



A decision is made to go into pre-proceedings under public family law

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Who is this document for?

This practice guide is principally for social workers in local authority Children's Services who are involved in deciding whether to go into pre-proceedings with a family whose child¹ is thought to be being sexually abused or at risk of sexual abuse.

It is also relevant to any other professionals working with the child at this time (in school, for example), to help them understand what is happening, what it means for the child, and how they can contribute to safeguarding and supporting the child at this time.

1. What are (PLO) pre-proceedings?

The pre-proceedings stage, often called the Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings stage, is a formal framework used by local authorities to work supportively with families when significant child protection concerns exist. The PLO pre-proceedings process represents an opportunity to work closely with families by offering help and support to address risk and needs with the aim of safely diverting children from becoming the subject of public law proceedings.

Where child sexual abuse is a concern, the pre-proceedings stage can be an important step when you can better understand the child's circumstances or test a safety plan before deciding next steps.

Under Families First transformations, the Multi-agency Child protection team (MACPT) will decide whether to move into pre-proceedings and care proceedings. The aim is for the transition from **Family Help** to a **MACPT** to be seamless, with the MACPT taking the lead on the PLO process while maintaining the supportive, relationship-based approach established in the Family Help stage.

To learn more about pre-proceedings read the [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026](#).

The UK Government's [Court Orders and Pre-proceedings for Local Authorities](#) provides statutory guidance, and the Public Law Working Group's best practice guidance [Support for and Work with Families prior to Court Proceedings](#) establishes several key principles for the pre-proceedings stage. The [Family Rights Group](#) also provides user-friendly guidance about the pre-proceedings stage.

Key steps and structure

The pre-proceedings should only be initiated following a child protection process. Usually, the pre-proceedings stage is a structured, intensive and time-limited period that focuses on targeted work between Children's Services and the family. Where child sexual abuse is a concern, it is an opportunity to understand the child's circumstances, complete specialist assessments and monitor a safety plan. The child should not be left in a risky situation during the pre-proceedings process, and the plan should not result in unnecessary delay for the child, should an application to the court be needed. Here is an example of how the steps might look where child sexual abuse is a concern:^{i ii}

¹ In this document we use the term 'child' to refer to anyone under the age of 18. See [An introduction to the child sexual abuse response pathway](#) for more about terminology.

- **Send a letter before proceedings**, marking the start of the process. The letter should provide the parent(s) with a concise, jargon-free summary of the concerns of child sexual abuse and any other harms, and the impact on the child. It alerts them to **their right to non-means-tested, non-merits-tested legal aid**. It also invites the parent(s) and other people with parental responsibility to a formal pre-proceedings meeting.
- **Hold a pre-proceedings meeting (PPM)**, usually within seven working days. The meeting is attended by the parent(s), their legal representatives, the social worker and their manager. Its aim is to make a written agreement that includes an action plan. This plan should clearly set out the concerns and what needs to change. Often, a separate safety plan setting out how the child should be protected from sexual abuse (such as excluding the person(s) of concern from the home and what should happen if they come to the home) and any other harms. The action plan might include a package of support to reduce the vulnerability of the parent(s) and child. The action plan should include clear expectations and clarify what will happen if the parent(s) do not follow the safety plan, or if the risk of sexual abuse or other harms does not reduce.
- **Offer the parent(s) a period of change and assessment** for a defined period – typically between 12 and 16 weeks – to follow the agreed action plan. This should only be extended by one or two six-week increments if the risk reduces and the parent(s) adhere to the safety plan. During this time the child protection plan continues in parallel, and the social worker:
 - organises a **package of support**
 - update the **child and family assessment**
 - arranges any **specialist assessments** (conducted by experts who should have clear instructions, be provided with the relevant information, and be suitably qualified to respond)
 - **monitors risk and safety plans** with the child and the parent(s) or carer(s) they live with
 - **energises wider family support through** Family group decision-making (FGDM). The plan offers practical support to parents and carers, whilst prioritising the safety and wellbeing of the child. FGDM helps to ensure a family network is engaged and empowered to participate in decision-making while a child and their family is receiving help, support or protection. This may result in assessment of family and friends as alternative carers.
 - Note that care proceedings may result from the pre-proceedings process, so you should prepare all reports to meet court standards.
- **Hold review meetings**, often at six-week intervals, to track progress against the action plan, discuss challenges, and make any necessary adjustments. At the conclusion of the pre-proceedings stage, Children’s Services will decide whether to step up to public law proceedings or step down (see Supporting the child’s emotional health and wellbeing)
- Supporting the child’s physical health and wellbeing
- Supporting the child’s relationships with their family and friends

- Supporting the child's education
- Supporting parents and carers: A guide for those working with families affected by child sexual abuse

6. Possible outcomes of the pre-proceedings stage

- below).
- If the FHLP or MACPT believes that the child's circumstances or welfare needs have changed at any point during the pre-proceedings stage, such that court proceedings should be initiated immediately, then the local authority should proceed with making an application to the court to initiate care proceedings.

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)

Family group decision-making (FGDM) is a term used to describe a voluntary process that enables a family network (including those who are not blood relatives) to come together and make a family-led plan in response to concerns about a child's safety and wellbeing, working alongside skilled professionals. Family Group Conferences (FGC) are form of FGDM.

Under Families First transformations:

- FGDMs should be offered through family help, multi-agency child protection and care and consider offering FGDM at every decision point, including at the point of reunification, should the child return back to the care of their parents / family member, after a period outside of the home.
- FGDMs should be offered at the pre-proceedings stage to ensure that families on the edge of care are offered the opportunity to make a family-led plan before care proceedings are initiated, if this offer is in the child's best interests.
- FHLPs and MACPTs will play a crucial role in supporting FGDM as the practitioners who know the child and family well and are delivering help, support and in some cases, protection through an existing plan.
- FHLPs and the MACPT should consider whether it would be appropriate to exclude certain individuals from FGDM to ensure the safety of the child, this includes person(s) of concern and those who have been identified as unable protect the child.

A family network may include the child's parents or any other person with parental responsibility for the child, relatives, friends or other persons connected with the child. Siblings, cousins, family friends, neighbours or other members of a child's community, might also form a part of the family network. Family networks can play a key role in supporting families to stay together safely, and even when this is not possible, can often offer a safe, loving and stable home which helps to keep children out of local authority care. Family networks can also, with the right support from trained practitioners, help parents and carers access support to address their own needs, while continuing to offer vital stability to children and young people.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes a measure to mandate local authorities to offer 'family group decision making'. This will establish an FGDM as a right of the child and place a statutory duty on Children's Services to provide and FGDM meeting before applying for a care order.

2. How may the child be feeling?

When a child communicates – either verbally or through their behaviour – about sexual abuse or coexisting harms in the family network but they remain living at home, they are in the uniquely difficult position of living within the very problem that professionals are trying to solve. They are the central witness, yet they are often not involved in the solution, left to navigate the emotional fallout alone.

Children rarely distinguish between different assessment and legal stages, often experiencing the entire period of Children's Services' involvement as one continuous period of uncertainty and stress. When a child has told of their abuse but remains at home, the pre-proceedings stage can be a time of heightened anxiety, conflicts of loyalty, and a heavy sense of responsibility.

Children may be in a precarious situation during pre-proceedings. When the legal threshold for care proceedings is met, home life can become tense or even frightening. Children may feel caught between risking family separation or enduring ongoing abuse. This may lead to tension in the home, where children become hypervigilant, closely watching family members to avoid conflict or harm, especially if the person of concern is still present or involved in family life [8]. The person of concern may be facing the legal consequences of their actions. Children naturally want family stability and feel loyalty to parents and other family members, which creates internal conflict when they have reported abuse.ⁱⁱⁱ They may blame themselves for family issues and see professional involvement, rather than the abuse itself, as the cause of distress.^{iv} This can result in guilt and fear, and can lead them to retract their statements or not say anything further. They may experience consequences for sharing information, such as not having their basic or emotional needs met, or physical harm.^v

The fragmented way in which children often communicate about their abuse means the information available at the start of the pre-proceedings stage may be incomplete. This is the reality of working with children who are scared, conflicted, and uncertain about who they can trust and what response they will receive. Children often feel that their attempts to tell about sexual abuse are futile, so they instead seek help through their behaviour because they don't have the words to describe what is happening to them. Our [Communicating with Children Guide](#) contains more information.

During pre-proceedings, children are managing uncertain outcomes. This is a time of uncertainty for a child, as major decisions about who they live with and spend time with will be made. If pre-proceedings drift on, it prolongs the uncertainty for the child. During pre-proceedings, children often experience fear and anxiety, torn between loyalty to their family and concerns for their own safety. Speaking up might lead to family separation, while silence could prolong any abuse they are experiencing. This leaves them in a state of persistent anxiety, caught between a harmful present and an uncertain future beyond their control.

Children can feel unheard and unseen during the pre-proceedings stage. The focus shifts to the adults: assessing the parent(s)' capacity, managing the person of concern, and holding professional meetings. Children often feel like bystanders in a process that should be entirely about them.^{viii} Most children do not fully grasp safeguarding or legal processes. They may see their parents distressed and meetings occur without clear explanation or direct engagement. Children are not included in pre-proceedings meetings, leading to feelings of powerlessness and a belief that their views are not important.

You can learn more about intra-familial child sexual abuse and its impacts in our guides:

- [Key messages from research on intra-familial child sexual abuse](#)
- [Key messages from research on the impacts of child sexual abuse](#)

3. How do Children's Services decide whether pre-proceedings are appropriate?

The pre-proceedings process may be considered once a child protection plan has happened and there continue to be child protection risk for the child. To learn more, see the Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidelines 2026, [here](#). Under Families First transformations, the Multi-Agency Child Protection Team will decide whether to move into pre-proceedings.

To decide the best course of action, Children's Services holds a **Legal Gateway Meeting**, also known as a Legal Planning Meeting. Statutory guidance for local authorities on conducting this meeting is contained in [Court Orders and Pre-proceedings](#) from the Department for Education; follow your local guidance on how to prepare for and participate in the meeting.

The meeting is attended by the social worker, other MACPT practitioners, team manager or service manager and the Children's Services legal representative. Under Families First transformations, members of the MACPT attend the meetings to ensure multiagency perspectives are active voices in the legal strategy. The participants will review the evidence – gathered by the practitioner from multiagency sources - to determine whether care proceedings are justified.

This will depend on, for example:

- the child's account and their Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) video recorded interview (VRI) (if one has taken place – you can find information about this interview and how it should be conducted in our guide [The child is formally interviewed by the police and children's social care](#))
- the findings from a paediatric medical assessment, if one has taken place – see our guide [The child has a medical examination](#) for details of this
- contextual evidence from professionals across multiple agencies such as police, health and education; we suggest using the CSA Centre's [Signs and Indicators Template](#) to record this information in a single place

- the non-abusing parent(s)' understanding of and response to the concerns²
- social work records, MACPT recordings and any assessments undertaken by the practitioners working with the family (under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989) or other experts.

The meeting will consider risks and vulnerabilities within the family, as well as protective factors. Having a protective parent who believes and supports the child is a significant mitigating factor, but coexisting harms and parental vulnerability can significantly increase the likelihood and severity of harm to the child: while one, or both parents may have acted protectively in relation to child sexual abuse, or tried to do so, there may be other concerns about their parenting.

Bear in mind that intra-familial child sexual abuse often occurs in combination with other forms of physical or emotional abuse or neglect, and there is evidence of a close relationship between child sexual abuse and domestic abuse.

Early help makes a difference, though: preventative interventions of sufficient intensity can reduce or prevent child maltreatment and thereby reduce the risk of harm and care proceedings, particularly if they are delivered in the first 1,000 days of a child's life.

Often risk factors can be reduced and care proceedings can be avoided by providing families with wraparound support through a child in need plan or child protection plan – and, in some cases, by going into pre-proceedings.

Possible outcomes of the Legal Gateway Meeting

The meeting will decide whether it is appropriate to:

- continue on a child protection plan with the parent(s) continuing to care for the child, or
- begin the (PLO) pre-proceedings process, or
- go directly into care proceedings.

The legal **threshold** for beginning PLO pre-proceedings or for going straight into care proceedings is the same. Under Section 31(2) of the Children Act 1989, this threshold is met if:

- the child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, *and*
- this harm will (or may) occur because the care given (or likely to be given) is not what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give, or because the child is beyond parental control.

To determine whether the threshold is met, Children's Services uses the civil legal standard of proof – '**on the balance of probabilities**'. This means they can take steps to safeguard the child **even if the threshold for criminal proceedings is not met and the police have taken no further action at his time.**

² By 'non-abusing parent' we mean someone in a parental or principal care-giving role to a child – their biological parent, step-parent, adoptive parent, foster parent or other relative fulfilling that role – who is not considered to have been involved in the sexual abuse of the child (even if they have previously come to agencies' attention for other reasons). See [An introduction to the child sexual abuse response pathway](#) for more about terminology.

Legal standard of proof

Research has found that the legal standard of proof is often misapplied in child sexual abuse cases, affecting the help that children receive.

- In criminal law, the standard of proof is '**beyond reasonable doubt**'. There must be a very high level of certainty that the individual committed the offence. The prosecution must prove the case to the extent that there is no reasonable doubt in the mind of the jury or judge.
- In family law, the standard of proof is '**on the balance of probabilities**', which means that a fact or event is determined to be 'more likely than not' to have occurred. It does not require absolute certainty or forensic corroboration in the same way a criminal conviction does.

However, research has found that this latter standard of proof is often not applied in situations where child sexual abuse is a concern:

- When police conclude an investigation because of 'evidential difficulties' (an inability to meet the 'beyond reasonable doubt' standard), Children's Social Care and other agencies frequently interpret this to mean the abuse did not happen and they do not take steps to safeguard the child.
- Consequently, agencies often determine that no safeguarding concerns exist and retreat from the family. This leaves the child without protection or support, even though the risk may remain high *on the balance of probabilities*.
- The system becomes 'paralysed', with no agency acting if the police cannot proceed.

This highlights the need for Children's Services and other agencies to interpret a police decision of 'no further action' as '**no further police action at this time**'. Rather than meaning that the child is safe, the decision simply indicates that the police will need more evidence before the case meets their *criminal law* standard of proof, but the child may still be at risk and require action to safeguard them. Additionally:

- Safeguarding partners should audit their decision-making to ensuring they make a clear distinction between safeguarding thresholds and criminal investigation thresholds.
- Safeguarding decisions must be based on all indicators of abuse and the balance of probabilities, regardless of the status of a police investigation. (add in reference to NP report here for this box, Jeremy)

(a) When will it be appropriate to go straight into care proceedings?

Children's Services will bypass the pre-proceedings stage entirely and apply for a court order to help protect the child if:

- the child is at **immediate or imminent risk of significant harm** and needs to be removed from the home without delay, or

- there is no safe way for the child to remain in the care of the parent(s) or within the family network while pre-proceedings take place.

This will be the case in situations where, for example:

- the child has shared a specific, high-risk detail (e.g. that a person of concern is returning to the home that evening) which shifts the case from a 'monitored risk' to an 'immediate danger', requiring an urgent court application to ensure the child's safety
- the child has undergone a medical assessment which reveals physical indicators of recent sexual abuse, necessitating immediate separation from a person of concern in order to prevent further harm or witness intimidation
- the police or social services have intercepted intelligence (such as digital communications or physical sightings) which indicate that the child is about to be moved to a specific location for the purpose of sexual exploitation or to meet an identified person of concern
- the police have attended the family home and have reasonable cause to suspect a sexual offence has just occurred, or a known high-risk person of concern has been found in an unauthorised contact.

For more information about what happens at this stage, see our guide [Children's Services decide to go into care proceedings](#).

(b) When will pre-proceedings be appropriate?

In situations where child sexual abuse is a concern, the pre-proceedings process may be appropriate if, for example:

- the legal threshold for care proceedings is met on the balance of probabilities because of other risks to the child, with only a *suspicion* of child sexual abuse, and Children's Services use the -pre-proceedings process to better understand the child's circumstances, or
- the legal threshold for care proceedings is met because of child sexual abuse concerns, but the person of concern has been excluded from the home and there is a need to test the capacity of the non-abusing parent(s) to keep the child safe.

Children's Services are experienced at managing risk in the community and will often choose the least intrusive option to protect the child's right to family life. The pre-proceedings stage may be an opportunity to work with the child and family to better understand the child's circumstances and test a safety plan.

Example

M is an 8-year-old girl whose mother is working with Children's Services to address issues related to neglect and domestic abuse. M's mother has recently separated from her partner, but the practitioner suspects they might have maintained contact. M's mother has found it difficult to sustain positive changes or make consistent use of the support provided but says she wants to make an effort now.

Concerns for M's safety increase when she tells the practitioner about a "secret game" she played with her mother's partner that she couldn't share. M's practitioner is concerned that there are possible signs of sexual abuse (see our [Signs and Indicators Template](#) for more information about spotting these signs). The police investigation is closed with '*no further police action at this time*' after M does not provide any more information. Following the police investigation, her mother separates from her partner.

While the evidence does not meet the criminal standard of proof at this time, the professional concern for her wellbeing remains because, on the balance of probabilities, she is at risk of significant harm of sexual abuse and there is a risk of future harm if the partner returns.

Children's Services assesses that the cumulative impact of the neglect and domestic abuse is significant enough to meet the legal standard of proof for care proceedings – but a decision is made to trial a period of change using the pre-proceedings process to support M and her mother, and to monitor safety with the partner excluded from the home. This is to enable M's mother to demonstrate that she can ensure M's safety, with a view to avoiding care proceedings. Children's Services will also work with M and her mother to better understand their circumstances. During this time M's mother will be given support to make meaningful and sustainable change, and her capacity to protect and maintain safe boundaries with her ex-partner will be assessed.

Note that in M's case:

- Child sexual abuse is suspected but is not the primary concern.
- The person suspected of the sexual abuse is no longer in the home.
- The case meets the legal standard of proof for care proceedings but there is no evidence of immediate risk of harm.

The pre-proceedings stage provides an opportunity to learn more about M's circumstances while monitoring her safety and creating opportunities for her to share more.

4. How can the social worker support the child and the parent(s) or carer(s) they are living with?

Children's Services may have decided to go into pre-proceedings because they think there's a realistic chance of change, or they may be testing whether the parent(s) can protect the child from the person of concern. The pre-proceedings phase is not just about change – it is also about understanding the family's circumstances and refining the assessment. Should the case progress to care proceedings, the local authority has a better understanding of the family's circumstances, clearer evidence of significant harm, and the parents' capacity to protect.

Where child sexual abuse is suspected, it is essential to understand that a child is unlikely to tell everything about their abuse at once: telling is a process, not an event.

- Children often "test the waters." A child may start with peripheral details or "leak" information about a less serious incident to gauge the adult's reaction before sharing about more significant harm.
- A child's ability to communicate is heavily mediated by their internal state (shame, fear, or confusion) and external pressures (threats from the person who has abused them or fear of breaking up the family).
- It is common for children to retract parts of their account or "minimise" the abuse after an initial statement. This is often a coping mechanism or a response to the perceived consequences of their initial "telling," rather than an indication that the original account was false.

Professionals therefore have to be patient, observant, and skilled at piecing together information from multiple sources over time.

To learn more about what prevents children from talking about their abuse, and how you can give them the opportunity to communicate what has happened to them, read [our Communicating with Children Guide](#).

This section covers:

- monitoring risk and safety planning with the child and the non-abusing parent or carer they live with
- supporting the child and family's emotional needs
- keeping the child informed and supporting their participation
- undertaking a holistic child and family assessment.

(a) Monitor risk and safety planning with the child and the parent(s) or carer(s) they live with

As the child's social worker, you have a responsibility during the pre-proceedings process to monitor any risk toward the child and review the safety plan. This may include involving other trusted adults and coordinating other professionals, using their input to update and adapt the safety plan accordingly. This will generally take place through Core Group Meetings via the Child Protection Process. Where child sexual abuse and coexisting harms are a concern, a rigorous, triangulated, evidence-informed approach to assessment and monitoring is essential.

When a child has reported abuse but remains at home, it's essential to consider the possibility that **the risk has increased**. The period that follows is often one of heightened anxiety, and the child may be managing the fallout in a home where tensions are running high and risk could escalate.

- Monitoring the child's presentation and wellbeing alongside more obvious risk issues is important, because **children will often show in their behaviour what is happening** to them rather than telling someone.

- Safety planning with the child and parent is a helpful way to **work together to reduce risk** and **build a shared picture of what safety looks like** for each family member.
- **The safety plans (including updated and revised copies) should set clear expectations about what should happen in certain scenarios**, such as what to do if the person of concern comes to the home or is not following protective orders or other court orders. How the non-abusing parent(s) respond to such risks will help with decision-making.

Supporting parent(s) who are protective, or have the potential to be protective, is one of the best ways to protect the child from future harm. These parent(s) may have responded to the discovery of the abuse appropriately or to the best of their ability, but there may be other concerns about their parenting such as neglect, physical or emotional harm. You may also have concerns about their capacity to protect the child from the person of concern, due to their own vulnerability or risks. Support for parents and carers who are looking after the child, should include addressing their own **trauma and mental health needs** as a direct result of the abuse in the family. While needing support in their own right, their needs are intrinsically linked to their capacity to care and protect. To learn more about how you can help them, see our [Supporting Parents and Carers Guide](#).

(b) Support the child and family's emotional needs

There is a common misconception that the child cannot receive emotional support or therapy during a police investigation, criminal proceedings, or family law proceedings where child sexual abuse is a concern. The Crown Prosecution Service's 2022 legal guidance [Pre-trial Therapy](#) makes clear that they can, and should. **Refer the child for therapeutic support at the earliest opportunity.** The child's health and wellbeing should always be the determinative factor in whether, when and with whom they seek therapy. **Reassure the child that what they say in therapy will remain with the therapist, unless it is necessary to safeguard them.** Be mindful that there are certain circumstances where therapy notes can be disclosed by direction of the court.

Children may not be ready for therapeutic support, and their needs should remain under review. Therapy can be accessed at any point and, if they are not ready, this can be revisited in the future. Be mindful that there can be long waiting lists for therapy and safe adults should work together to consider how they can support the child too.

Supporting the child and family's emotional needs should consider:

- The child's immediate and long-term care, support and therapeutic needs, including their readiness and willingness to engage with therapy
- The emotional and support needs of the parent / carer they are living with, including supporting them to understand the child's care and support needs
- The immediate and long-term care and support needs of other children and vulnerable people within the home, considering whether they have also been sexually abused
- The care, support and therapeutic needs of other children in the home that have engaged in harmful sexual behaviours.

- When therapy is not appropriate at this time, including any barriers to the child accessing therapy and reasons why there may be opposition to therapy from family or professionals

Any therapeutic support should have clear ground rules and should be mindful of any open investigations and the potential to impact or influence any evidence the child may give in criminal law proceedings or family law proceedings. The therapist should avoid questioning the child about their account or asking too many questions which could be perceived as coaching or influence. Check with statutory and legal professionals about any ground rules that might enable the child to receive support without impacting on proceedings.

To learn more about the impact of child sexual abuse and family law proceedings and how you can support the child, parents and carers, read our guides:

- [Supporting the child's emotional health and wellbeing](#)
- [Supporting the child's physical health and wellbeing](#)
- [Supporting the child's relationships with their family and friends](#)
- [Supporting the child's education](#)
- [Supporting parents and carers: A guide for those working with families affected by child sexual abuse](#)

(c) Keep the child informed and support their participation

Keeping children engaged and informed is a way of ensuring that their voice is heard and they are at the centre of plans relating to their safety and wellbeing. How to do this will depend on their age, understanding, preferences and specific needs. As the social worker, you have a responsibility to monitor the child's safety, 'ascertain their wishes and feelings' (Children Act 1989), involve them in safety planning, and help them understand the pre-proceedings process. Sexual abuse is silencing in its very nature. Allowing the child space to speak, ask questions and participate can begin the process of countering this,

Explain the pre-proceeding process in terms that are appropriate to their age, their communication needs and their background and characteristics – and give them an opportunity to ask questions and share their views. Take the time to help the child understand:

- the purpose of the pre-proceedings stage, how it is different from what has happened before, and what might happen next
- who will be involved in the pre-proceedings stage
- how the child will be involved (such as through safety planning(a) Monitor risk and safety planning with the child and the parent(s) or carer(s) they live with – see above)
- what they should do if they want to talk to you or tell you something
- what assessments and support will be available, and what this means for them
- how their views will be shared with their parent(s) and other professionals
- how their views will influence what happens
- what decisions might be made at the end of the pre-proceedings process

- how the decisions will be made
- how they will be informed about what happens during the pre-proceedings stage and at the end – this is something to agree with them.

Understanding is a two-way street. **Always offer the child an opportunity to share any more information about what has happened and is happening to them.** Reflect back to them your understanding of what they have said so they can correct any misunderstandings. Use the CSA Centre's [Signs and Indicators Template](#) and record what the child said and your observations, along with any information received from other professionals, at the same time.

When discussing the possible outcomes of pre-proceedings, children might have questions about what it means to go into care proceedings. For more information, read our guide [Children's Services decide to go into care proceedings](#).

The [Family Justice Young Peoples Board \(FJYPB\)](#) has prepared a range of resources tailored to children, including:

- a [glossary](#) explaining some of the words and phrases which children and young people may hear during a case in the Family Court.
- a [video](#) that explains how the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) helps children and young people involved in the Family Court.

(d) Undertaking a holistic child and family assessment

Undertaking a robust child and family assessment during the pre-proceedings stage is a meaningful way for you to exercise your statutory powers to help protect and support the child.

In the pre-proceedings phase, one parent or person with parental responsibility may be identified as protective or may have their ability to implement a safety plan assessed. The main issue may be allegations of child sexual abuse, but other types of harm can also be examined within a comprehensive assessment.

A robust child and family assessment should:

- clearly set out the risks and vulnerabilities related to the child
- evaluate the risks, strengths and protective abilities of the parent(s) who is caring for the child and their capacity to co-develop and implement a safety plan
- evaluate the current and future risk posed by the person of concern, including whether they can and will adhere to a safety plan and any other restrictions,
- gather and synthesise evidence from multiple sources, including contextual evidence from partner agencies and evidence from those (such as the police and probation officers) who understand both static and dynamic risk assessments.

The assessment enables you to make a safe decision at the end of pre-proceedings and, if the decision is made to go into care proceedings, to:

- arrive at court prepared with a clear picture of the child's lived experience
- provide the court with evidence that enables safe and just decisions
- provide the court with a clear picture of who in the family is supportive and protective.

To find out more, see our guide [Children's Services decide to go into care proceedings](#).

When preparing a child and family assessment, follow your local guidance and use our [Signs and Indicators Template](#) to record what the child says and your observations.

Our [Communicating with Children Guide](#) can help you talk to the child about sexual abuse, encourage them to communicate what has happened to them, and respond supportively if they do so.

5. How other professionals can support the child and family

If Children's Services have gone into pre-proceedings with a child or family who you work with, this indicates that they have concerns about whether the child can be kept safe within the family home.

Consider the possibility that **the child is at risk by remaining in the family home**. Monitor their presentation and wellbeing alongside more obvious risk issues, remembering that children often show what is happening to them **in their behaviour** rather than by telling someone. Be patient, remain observant, and piece together any information you receive or observe over time; if you have any concerns, inform the child's social worker.

Bear in mind too that, although the child may already have told someone that they have been or are being sexually abused, they may say more about it in the future. Telling is a process, not an event, and children rarely tell everything about their abuse at once.

- **Non-linear patterns:** Children often 'test the waters'. A child may start with peripheral details or 'leak' information about a less serious incident to gauge adults' reaction before sharing about more significant harm.
- **The influence of external factors:** A child's ability to communicate is heavily mediated by their internal state (shame, fear, or confusion) and external pressures (threats from the abuser or fear of breaking up the family).
- **Incremental recanting and re-telling:** It is common for children to retract parts of their account or 'minimise' the abuse after an initial statement. This is often a coping mechanism or a response to the perceived consequences of their initial telling, rather than an indication that the original account was false.

To learn more about what prevents children from talking about their abuse, and how you can give them the opportunity to communicate what has happened to them, read [our Communicating with Children Guide](#).

If you have any concerns about the non-abusing parent(s)' ability to protect the child, inform the social worker. To learn more about how you can help the parent(s) during this difficult time for them, see our [Supporting Parents and Carers Guide](#).

To learn more about how you can support the child during this period, see our guides:

- [Supporting the child's emotional health and wellbeing](#)
- [Supporting the child's physical health and wellbeing](#)

- [Supporting the child's relationships with their family and friends](#)
- [Supporting the child's education](#)
- [Supporting parents and carers: A guide for those working with families affected by child sexual abuse](#)

6. Possible outcomes of the pre-proceedings stage

If risks escalate during pre-proceedings, Children's Services may act to ensure the child's safety by making an application at short or no notice to go into care proceedings.

Typically, however, the pre-proceedings stage ends with a final planning meeting, with four possible outcomes:

- **Lower level of support:** The child is supported through a:
 - *a Family Help plan (including statutory Child in Need where required)' or*
 - *a Child Protection Plan (reviewed in Core Group meetings, with input from the Multi-Agency Child Protection Team)', or*
 - in Wales, a Care and Support Plan, and reviewed through regular meetings.
- **Case closure:** All concerns are resolved, and Children's/Social Services withdraws.
- **Private law proceedings:** If court involvement is necessary for the child's welfare (to decide where the child lives and spends time), an application to private family law may be made. In cases involving sexual abuse or other harms, protective orders may also be sought.
- **Public law proceedings:** If the legal standard (or **threshold criteria**) under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989 is met and the child's safety cannot be ensured at home, Children's Services may decide to go into care proceedings.

7. Where next?

- Child is supported through a Family Help / Care & Support plan (including statutory Child in Need where required)
- The case is managed on [a child in need plan \(regularly reviewed at child in need meetings\)](#) or [a child protection plan \(reviewed at core group meetings with input from the Multi-Agency Child Protection Team\)](#)
- Private Law Proceedings – [The court responds to an application](#)
- Public Law Proceedings – [A decision is made to go into public law proceedings](#)
- Or return to this [response pathway summary guide here](#).

References

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