooperative, or performing insight you don't feel. It's about being as honest with yourself as you're asking the process to be with you.



PRACTICAL TEST

Anything you put in writing can be used later, including in family court or a police investigation. Before you send anything that admits fault, even something small, run the wording past a family law solicitor. That isn't hiding what's fair. It's making sure the way you say it protects you as well as your child.

If you're the one being abused

Fathers experience domestic abuse too, and many worry they won't be believed. Some hold back because it doesn't look like what they think abuse looks like. Others feel embarrassed, as if saying it makes them look weak, or as if they're overreacting to something they should be able to handle. That reaction is common. It doesn't make what's happening any smaller.

That fear isn't always in your head. Some men are laughed at, told nobody will believe a man, or made to feel that naming it will count against them as a father. If that happens, it says something about the response, not about whether what you went through was real.

Abuse isn't only physical violence. It can include coercive or controlling behaviour, monitoring, financial control, cutting you off from family and friends, humiliation, threats, or using

arrangements for the children to put pressure on you. Coercive control can carry on after separation, and children and professionals can be drawn into it.[15]

If you feel unsafe or unable to speak openly, ask to speak to the social worker on your own. Give specific examples and rough dates, and explain the effect on you and your child. Focus on the pattern and its impact rather than labels.

TRY SAYING

There's something I need to tell you privately. I've been on the receiving end of behaviour at home that I think is abuse, and I'm worried about the effect on the children. Can we talk on our own?

The ManKind Initiative and the Men's Advice Line are there for men in this position. Their details are in Contacts and resources.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Which specific incidents are being relied on? Do you know?
2. Is there anything in what's been said that's uncomfortable but fair?
3. If you're experiencing abuse, who is one person you could tell this week?

CHAPTER 10

Your children through this

IN SHORT

1. Keep routines going and keep adult worries away from your children.
2. Keep explanations short and honest, and never question or coach them.
3. Make time together count, and get help if changes carry on.

While the adults are dealing with assessments and meetings, your children are living through it too. They may know more than you think, or much less. Either way, what they need most from you is calm, routine and the sense that they're not in trouble.

What children might be feeling

Children react in different ways. Some go quiet. Some act up. Some worry it's their fault, especially if they said something to a teacher or the social worker. Younger children may become

clingy or go backwards with sleep, toileting or tantrums. Older children may be angry, embarrassed or protective of one parent.

None of this means you're failing. It means something big is happening around them.

What helps

- **Keep routines going.** Same bedtime, same school run, same Saturday football if you can. Routine tells a child things are still OK.
- **Keep adult stuff adult.** Keep paperwork, phone calls and conversations about the case away from them, including on speaker phone and in the car.
- **Don't run down the other parent.** Even if you're hurting. Your child loves both of you, and hearing one parent criticised puts them in the middle.
- **Let them lead.** If they want to talk, listen. If they don't, don't push.
- **Tell school.** A quiet word with the safeguarding lead or class teacher means someone is keeping an eye out. Share only what they need to know.

If they ask what's going on

Keep it short, honest and right for their age. You don't need to explain the process or what's been alleged.

TRY SAYING

Some grown-ups are helping our family at the moment, to make sure everyone's OK. It's not your fault, and it's not your job to fix. You can ask me anything, and you can talk to the social worker too.

For an older child:

TRY SAYING

You probably know some people have been worried about things at home. A social worker is looking at how we can make things better. You're not in trouble. If you want to talk about it, I'm here, and if you would rather talk to someone else, that's OK too.

When they're seen by the social worker

The social worker will usually want to speak to your child, sometimes on their own.[1] That's normal and it's part of the job. Tell your child it's fine to be honest and they won't be in trouble for anything they say.

Don't prepare them, rehearse answers or ask what they said afterwards. Even gentle questions can feel like pressure, and they can be seen as coaching.

INSTEAD OF

~~"What did the social worker ask you? What did you say about me?"~~

TRY

Thanks for chatting with her. Fancy a hot chocolate?

If they tell you something worrying

Stay calm, listen and don't ask leading questions. Let them know you're glad they told you. Afterwards, write down their words as closely as you can, with the date and time. If they may be at risk, tell the social worker straight away. If they're in immediate danger, call 999.

Time with you

If contact has been reduced or is supervised, make the time you do have count. Turn up on time, put your phone away and keep it about them. A contact centre can feel awkward, but bring a game, a book or something you can do together.

If contact has stopped for now, ask whether you can send cards or letters, and how. Keep a box of things to share with them later: drawings, notes, photos of things you would like to show them.

When to get extra help

If changes in sleep, eating, behaviour or school carry on, or something worries you, talk to the school, your GP or the social worker. Support for children is often available, and asking for it's good parenting.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. What routine matters most to your child, and can you protect it this month?
2. Are there any places where adult worries are reaching your child, like phone calls or the car?
3. What could you do in your next time together that's just about them?

CHAPTER 11

Keeping a record without losing yourself in it

IN SHORT

1. Keep the originals and two short logs: key events, and actions and deadlines.
2. Record facts and sources, not conclusions, and correct important errors quickly.
3. Ten focused minutes, then stop and get back to your life.

Information about your child ends up spread across meetings, emails, WhatsApp, photos, social care and police documents. A simple record helps you check what happened, follow the plan and show what you have done for your child.

Don't try to record every disagreement or build a case against the other parent. The aim is to keep the important things easy to find and easy to check.

Keep it simple

Keep one folder for the originals: assessments, plans, meeting notes, important emails, full message exports, relevant photos, contact records and police documents.

Alongside it, keep two short logs:

- **Key events:** important developments, decisions and incidents.
- **Actions and deadlines:** what was agreed, who's responsible and by when.

Key events

Add an event only if it's about one of these:

- your child's safety, welfare, care or contact
- the current assessment or plan
- an important factual error
- something you have done or offered to do for your child

Leave out routine messages, repeated arguments and several entries making the same point.

Date	Important event or decision	Source	Outcome or next step
12 Mar	CIN review agreed weekly contact would restart	CIN review minutes, my notes	Social worker to confirm venue by 15 Mar
15 Mar	Contact venue not yet confirmed	Email to social worker	Contact arranged for 20 Mar
20 Mar	Went to contact centre session	Contact centre report	Next session booked

Actions and deadlines

Keep this list next to your key events. It shows your responsibilities and what professionals have said they will do.

Action	Who	By when	Progress
Refer father to parenting support	Social worker	18 May	Waiting for referral
House rules exercise with the children	Father	23 May	Done 23 May
Arrange educational psychology assessment	School pastoral team	28 May	Waiting for update

Record facts, not conclusions

Write what happened and how you know. Keep what you saw yourself separate from what someone told you, and from what you think it means.

AVOID

The other parent always tries to stop me seeing my child.

TRY SAYING

Contact was due at 10am on 14 May. At 9.18am I got a message saying our daughter wouldn't be coming. I emailed the social worker at 9.35am and asked what arrangements should be followed.

Use phrases that show the source, like "I saw", "The school emailed", "My child said", "The police document records" or "I'm concerned that...".

When to write a separate incident note

Some things need more than a line in the log. Write a note when:

- contact doesn't happen, or an agreed arrangement is broken
- your child seems distressed or says something that worries you
- you're told something that contradicts what you were told before

- the police, a hospital or the school get involved

For each one, write the date, time and place, what you saw or received, how your child was affected, any witnesses, what you did next and any evidence you're keeping.

If in doubt, write it down. A note you never need costs nothing. A missing note when you do need it's a real gap.

Messages, photos and videos

Save a full WhatsApp export every so often. Screenshots should show who sent it, the date and time, and enough of the conversation to make sense. If you need to crop, label or highlight something, do it on a copy. Use clear file names, like "2026-03-15 WhatsApp export".

Only keep photos or videos that record something relevant, like an injury, damage or a condition affecting your child. Note when and where it was taken, who took it and what it shows.

Don't go into anyone else's phone or accounts without permission, change original material or ask your child to gather evidence. Never delay medical or safeguarding help to take a photo. If your child is injured, don't take intimate images. Ask a health or safeguarding professional to make the record.

After meetings and calls

Write brief notes of the main decision, each action and deadline, anything important you disagreed with and the next review date. Put just the main outcome in your key events.

After an important meeting or call, send a short email confirming what you understood.

TRY SAYING

Thanks for the call today. My understanding is that we agreed X, Y and Z. Please let me know if I've got anything wrong.

Check the official minutes

Minutes become part of the official record and may be relied on later, including in court. They're usually summaries, but they should accurately record important information, decisions, disagreements and actions.

Read them promptly and focus on errors or gaps that could affect your child, the plan, risk or your involvement. Send corrections in writing with evidence where you can.

TRY SAYING

The Child in Need review minutes dated [date], page [number], say: "[short quote]". This is inaccurate because [brief explanation]. I've attached [file name] as evidence. Please correct the record, or attach my response to the case file and note that the point is disputed.

Getting your records

You can ask the local authority for the personal information it holds about you with a subject access request (SAR). Say which service, child, dates and records you mean. The local authority normally has one month to respond. It can extend that by up to two more months for complex requests, but it should tell you why within the first month.[3]

Having parental responsibility doesn't guarantee access to your child's whole file. Information can be held back to protect your child or other people.[4] If you need records urgently for proceedings, get legal advice.

Ten minutes is enough

Spend no more than ten minutes logging an event. Save the original, add one line to key events, update any action or deadline, then stop.

A short, accurate record is far more useful than overlapping logs and thousands of screenshots. It's there to help get the best decisions for your child, not to take over your life.

A GROUND RULE YOU COULD SET

Ten minutes, then I close the folder.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Where are your originals right now? Could you find the last plan in under a minute?
2. Is your record facts and sources, or has it drifted into conclusions?
3. Are you spending more than ten minutes a time on it?

CHAPTER 12

Feedback and complaints that actually go somewhere

IN SHORT

1. Focus on what went wrong, how it affected your child and what would put it right.
2. Be clear, balanced and evidence-led, and keep working with the plan.
3. If the local authority's process doesn't fix it, the Ombudsman is free. Go within 12 months.

Sometimes things go wrong: you're left out of a meeting, a record is wrong, or promised help never arrives. A clear, calm complaint can put it right. An angry one usually doesn't.

Start with the social worker

Where you can, raise it with the social worker first. Say what's worrying you, how it affects your child or the plan, and what you would like to happen. Give them a fair chance to respond or put it right.

Don't hold back an urgent safeguarding concern, or a serious breach of your child's plan, while you try to sort things out informally.

TRY SAYING

I wanted to raise something with you before it goes any further. I wasn't told about the review on [date], so I couldn't share how [child] has been doing. Could we look at what was decided, and make sure I'm invited next time?

When to make a formal complaint

Think about a formal complaint when talking hasn't fixed it, the same thing keeps happening, or it's too serious to deal with informally. Ask the local authority to confirm whether it's using the statutory children's complaints procedure or its own local process, who will look at it and what the timescales are.[11]

A complaint is about your child and how the process has been handled. It isn't an appeal against a court order, a way to decide criminal guilt or a contest between adults. It can cover things like:

- not involving you as a father

- inaccurate or incomplete records
- allegations written up as established facts
- missed meetings, reviews, actions or referrals
- unexplained delays
- not following your child's plan or the right procedure
- poor communication or management oversight

Make each point easy to follow

A clear complaint helps the person reviewing it see exactly what went wrong, check the evidence and give a specific answer. For each issue, say:

1. what should have happened
2. what actually happened
3. when, and what evidence supports your account
4. how it affected your child, the assessment or the plan
5. what you want done to put it right.

If it happened more than once, add a short timeline showing the pattern. Describe what happened without guessing why.

TRY SAYING

I wasn't invited to the Child in Need review on [date], so the meeting went ahead without information from me about my son's routines, needs and family support. This may have left professionals without a full picture when reviewing his progress. Please consider the missing information, review any decisions affected by it and make sure I'm invited to future reviews.

Say what worked too

Not everything will have gone wrong. Say what the social worker or service did well, like clear communication, help with arrangements or support for your child. It makes your complaint fairer and helps protect a working relationship you still need. Being balanced doesn't mean playing down a serious failure. It means separating what worked from what needs to change.

TRY SAYING

I appreciated that [name] always communicated clearly with me and helped arrange contact at a suitable venue when things were difficult. That reduced disruption for my son. My concern is that future arrangements are still unclear. Please confirm the venue, dates and review arrangements in writing so he knows what to expect.

If someone's work really helped, tell them, or tell their manager. Positive feedback matters too.

Which process applies

Not every complaint follows the statutory Children Act procedure. Complaints about section 47 enquiries, child protection conferences or safeguarding decisions may follow a different local process. Ask the local authority which one applies and why.

Where the statutory procedure applies, it normally has three stages:

WHERE A COMPLAINT CAN GO

Raise it with the social worker
Say what is worrying you and what you would like to happen.

Stage 1: local resolution
10 working days, up to 20 if complex
Usually handled by the team involved.

Stage 2: investigation
Usually 25 working days, no more than 65
By someone independent of the team.

Stage 3: review panel Panel within 30 working days
An independent panel looks at it again.

The Ombudsman
Normally within 12 months of the events
Free and independent, once the local authority's process is finished.

You only move to the next step if the one before hasn't put things right. Ask which process applies, as not every complaint follows these stages.

Complex complaints can take longer. If something new comes up, tell the complaints manager and ask whether it will be added, handled separately or dealt with another way.

Ask for a practical outcome

Say what would put it right, not only what went wrong. For example:

- correct a record, or attach your response to the case file
- complete an overdue action
- explain or review a decision
- stop the same thing happening again

Keep working with the plan

The social worker will usually know you have complained, especially if it's about their work. That can make things feel awkward, but it doesn't mean you were wrong to raise it.

Keep going to meetings and doing your actions. A complaint won't normally pause or overturn the plan.

Going to the Ombudsman

If you have been through the local authority's process and you're still not satisfied, you can ask the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to look at it independently. It's free. They look at whether the local authority got something wrong and whether that caused you or your child real harm or disadvantage. [11] [16]

You normally need to finish the local authority's process first. The Ombudsman can step in earlier in limited cases, like serious delay. You should normally go to them within 12 months of

the events. They can't look at anything a court has already decided. [16]

If your complaint is late

A local authority may refuse a statutory complaint made more than a year after the events, but it should still consider your reasons for the delay rather than apply the cut-off automatically.

Common reasons include being too caught up in the live case to raise it, only getting the full picture months later through a subject access request, or being advised to hold off while proceedings were going on. Ask for the decision and reasons in writing. [11]

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. What exactly went wrong, and how did it affect your child?
2. What would put it right?
3. Is there anything the service did well that you could acknowledge?

CHAPTER 13

When police are involved

IN SHORT

1. Police and social care are separate, can run side by side and can reach different decisions.
2. Get legal advice before an interview, and follow every restriction until it's formally changed.
3. Understand any arrangement before agreeing to leave home, change contact or section 20.

If the police get involved on top of everything else, it can feel like the ground has shifted twice. It helps to remember these are two separate processes, even when they land at the same time.

The police investigate whether a crime may have been committed. Social care looks at what your child has experienced, whether they may be at risk and what support or protection they need now.

An arrest doesn't prove an allegation. And a police decision not to charge doesn't automatically end a Child in Need or child protection process.

Get legal advice first

If you're arrested or invited to a voluntary police interview, get legal advice before you answer questions. You're entitled to free legal advice at the police station.

Use a criminal solicitor for the police side, and a family law solicitor for social care or family court. Make sure each one knows about the other.

Know your police status

Ask the police or your solicitor to confirm your status, and any restrictions, in writing.

- **Arrest:** an investigative step, not a charge or a conviction.
- **Pre-charge bail:** the investigation continues and you may have conditions limiting contact, communication or where you can go.
- **Released under investigation:** the investigation is still open, but you're not on bail and there are no bail conditions. Court orders or social care arrangements may still restrict contact.
- **No further action:** the police or Crown Prosecution Service aren't taking the case further at that point.

- **Charge:** the criminal case is going ahead. Get advice from your criminal solicitor, and tell any solicitor advising you about your child.

Follow every written bail condition exactly. Only the police or a court can change a legal restriction. Someone else inviting you to make contact doesn't override it.

The waiting

Pre-charge bail follows a review timetable. Released under investigation has no fixed end date, and updates can be few and far between. Waiting is hard when it's affecting time with your child, but silence doesn't predict the outcome.

Keep the investigating officer's details, ask when you can expect an update, and make sure social care has your police status recorded correctly. Talk about the evidence only with your solicitor, and don't contact witnesses.

Why social care doesn't wait

> FROM PEER SUPPORT
>
> *It can feel back to front when social care doesn't wait to see what the police find. I remember how confusing that was: one investigation was still open while decisions about contact and family life were already being made.*

The two processes answer different questions and move at different speeds. Social care has to decide what your child needs now, so decisions about contact, where your child lives and support may be made before the police are finished.

If you're asked to leave home or change contact

Social care may ask you to leave the family home, or accept reduced, supervised or paused contact while concerns are looked at.

Ask whether it's a recommendation, a voluntary safety agreement, a bail condition or a court order. A social care plan isn't a court order, but refusing it may lead the local authority to reassess the risk or apply to court.

Get the reasons, the contact arrangements and the review date in writing. Get legal advice before agreeing to anything open-ended.

TRY SAYING

Please confirm the concern, the legal status of this arrangement, how I can stay involved with my child, what needs to change and when it will be reviewed.

Child protection alongside a police case

Section 47 enquiries and a child protection conference can carry on while the police investigate. The conference looks at your child's safety and plan. It doesn't decide criminal guilt.

Prepare a short statement covering your child's needs, your position, your police status, the arrangements you have followed and the support you can offer. Your criminal solicitor should check anything you plan to say about the allegation itself.

If the police take no further action

Get written confirmation if you can and give it to the social worker, the conference chair and your solicitor.

No further action doesn't automatically end the social care process, but it must be recorded and taken into account.

TRY SAYING

The police confirmed no further action on [date]. Please update the record, tell me which concerns are still supported by other information, and arrange a review of the analysis and plan.

Social care may still have concerns based on other evidence or observations. If so, they should say what those are, rather than keep relying on an investigation that has ended.

How your child can be moved away from home

If social care thinks your child can't safely stay at home, there are several ways they can come to stay somewhere else. The Children Act 1989 has a different section for each. One needs your agreement. The others don't. Here's what each one

actually is.

Section	What it is	How long	Your agreement needed?
Section 20	Voluntary. You agree that your child stays somewhere else, such as with a foster carer or relative.	As long as you agree. You can usually object or ask for your child back.	Yes
Section 46 (police protection)	A police officer takes your child to safety, without a court order.	Up to 72 hours	No
Section 44 (emergency protection order)	A court order, usually applied for by the local authority, to remove your child or keep them somewhere safe.	Up to eight days, extended once to 15 at most	No

Section	What it is	How long	Your agreement needed?
Section 21	Not a way of removing a child. It's the local authority's duty to provide somewhere for your child to stay after police protection or an emergency protection order.	While the emergency lasts	No
Section 38 (interim care order)	A temporary court order while the court decides whether to make a care order. The local authority shares parental responsibility with you.	Set by the court until it decides	No. A judge decides.
Section 31 (care order)	A court order placing your child in the care of the local authority. It gets parental responsibility, shared with you, and can decide where your child lives.	Until your child is 18, unless the court ends it earlier	No. A judge decides.

If you're asked to agree to section 20

You don't have to agree on the spot. Ask what the concern is, why this is being suggested, how long it's for and what would need to change for your child to come home. Your agreement must be informed and voluntary, and you generally have the right to object or ask for your child back. [5]

Your child would become "looked after", with a care plan and reviews, but the local authority wouldn't get parental responsibility.

In practice this gets complicated. What counts as a clear objection, the timing of a request and the position of older teenagers can all affect what happens. Get family law advice before agreeing, withdrawing agreement or asking for your child back in a serious safeguarding dispute. [5] [6]

An informal arrangement with a relative or family friend is different, and the support and responsibilities may not be the same as section 20. The same advice applies. [6]

If your child is taken away urgently

Police protection and emergency protection orders both happen without your consent. Here's what else is worth knowing.

Police protection. The police must tell the local authority. They must also tell you what they have done and plan to do, as far as they can, and allow reasonable contact.

Emergency protection order. The application can be made without you being told first. The local authority gets limited parental responsibility, only what's needed to keep your child safe. If you weren't at the hearing and weren't given notice, you can ask the court to end the order once 72 hours have passed.

While your child is away. The local authority has to provide somewhere safe for them to stay (section 21). It isn't a decision that your child should be in care. It should consult you, allow reasonable contact and keep the separation no longer than needed.

After that, one of three things normally happens. Your child goes home. You agree to a section 20 arrangement. Or the local authority applies to court for a care order.

What to do. Ask what has happened, where your child is and what happens next. Ask for contact, and write down what you're told and when. Then call a public law children solicitor the same day and tell them it's an emergency removal. Don't wait to see how it goes.

If it moves towards court

A Letter Before Proceedings. This is the formal warning that the local authority is considering applying to court for a care or supervision order. Contact a public law children solicitor straight away, take the whole letter and go to the meeting with your solicitor. Parents and others with parental responsibility are normally entitled to free legal advice at this stage, whatever their income.[7]

An application for a care order. A judge makes the decision, and only if they're satisfied that your child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, and that a care order is better for your child than no order. While the court decides, it can make an interim order. You're a party to the case, so you have the right to be heard and to be represented. Parents are normally entitled to legal aid in care proceedings, whatever their income.[7]

Court papers or a hearing notice. Tell your solicitor immediately. Don't miss a hearing or any deadline in the papers.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Do you have your police status and any conditions in writing?
2. Does social care have your status recorded correctly?
3. Do your criminal and family solicitors know about each other?

CHAPTER 14

Finding your place in the system

IN SHORT

1. Ask what decision is being made now and what evidence will be used.
2. A Letter Before Proceedings or court papers mean legal advice straight away.
3. Check deadlines, and ask which national or local rule applies.

A lot of dads feel lost because nobody has shown them the map. Meetings have different names, and early assessments can shape later decisions. This is the general route in England, from the first contact to court.

Who does what

- **Social worker or lead practitioner:** runs the assessment and the plan day to day.
- **Their manager:** signs off decisions.

- **Conference chair:** should be independent of your case. Sometimes another social worker, sometimes an independent chair, but not the person working with your family.
- **Complaints team:** can point you to the right complaints route.
- **Your solicitor:** anything legal. Nobody at social care can advise you on that.
- **An advocate or supporter:** can help you understand what's happening and get your views across, but isn't a substitute for legal advice.

If you're ever unsure who you're talking to, ask: what's your role, what can you decide, and what happens next?

The route

It isn't always a fixed sequence. A case may close, move to support, step up to child protection enquiries or go straight to court.

THE LEVELS OF THE SYSTEM

Referral and help

Voluntary support for children and families with identified needs.

Referral · Family Help · Child in Need

Child protection

Where significant harm is suspected.

Strategy discussion · Section 47 enquiries · Conference · Child Protection Plan

Court

The local authority is considering, or has applied for, a care or supervision order.

Pre-proceedings · Court proceedings

⇄ A case can step up or step down, or close, at any point.

Ask which level you're at. The table below covers each stage in turn.

Stage	What it is	Your focus
Referral (front door or MASH)	The team that takes referrals reviews the information and should decide the next step within one working day.	Understand the concern, the decision and the next step.
Family Help, section 17, Child in Need	Voluntary, coordinated help for children and families with identified needs.	Confirm the legal basis, lead practitioner, plan, actions, support and review date.
Strategy discussion	Agencies share information and plan section 47 enquiries where significant harm is suspected.	Ask what's been decided, what happens next and whether any immediate arrangements apply.
Section 47 enquiries	Social care, often with police and health, looks at whether your child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm.	Cooperate, give a clear account and follow any immediate safety arrangements.
Initial child protection conference	If serious concerns remain, the conference decides whether a Child Protection Plan is needed.	Correct important mistakes and help make any plan specific and measurable.
Core group and Child Protection Plan	Parents and key professionals turn the plan into detailed actions and review progress.	Check every action has an owner, a date, support and a clear outcome.

Stage	What it is	Your focus
Public Law Outline (pre-proceedings)	The local authority is considering applying for a care or supervision order.	Contact a solicitor straight away and go with legal representation.
Court proceedings	The court decides whether the legal threshold is met and whether an order is needed.	Follow legal advice and put forward safe, realistic options for your child.

At the serious stages

An initial child protection conference is a multi-agency meeting, not a court hearing. If a Child Protection Plan is made, the core group turns it into actions and checks progress. Ask for the plan, minutes, named actions, support and review dates.

A Letter Before Proceedings is a formal warning that the local authority is considering a care or supervision application. Contact a solicitor straight away, take the whole letter and go to the pre-proceedings meeting with your solicitor. Parents and others with parental responsibility are normally entitled to free legal advice at this stage, whatever their income.[7]

Ask about a family group meeting, so your wider family can help make a plan. Once the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 is fully in force, the letter will have to offer one unless that wouldn't be in your child's best interests.[14]

If an application is made, the family court, not social care, decides whether the legal threshold is met and whether an order is needed. A complaint can't overturn a court order. Follow the court timetable and your solicitor's advice, and never miss a hearing or a filing deadline.

How long things take

These timescales come from Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026. The court timetable is set by the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Children and Families Act 2014, and the Public Law Outline.[8] If a deadline looks like it will be missed, ask which local rule applies and how the delay is being handled.

Step	Timescale
Referral decision	Within one working day of the referral
Assessment	A decision on next steps within 45 working days of the referral at most. Some must be quicker, and support can start before it ends.
Family Help and Child in Need reviews	No single national interval. The plan should say how often, and the next review date.
Seeing your child	Timing should reflect the concerns and the plan. Where possible, your child should be offered the chance to speak alone or with a trusted adult.

Step	Timescale
Initial child protection conference	Normally within 15 working days of the strategy discussion
First core group	Within 10 working days of the initial conference[9]
Review conferences	The first within three months, then at least every six months
Pre-proceedings	No time limit in law. Best practice guidance says it should usually take no more than 16 weeks, and shouldn't drift.[7]
Care or supervision proceedings	Normally finished within 26 weeks. The court can extend this only when it's needed to resolve the case fairly.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Where is your case on this map today?
2. Do you know the next date on your timeline?
3. Is there a stage coming up where you need a solicitor?

CHAPTER 15

Looking after yourself

IN SHORT

1. Looking after yourself is part of looking after your child.
2. Sleep, food, movement and time off from the case all matter.
3. Talk to someone, and get help straight away if you're in crisis.

Most of this guide is about your child and the process. This chapter is about you. If you run yourself into the ground, it gets harder to stay calm, think clearly and be the dad your child needs. Looking after yourself isn't selfish. It's part of the job.

What stress can look like

Long-running stress shows up in all sorts of ways. You might not sleep, or sleep too much. You might snap at people, drink more, stop eating properly, or feel numb. Some dads replay meetings for hours, check their phone constantly or can't concentrate at work.

These are normal reactions to something hard. They're also signs you need to take some of the weight off.

The basics matter

Give yourself a clear stopping point for reading reports or checking messages. **Day-to-day ways to look after yourself** Practical self-care in Parenting Apart.

A GROUND RULE YOU COULD SET

After 9pm, the case is closed for the day.

Talk to someone

A lot of men keep it all in. It doesn't work for long. Find at least one person you can be honest with: a mate, a family member, a peer group or a counsellor.

Peer support groups for dads can help, because the people there understand without you having to explain. Your GP can also refer you for talking therapies, or you can often refer yourself to your local NHS talking therapies service.

TRY SAYING

I'm going through something with social services and my kids, and it's getting on top of me. I don't need you to fix it. I just need to talk it through.

Work

You may need time off for meetings, or a bit of flexibility. You don't have to tell your employer everything. Something like "I'm dealing with a family matter that needs some meetings over the next few months" is usually enough. If your employer has an employee assistance programme, it may offer free, confidential counselling.

When it's more than stress

If you're having thoughts of ending your life, or of harming yourself or anyone else, get help now. Call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option, or call Samaritans on 116 123. Both are free and open any time. Call 999 or go to A&E if you might act on those thoughts. You can also ask your GP for an urgent appointment.

Feeling this way doesn't make you a bad father, and it won't automatically count against you. Getting help is what a protective parent does.

Small wins

Some weeks, getting through is the achievement. Notice the things you're doing right: you turned up, you kept your cool, you made your kid laugh. Write one down each day if it helps. On the bad days, you will have proof that you're doing better than you feel.

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. What's one thing that helps you switch off, and when did you last do it?
2. Who could you be honest with this week?
3. What's one small win from today?

CHAPTER 16

After the case closes

IN SHORT

1. Get the decision, the reason and any ongoing support in writing.
2. Keep what's still needed, store it safely and check before deleting.
3. Give yourself and your child time to settle after a long period of stress.

Nobody prepares you for the final meeting that says social care is stepping back. Sometimes the case closes with no further action. Sometimes statutory involvement ends while Family Help, community support or one agency carries on. Either way, it can bring relief, uncertainty or the strange feeling of standing up too fast after months of pressure.

This chapter is about the quieter time after social care closes or steps down. It doesn't cover ongoing family court proceedings, or a case that closes while restrictions are still in place. Those

need their own advice.

What "closed" means

Closure means social care has decided it won't provide a statutory service at the moment. Support may carry on through Family Help, universal services or another agency.

It matters, but it isn't automatically a finding that every allegation was proved or disproved, or that the family has no needs left.

Ask for the decision in writing. It should confirm the date, the reason, whether support is ending or stepping down, who's still involved and what plan or reviews carry on. Keep it with the final assessment and plan.

TRY SAYING

Thanks for letting me know the case is closing. Could you confirm in writing the date, the reason, and whether any support or reviews are carrying on?

The gap where the structure was

For months, the process gave your life a shape. Meetings to prepare for, actions to finish, a social worker to update, a reason to hold it together on the bad days. When it stops, some dads feel lighter within days. Others feel worse before they feel better, because whatever the process was holding back is still there.

If you're still checking your phone for messages that aren't coming, rehearsing for meetings that won't happen or tensing up when an unknown number rings, that can be a reaction to long-term stress. It often eases as normal life comes back. If it doesn't, or it's affecting your sleep, work, parenting or safety, talk to your GP, a counsellor or a support service. Looking after yourself now is part of looking after your kids.

Your children after it's over

Children don't always experience closure the way adults do. Some understood far more than you realised and need time to talk, if and when they want to. Others were protected from most of it and won't have questions.

Don't assume either way, and don't keep bringing it up to check they're OK. Let them lead. If they ask, keep it honest, short and right for their age. You don't need to explain the process, the other parent's role or what was alleged.

TRY SAYING

The social worker has finished this part of the work with our family. Some help might carry on. None of it was your job to fix. If you ever want to talk about it, you can.

Keep an eye on sleep, behaviour and school, both during and after. A child can react at either stage. Stay curious without questioning them, and get school, health or safeguarding support if a change carries on or worries you.

What to do with the folder

You may have months of timelines, message exports and meeting notes. When the case closes, pause before you either delete everything or keep every copy forever.

- **Keep what's still live.** If a complaint, investigation, family court case or likely dispute is still going, keep the relevant originals, and follow any court order or solicitor's advice. Don't delete things just because social care has closed.
- **Keep the core papers.** The closure decision, final assessment, last plan and a short timeline may be useful later. There's no national rule that every family must keep everything forever.
- **Check before you delete.** Before getting rid of routine exports or duplicates, check they're not relevant to a complaint, time limit, police investigation, court case or advice you have had. If in doubt, ask.
- **Store it safely.** Away from children and anyone who shouldn't see it. Avoid shared devices, extra copies and accounts other people can get into. When it's right to delete something, do it securely.

You're allowed to stop adding to it. The ten-minute rule was there to stop the process taking over your life while it was live. Now it's closed, the healthiest thing most days isn't to open the folder at all.

Rebuilding trust

Some dads come out of a closed case more confident, because they stayed involved and found a way through. Just as many come out quieter, more careful about what they say and slower to trust a new professional, partner or even friends who didn't understand what was going on.

Either is normal. If you have become guarded in a way that's affecting relationships, work or daily life, talk to someone you trust, your GP or a counsellor.

If there was an allegation you disputed, you may still carry it. Closure doesn't usually decide every allegation, and it isn't a public correction. Some people who heard the concern early may never hear how it ended. That's a real loss, and it can take time to make peace with.

If it starts again

Where family conflict or concerns carry on, a closed case isn't always the end. A new referral can arrive months or years later, sometimes about something similar.

If that happens, everything in this guide still applies, and you're not starting from scratch. You already have a timeline, you know your parental responsibility position, and you know what worked last time. Get the old folder out, add to it rather than starting again, and if a pattern is genuinely repeating, say so calmly and with dates. Don't assume professionals will spot it themselves.

A closing thought

The case closing doesn't erase the months before it. You're allowed to be glad it's over and still feel its weight for a while.

> FROM PEER SUPPORT
>
> *In my experience, most dads eventually describe the same shift. Life gets quieter, ordinary routines come back, and one day the file hasn't crossed their mind for weeks. That isn't moving on too fast or caring too little. It's life starting to feel like your own again.*

OVER TO YOU

You don't have to write the answers down, but many fathers find it helps.

1. Do you have the closure decision in writing?
2. What would help your child, and you, settle over the next few months?
3. What's one ordinary thing you have been putting off that you can pick back up?

Scripts at a glance

Short, ready-made words for the moments that matter. Change the names and details to fit.

The first call

> Thanks for letting me know. I want to work with you on this. Can you tell me what the concern is, what happens next, and when? Could you also send that to me by email?

Asking to be involved

> I'm [child]'s dad and I want to be involved in the assessment. Could you let me know how you will include me, and when we can meet?

Asking who someone is

Can I check what your role is, what you're able to decide, and who I should contact if I have questions?

When calls are too much

I want to take part properly, but I'm finding calls hard at the moment. Could you send questions by email and give me a few days' notice of meetings?

Asking for the specifics

I don't agree with that description. Please tell me the specific incidents, dates and evidence being relied on, and how it's said to have affected my child.

Correcting the record

On page [number], it says "[short quote]". This is inaccurate because [brief explanation]. I've attached [file name]. Please correct the record, or attach my response and note that the point is disputed.

Checking a restriction

> Could you confirm in writing what the arrangement is, whether it's voluntary or legally required, what needs to change, and when it will be reviewed?

Before a meeting

> Could you send me the current plan and any reports that will be discussed? I'd also like to bring someone with me for support.

Put on the spot

> I don't want to guess or agree before I understand what it means. Please record the question and I'll reply in writing by [date].

After a call or meeting

> Thanks for today. My understanding is that we agreed X, Y and Z. Please let me know if I've got anything wrong.

Asking for a family group conference

Could we have a family group conference? There are people in our family who want to help, and I'd like us to agree a plan together.

Telling them you're being abused

There's something I need to tell you privately. I've been on the receiving end of behaviour at home that I think is abuse. Can we talk on our own?

After no further action

The police confirmed no further action on [date]. Please update the record, tell me which concerns are still supported by other information, and arrange a review.

Raising a problem informally

I wanted to raise something before it goes any further. I wasn't told about the review on [date]. Could we look at what was decided, and make sure I'm invited next time?

Talking to your child

> Some grown-ups are helping our family at the moment, to make sure everyone's OK. It's not your fault, and it's not your job to fix. You can ask me anything.

When the case closes

> Could you confirm in writing the date the case is closing, the reason, and whether any support or reviews are carrying on?

Contacts and resources

These organisations are mentioned throughout the guide. Numbers and opening hours were checked in November 2026, but services change, so check the website too.

Advice about children's social care

- **Family Rights Group:** free, independent advice for parents and kinship carers dealing with children's social care. Advice line 0808 801 0366, Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 3pm. They also run online forums and webchat. frg.org.uk

Legal help

- **Civil Legal Advice:** checks whether you can get legal aid and can refer you to a legal aid solicitor. 0345 345 4345, Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm, Saturday 9am to 12.30pm. gov.uk/check-legal-aid
- **Find a legal aid adviser:** search for family law solicitors who do legal aid work in England and Wales. find-legal-advice.justice.gov.uk

- **Law Society, Find a Solicitor:** for child protection, section 20, PLO or care proceedings, look for a public law children solicitor, ideally with Children Law Accreditation. For private disputes about child arrangements, look for a family law solicitor, ideally with Family Law Accreditation. solicitors.lawsociety.org.uk

If you're affected by domestic abuse

- **ManKind Initiative:** national helpline for male victims of domestic abuse. 0808 800 1170, Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm. mankind.org.uk
- **Men's Advice Line:** run by Respect, for male victims of domestic abuse and the people supporting them. 0808 801 0327, Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm. mensadviceline.org.uk

Complaints

- **Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman:** free and independent, once you have been through the local authority's complaints process. Normally within 12 months. lgo.org.uk

In a crisis

- **Emergency:** if anyone is in immediate danger, call 999.
- **NHS 111:** urgent mental health support in England, any time. Call 111 and choose the mental health option. nhs.uk
- **CALM:** for anyone having suicidal thoughts, 0800 58 58 58, every day, 5pm to midnight. thecalmzone.net

- **Samaritans:** someone to listen, free, any time. 116 123. samaritans.org
- **Your GP:** for anything affecting your sleep, eating, work or mood. Ask for an urgent appointment if you need one.

None of these services can tell you what will happen in your case. What they can do is make sure you're not carrying it on your own.

Sources

The small numbers in the text point to these sources. Information and links checked November 2026.

1. Department for Education, Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026, Chapter 1, paragraphs 16, 19 and 28 (working with parents and carers, including fathers and male carers), and Chapter 3, paragraphs 136 to 146 (Family Help and assessment), and the summary of changes (March 2026).
2. Equality Act 2010: section 11 (sex as a protected characteristic), section 13 (direct discrimination), sections 20 and 29 (services and reasonable adjustments) and section 149 (public sector equality duty).
3. UK GDPR, Article 15; Information Commissioner's Office, A guide to subject access: how to recognise a request and how long there is to respond.
4. Information Commissioner's Office, A guide to subject access: requests for information about children.

5. Children Act 1989, section 20; Department for Education, Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations, Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review.

6. Children Act 1989, section 20(7) and (8); Volume 2 care planning guidance.

7. Department for Education, Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations, Volume 1: court orders, Annex 1; Public Law Outline pre-proceedings guidance; Public Law Working Group, Recommendations to achieve best practice in the child protection and family justice systems (March 2021).

8. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026, Chapter 3; Children Act 1989, section 32, for the 26-week timetable.

9. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026, Chapter 3: child protection conferences and core groups.

0. Children Act 1989, sections 2, 3, 4 and 12; GOV.UK, Parental rights and responsibilities.

1. Department for Education, Getting the Best from Complaints (2006); Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006; Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, the children's statutory complaints procedure.

2. HM Courts and Tribunals Service, Sharing information outside of court in family proceedings (April 2025); Transparency and reporting in the family courts (August 2025).

3. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026, Chapter 3: referrals, assessment and the 45-working-day timescale.

4. Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 (Royal Assent 29 April 2026): family group decision-making and multi-agency child protection teams; Department for Education, policy summary notes.

5. Department for Education, Families First Partnership programme guide: year 2, 2026 to 2027, including Family Help plans, family group decision-making, multi-agency child protection teams and engaging fathers and male carers; Lead Child Protection Practitioner Standards (June 2026).

6. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, Children's care services.

7. Children Act 1989, section 17 (children in need and their families) section 22 (wishes and feelings of parents of looked after children), section 34 (contact with children in care) and Schedule 2, paragraph 15 (promoting contact).

8. Human Rights Act 1998, section 6 and Schedule 1: Article 6 (fair hearing) and Article 8 (respect for family life).

9. Family Procedure Rules 2010, rule 12.3 and Practice Direction 12A.

10. Department for Education, Understanding and dealing with issues relating to parental responsibility (updated August 2023).

1. Family Justice Council, Covert recordings in family law proceedings concerning children (15 May 2025).
2. Social Work England, Professional standards, standards 2.1, 2.4, 3.5 and 3.11.
3. UK GDPR, Article 5(1)(d) (accuracy), Article 12 (time limits and reasons for refusal) and Article 16 (right to rectification); Information Commissioner's Office, Right to rectification.
4. Children Act 1989, section 47 (the duty to investigate where there is reasonable cause to suspect significant harm); Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026, Chapter 3: child protection enquiries.
5. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026, glossary: the four categories of abuse and neglect (physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect), and domestic abuse as a safeguarding concern.

Also used for checking

- Children Act 1989 (including sections 20, 21, 31, 38, 44, 45 and 46); Children and Families Act 2014.
- Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984; Policing and Crime Act 2017; Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.
- Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, Part 1, Schedule 1.
- Domestic Abuse Act 2021; Home Office, Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance.

- Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years.
- Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, The Myth of Invisible Men (September 2021).

Glossary

Advocate

An advocate is someone who helps parents, children or other family members get their views across when dealing with children's services and other official agencies.

Bail / pre-charge bail

Conditions you must follow while a police investigation continues, governed by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 as amended by the Policing and Crime Act 2017 and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Breach can lead to further action.

Cafcass

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. Family Court Advisers give the family court independent advice about a child's welfare. In public-law proceedings, a Children's Guardian from Cafcass may represent the child's interests and appoint a solicitor for the child.

Care order

A court order that gives the local authority parental responsibility for a child. A parent can retain parental responsibility too.

Child in Need (CIN) / section 17

A child who is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development without services; whose health or development is likely to be significantly or further impaired without services; or who is disabled. Defined by section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

Child Protection Plan

A formal multi-agency plan to reduce the risk of significant harm.

Children's Guardian

A Cafcass or Cafcass Cymru practitioner appointed to represent the child's interests in court. The child also has a solicitor in care proceedings.

Core Group

The smaller group (including parents and key professionals) that turns the conference outline into detailed action and reviews progress.

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)

Prosecutes criminal cases investigated by the police in England and Wales.

Emergency protection order (EPO)

A court order, usually applied for by the local authority, allowing a child to be removed or kept in a safe place for up to eight days, extendable once to 15 days. Section 44 of the Children Act 1989.

Family group conference / family group decision-making

A voluntary, family-led way to bring relatives and other trusted people together to make a plan for a child alongside skilled practitioners. A Family Group Conference is one model of family group decision-making.

Family Help

The coordinated approach described in Working Together 2026, bringing targeted early help and section 17 support into a more seamless offer through a family help plan and named lead practitioner. Local arrangements and names vary.

Family Law Accreditation Scheme

A Law Society scheme recognising solicitors with proven specialist expertise in family law cases.

Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC)

Multi-agency meeting that decides whether a Child Protection Plan is needed.

Lead practitioner

The named professional who coordinates support and keeps the family's plan under review.

Letter Before Proceedings

A formal letter telling a parent or other person with parental responsibility that the local authority is considering applying for a care or supervision order.

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

An independent body that can consider complaints about local authority services. It usually expects the relevant local authority complaints procedure to be completed first, although it may accept a complaint early in limited circumstances such as serious delay.[11]

Multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)

A team where children's services, police, health and other agencies share information about safeguarding concerns and decide what action may be needed. Local names vary.

NFA (No Further Action)

Police/CPS decide not to proceed with a criminal case at that time. Not a formal finding of innocence.

Parental responsibility

Parental responsibility means the legal rights, duties and authority a person has in relation to a child. A birth mother has it automatically. Common routes for a father include marriage or civil partnership with the birth mother when the child was born, qualifying registration as the father in England and Wales on or after 1 December 2003, a registered parental responsibility agreement or a court order. Later marriage and re-registration, fertility treatment, surrogacy, adoption or a birth outside England and Wales can change the answer. Parental responsibility does not itself guarantee contact or unrestricted access to records. Seek legal advice if you are unsure.[10]

PLO / Public Law Outline / pre-proceedings

Formal process when the local authority is considering an application for a care or supervision order.

Police protection

Power for a police officer to take a child to safety for up to 72 hours without a court order, where the child would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm. Section 46 of the Children Act 1989.

Section 20

Local-authority accommodation of a child without a care order. The child becomes looked after, but the local authority does not gain parental responsibility. Agreement must be informed and genuinely voluntary. Rights to object, seek the child's return and the position of a 16- or 17-year-old can be complex; obtain family-law advice.[5][6]

Section 21

The local authority's duty to provide accommodation for a child removed from home under police protection or an emergency protection order. It doesn't depend on parental agreement, unlike section 20.

Section 47

Local authority duty to make enquiries where there is reasonable cause to suspect significant harm.

Single assessment

The social worker's assessment of what help or protection a child needs, carried out under Working Together to Safeguard Children. Local authorities call it different things, including a single assessment, a child and family assessment or a Family Help assessment. It's the same thing. It should reach a decision within 45 working days of the referral.

Strategy discussion

Multi-agency discussion (usually without parents) to plan section 47 enquiries and immediate safety.

Subject access request (SAR)

A request to an organisation for a copy of your own personal information. Some information can be withheld where an exemption applies.

Supervision order

A court order requiring a named supervisor, usually the local authority, to advise, assist and support the child.

Threshold

The level of need used to decide which service or process is appropriate. In court proceedings, ‘the threshold' can also mean the separate legal test that must be met before certain orders are made.