



Cafcass Cymru

Working With Children & Families

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Introduction

We work with children and families at moments of significant stress, transition, and vulnerability. Our role requires compassion, clarity, and professional expertise, rooted in children’s rights and informed by research, evidence, and lived experience.

This guidance brings together key principles, practice expectations, and tools to support us in delivering child-centred, trauma-informed, and safe assessments and recommendations to the family court.

Helping families involves working with them — and therefore the quality of the relationship between the family and professionals directly impacts on the effectiveness of help given.

The Munro Review (2011)





1. Purpose of this Guidance

1.1 Purpose

The Working with Children and Families Guidance supports us to engage effectively with children and families involved in private and public law family court proceedings. It promotes:

- Child-centred, rights-based practice
- Trauma-informed approaches
- Consistency and quality across the service
- Safe and skilled engagement where domestic abuse is present
- Evidence-informed assessment and proportionality
- Professional curiosity and reflective practice
- A safety-first approach

It brings together the [Cafcass Cymru Practice Framework](#), [Cafcass Cymru's Domestic Abuse Practice Guidance](#), direct-work resources, structured tools, and analytical guidance to help us provide safe, realistic, and sustainable solutions for families.

This guidance is not prescriptive. It is designed to be a flexible resource to support professional judgement.

1.2 Why We Need This Guidance

We encounter a wide range of challenges when supporting children and families involved in family law proceedings. These often include managing complex emotional situations and safeguarding concerns, especially when family relationships are strained or fragile. Many of the families we work with are navigating trauma, issues of domestic abuse and other difficult situations and this requires sensitive, trauma-informed engagement.

There are a wide range of resources available to support our work with children and families, this toolkit draws these resources together to:

- Support consistent, high-quality practice across Cafcass Cymru
- Strengthen assessments and analysis
- Improve outcomes by focusing on the child's lived experience
- Embed trauma-informed practice



2. Direct Work with Children and Seeing Children

2.1 The Importance of Seeing Children

Direct work with children is a central part of our approach to understanding family circumstances. Seeing and engaging with children directly provides us with a fuller and more reliable picture of each child's individuality, their everyday experiences, and their developmental needs. This first-hand understanding supports high-quality analysis and ensures that the recommendations we provide to the court reflect the child's own perspective, rather than relying solely on adult accounts or interpretation. [Our 7 Minute Briefing: Voice of the Child](#) reinforces these principles and highlights what meaningful engagement should look like in practice.

Research about children's participation, including studies published by the [Nuffield Family Justice Observatory](#) and the [Welsh Government](#) highlight that children benefit greatly from understanding what decisions have been made, why they have been made, and what the outcomes mean for their day to day lives. When children are not given explanations, they often create their own narratives, which may be inaccurate, worrying, or emotionally distressing.

We have an important role in supporting this understanding by:

- Explaining what their involvement means
- Providing age-appropriate information about court processes
- Explaining the options they have for sharing their views with the court
- Helping children understand what may happen next
- Offering reassurance where possible, without making promises
- Ensuring explanations are clear, honest, and free of adult conflict

This communication contributes to children feeling respected, reduces anxiety, and strengthens trust in the process.

In most situations, meeting with the child is both appropriate and beneficial. Direct engagement supports children's participation rights and ensures their experiences remain central to the assessment. There will, however, be some cases where meeting a child is not possible or would not be in their best interests at that time, for example, where engagement may cause distress, where their views have been repeatedly sought and there is a risk of the court process becoming emotionally abusive, or where a key safeguarding process needs to take place before contact is appropriate. In these circumstances, you may wish to discuss the situation with a Practice Manager to consider timing, risk, and alternative ways of understanding the child's experience.



Whenever it is not possible to meet directly with a child, the reasoning should be clearly evidenced, proportionate, and recorded within the report. You should also consider how the child's voice and lived experience can be understood through other safe and reliable means, such as observation, school information, school and parents or carers completing the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) or gathering insights from health or other professionals already involved with the child.

This approach ensures that all children are supported to participate in the way that is safest and most appropriate for them, while upholding consistent, child-centred practice across Cafcass Cymru.

2.2 Making Participation Meaningful

A helpful model for considering children's participation is the Lundy Model of Participation (Laura Lundy, 2007). This provides a structured way to ensure child's voices are meaningfully heard in decisions that affect them, and that children and young people are afforded their rights to express views, and to have their views given due weight, as set out in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There are four elements to the model:

<p>Space</p> 	<p>This means ensuring that children are given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- We offer age-appropriate environments that feel welcoming and do not include too many professionals or strangers.- We provide tailored information about family proceedings and how their engagement fits into this.- We use different types of communication to understand the views of younger children and children with speech and learning needs. This might mean observing younger children to understand what they are expressing about relationships through their behaviour.- We allow enough time for children to express themselves and explore complicated feelings and engage with empathy, curiosity and sincerity.
<p>Voice</p> 	<p>This means facilitating children and young people in expressing their views.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- We provide a range of options to help children express themselves in ways that work for them, including through practice tools, discussion, crafts, supporting them to write

letters to the court and we make sure children understand that they don't have to share their views.

- We provide opportunities for direct communication such as supporting children to write to the court, including their direct work or their views in their own words in our reports.
- We ask how they would like to be informed of the outcome of proceedings.

Audience



This means we listen to children, seek to understand their views and what is important to them, and to accurately represent these during court proceedings, including when their views do not align with professional views about what is in their best interests.

- We share their views with their parents, carers and the court who have the responsibility of making decisions about them.
- We make sure children understand who their views will be shared with, how this will happen, and how their views will be taken into account in the case.
- We are clear about how we have taken account of the child's views in coming to our own recommendations.

Influence



This means that children's views are taken seriously, are considered by decision-makers, and are acted on where appropriate.

- Children get feedback and we make sure they understand how their views have been considered and impacted the court's decision, for example by recommending that the judges write to children at the end of proceedings.
- We consider in our reports who is going to tell the child the outcome of the proceedings.



Practice Tip



1. Prepare

- Send an introductory letter containing your personalised biography.
- Encourage parents / carers to go through the letter with the child.
- Offer options for first contact (home, neutral venue, secure video call).



2. Introduce Well

- Explain confidentiality and its limits in child friendly terms.
- Check the child's understanding and invite questions.
- Reassure the child that adults, not children, make decisions.



3. Create Safe Conditions for Participation

- Start by assessing any domestic abuse or other safeguarding concerns, as these shape how safe the child feels and what they may be able to express.
- Stay alert to signs of coercion, fear, or constraint influencing the child's presentation.
- Use trauma informed and rights-based approaches.
- Consider both verbal and nonverbal communication behaviour may form part of the child's "voice."



4. Use Flexible, Child-centred Methods

- Agree how the child wishes to participate (discussion, drawings, timelines, writing, etc.).
- Discuss how they want to be kept informed.
- For younger children, use observation-based work to understand daily experience.



5. Be Clear About Outcomes & Feedback

- Ask how the child wants to hear the outcome (parent/carer, judicial letter, or when ordered by Cafcass Cymru).
- Refer parents/carers to the [Welsh Government guide on explaining court decisions to children](#).
- Consider the [Writing to children - A toolkit for Judges](#) where judicial communication is appropriate.
- Record the child's preference within your recommendations.
- Consider sending a goodbye letter to the child at the end of the case, that reflects on the time you spent with them, how their views influenced the outcome, and tells them that your involvement has ended.



6. Record With Transparency

- Clearly document:
 - How the child participated (or why they were not seen)
 - What they understood and expressed
 - Why they may feel that way
- Link interpretations to evidence and context, not assumption

2.3 Approaches to Direct Work

Direct work provides children with a structured but flexible means of expressing their views, sharing their experiences, and understanding the purpose of our involvement. Consider using [Cafcass Cymru tools](#) such as [Needs, Wishes and Feelings](#), [All About Me](#), [What makes me 'me'](#), the [CC-CAWAC tools](#) and other [child-friendly social work resources](#). These can be especially helpful when supporting children who benefit from visual prompts, simplified language, or alternative communication formats, or when you need to explore sensitive topics in a safe and accessible way. All approaches can be adapted to the child's age, developmental stage, communication needs, identity, and neurodiversity so that engagement remains appropriate and accessible.

Effective direct work also involves managing the emotional and cognitive demands placed on children. You should consider where and how children feel most comfortable speaking, ensure the pace is manageable, and create space for children to ask questions or revisit topics if needed. This reinforces the understanding that meetings with children should not be solely information-gathering exercises but should actively promote trust, clarity, and emotional support. Direct work provides children with a structured but flexible means of expressing their views, sharing their experiences, and understanding the purpose of our involvement.

2.4 Diversity, Identity and Inclusion in Direct Work

Direct work is most effective when it is responsive to each child's identity, context, and lived experience. This requires us to remain sensitive to the full range of factors that shape how a child understands their situation and how they are best able to express their views. Culture, language, disability, neurodiversity, gender identity, faith, and family history all contribute to the way a child communicates and makes meaning of their circumstances. Approaching engagement with this awareness supports practice that is both inclusive and attuned to the child's individual needs.

Planning for participation should therefore be accessible, flexible, and culturally responsive. Wherever possible, you are encouraged to collaborate with the child in designing the meeting, agreeing together on the venue, timing, and format that will feel most comfortable. Some children may benefit from communication aids, visual tools, interpreters, or sensory-adapted resources while others may prefer structured materials that help them organise their thoughts. Consider using the [Family Justice Young People's Board \(FJYPB\) "top tips"](#), which offer practical suggestions for working with disabled children, autistic children, LGBTQ+ young people, siblings, and children affected by domestic abuse. Incorporating these insights into planning and recording them in case notes helps ensure that the approach taken is thoughtful, consistent, and responsive.

Children's backgrounds and experiences can affect how safe they feel and how comfortable they are sharing their views. Children can face barriers to participation because of discrimination, stigma, communication differences, or past experiences, and these can all influence what they feel able to share. In some cultures, for example, children may have been taught to show respect by agreeing with adults or not expressing their own views openly. Keeping these influences in mind helps us create spaces where children can take part at their own pace and in ways that feel emotionally safe, while still making sure their voice is heard.

When preparing for direct work, it helps to think about how the child likes to communicate, their cultural or linguistic background, any sensory or cognitive needs, and anything in their history that might shape how they engage. It's also useful to check in with other professionals who know the child well to understand what will best support their participation.

Tools such as [All About Me](#) or [What makes me 'me'](#) can be a helpful and engaging way to explore identity and what matters to the child. Asking children directly about their identity promotes trust, as it shows we are not making assumptions about them or relying solely on adults' descriptions. Children and young people should also be told how any [diversity information](#) they choose to share will be used and why it is being gathered.

Alongside these considerations, it is equally important to recognise a child's strengths, such as relationships that offer stability, interests that support resilience, or communication methods that help them feel confident. These strengths provide valuable insight into the child's world and can be used to shape engagement in a positive and empowering way.

Further guidance on aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion is available through Community Care's [Equality, diversity and inclusion \(EDI\) knowledge and practice hub](#) which provides clear, practical resources to help practitioners embed anti-discriminatory and inclusive approaches into everyday social work, including guidance on working effectively and sensitively with people from diverse and marginalised groups.



Practice Tip



Consider the child's preferred methods of communication...

...their cultural or linguistic background...



...sensory or cognitive needs...

...personal or family history that may affect engagement...

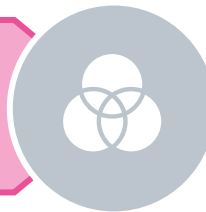


...strengths and protective factors within the child's identity and support network...

...consider using practice tools such as ['What do you know about me?'](#) and ['What makes me 'me?' for children and young people.](#)



...Think [intersectionally](#) and remember that identity and culture are multi layered.



2.5 Child Participation in Complex Family Situations

Some children experience significant difficulty participating in arrangements that involve seeing a parent after separation. Where a child is expressing that they do not wish to spend time with a parent, we should recognise that this is a complex behaviour with multiple potential drivers, all of which pertain to the child's day-to-day experience, sense of emotional safety, and their key relationships.

Cafcass Cymru's position is that the child's views must always be explored through a domestic-abuse-informed, safeguarding-first, and trauma-aware lens. This reflects the Domestic Abuse Practice Guidance (2025) and the [Family Justice Council's Guidance \(2024\)](#), on responding to a child's unexplained reluctance, resistance or refusal to spend time with a parent and allegations of alienating behaviour, which emphasise the importance of understanding the context in which children form their views.

Understanding the Different Reasons Children May Not Wish to Spend Time

Children may not want to spend time with a significant adult for a range of reasons that may overlap or evolve over time. This resistance or reluctance should never be assumed to reflect preference, “alienation,” or a simple child-versus-parent dynamic. Instead, we should explore the full picture, including:

i. Appropriate Justified Rejection: When the Child Feels Unsafe

A child's avoidance may be a protective response to domestic abuse, coercive control, harmful parenting, or experiences of fear.

Where domestic abuse is present or alleged, resistance may be an understandable reaction to trauma or unsafe behaviour and should be assessed as such.

ii. Affinity, Alignment and Developmental Processes

Some children resist spending time with a parent due to developmental factors, differences between households, or temporary loyalty binds following separation.

These patterns can occur naturally and do not necessarily indicate adult manipulation.

iii. Attachment Responses and Loyalty Conflicts

Children may unconsciously adopt strategies, such as staying close to one caregiver, avoiding transitions, or withdrawing from a parent, to protect their primary attachment relationship.

These responses reflect emotional need rather than choice or coaching.

iv. Alienating Behaviours as Domestic Abuse

Behaviours historically labelled as “alienation” are better understood as emotionally abusive behaviours situated within the continuum of domestic abuse, and not a separate category.

These behaviours can include creating fear, rewarding loyalty, undermining the other parent, or involving the child in adult disputes.

The 2024 Family Justice Council guidance is clear that allegations of alienating behaviour frequently arise within domestic abuse contexts and must be evaluated with care to ensure that protective parents are not discredited or further harmed through the court process.

The Cafcass Cymru Domestic Abuse Guidance “Listening to the Child: Assessing Lived Experiences of Domestic Abuse in Family Time Arrangements” similarly highlights that allegations of ‘parental alienation’ often appear in cases involving domestic abuse and should always be understood within that broader safeguarding context, rather than treated as a separate or equivalent concern.

v. Loyalty-Based or Survival-Driven Compliance

Some children may say they want to spend time with a parent or carer even when the relationship is unsafe.

This can occur in both private and public law contexts, where children may minimise harm, protect the adult, or feel responsible for maintaining the relationship. Such wishes can be shaped by fear, trauma bonding, emotional coercion, or role-reversal dynamics rather than free choice.

These presentations require careful, safeguarding-led assessment to ensure loyalty, fear, or survival strategies are not mistaken for genuine comfort or safety.

Exploring the Child’s Experience

We should adopt a curious, child-centred and relationship focussed approach exploring:

- The history and pattern of the child’s resistance
- How the child understands and experiences each parent
- Any exposure to fear, coercive control, or emotional manipulation
- The child’s coping strategies, internal conflicts, and adaptations
- Sources of emotional safety and support
- Indicators of harm, distress, or trauma responses

This aligns with a child impact analysis approach, ensuring the child’s emotional reality remains central to assessment.

Supporting the Child’s Participation

Children in these circumstances need space, clarity, and emotional safety to participate meaningfully. We should:

- Meet children in environments that support emotional regulation i.e. settings which reduce sensory overwhelm, provide comfort, and help children manage their feelings during the meeting
- Use trauma-informed, child-friendly approaches to explore their experiences
- Validate their feelings without making promises or taking sides
- Provide information in accessible ways to reduce confusion and fear
- Ensure explanations do not place emotional burdens on the child

Help children understand that adults, not children, are responsible for decisions. Participation must always be proportionate and sensitive to the child's capacity and emotional state.

Avoiding Pro-Contact Assumptions

International and national research warns of the risk of pro-contact bias, where pressure is placed on a child to maintain contact even when this conflicts with their safety or wellbeing. The Family Justice Council (2024) emphasises that children's resistance must not be dismissed or overridden without a thorough and safeguarding-led understanding of the causes.

We must be cautious to avoid:

- Assuming that not wanting to spend time with a parent equals manipulation
- Framing reluctance as "contact refusal" without exploring context
- Pressuring children into unsafe or emotionally overwhelming situations
- Minimising domestic abuse indicators in pursuit of spending time arrangements
- Interpreting child behaviour without triangulated information

Safety, emotional security, and children's rights must remain paramount.



Practice Tip:

Supporting participation in cases where a child does not wish to spend time with a parent:



Start with a clear domestic abuse and safeguarding analysis, ensuring that risk factors, patterns of harm, and protective capacities are fully understood from the outset, and remain alert to any [potential indicators of coercion, fear, or constraint within the child's presentation](#).



Take a holistic view of the child's experience, recognising the interplay between their developmental stage, lived experience, identity, relationships, and sense of emotional and physical safety.



Consider a range of possible and overlapping explanations for the child's views and behaviour, maintaining a position of curiosity rather than assumption.



Use trauma-informed, rights-based approaches to engagement, providing a safe and supportive environment that enables the child to express their views freely and without pressure.



Provide a clear, contextualised account of the child's lived experience in reporting and analysis, demonstrating how their views have been understood in relation to the circumstances affecting them.



Support the court to understand not only what the child has said, but the context and meaning behind their views, ensuring interpretation is grounded in evidence, professional judgement, and the child's individual circumstances.

This approach promotes balanced, proportionate recommendations and helps ensure that children are protected from harm, re-traumatisation, or undue influence.

2.6 Balancing What Children Say with Professional Assessment

While children's views are an essential part of the assessment, they represent one piece of a wider picture. We should consider not only what children say but also the context in which those views were formed, the potential influence of others, and any indicators that the child may be absorbing adult narratives or responding defensively to their circumstances. Children's views may also be shaped, upheld, or constrained by the professional lenses of the adults around them, and we should remain mindful of how our own assumptions and interpretations may influence this process.

We should also be alert to situations where a child expresses a wish to spend time with a parent or carer whose behaviour has been abusive, or with someone who the child might reasonably be expected to fear. Just as we would scrutinise parental agreements reached in the context of safeguarding concerns, including situations involving domestic abuse, we should dig deeper in these circumstances. Agreements formed under pressure or control can mask risk, and the same dynamics may influence what a child says they want, making thorough exploration essential to understanding their true experience and ensuring their safety.

Safeguarding is at the centre of how we understand and balance children's views and our [Operational safeguarding procedure](#) reminds us that we have a statutory duty to safeguard children and promote their welfare, which includes identifying harm, assessing risk, sharing information appropriately, and taking timely action when we believe a child is unsafe. These procedures apply not only to the child at the centre of proceedings but also to any other child connected to the case who may be at risk.

Our safeguarding role also sits within the wider legal context in Wales. [The Children \(Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment\) \(Wales\) Act 2020](#) removes the defence of "reasonable punishment," meaning any physical punishment of a child is now treated as an assault and must be considered as part of safeguarding processes. This change has strengthened the protection children receive and ensures that when a child talks about being hit, smacked, or physically disciplined, we view this as a potential indicator of harm that requires careful consideration.

Reflective supervision can also play a crucial role in achieving balanced assessments. It offers us the space to explore any uncertainties, consider alternative hypotheses, and reflect on how our responses, values, or emotional reactions might be shaping the assessment. It also provides emotional and professional support, helping us process the impact of complex or distressing work. In complex or high-risk situations, particularly when children express views that appear inconsistent with known risks, reflective supervision provides an important safeguard, helping us maintain curiosity, avoid drift, and ensure decision-making remains grounded in evidence and the child's lived experience.

To achieve a balanced assessment, we need to:

- Listen respectfully and attentively to what children say
- Observe behaviour, emotional cues, and the wider context
- Look at relationship patterns and family dynamics
- Weigh children's wishes alongside safeguarding concerns and evidence
- Use reflective supervision to support balanced and child-centred decision-making

Keeping this balance ensures that children are genuinely heard, while also making sure their safety and long-term wellbeing remain at the centre of every decision we make.

2.7 Supporting Outcome-Sharing with Children

In most circumstances, the outcome of private or public law proceedings is best shared with the child by a parent or another trusted family member, provided it is safe and appropriate to do so. Children are generally most secure with the adults who care for them day-to-day, and hearing outcomes from them can offer reassurance and emotional continuity during what is often a confusing time.

In private law, this often involves supporting parents to explain new arrangements such as time spent with each parent. In public law, sharing outcomes may include helping children understand decisions relating to care plans, changes in where they live, or ongoing involvement from the local authority. In both contexts, you may choose to support parents (or carers) to share information in a clear, child-centred manner, drawing on resources such as the [Welsh Government guidance](#) on explaining family court decisions. In public law, you may also work alongside the local authority social worker to agree who is best placed to share this information with the child and consider developing a shared narrative to support consistency and reduce confusion.

Where the child expresses a preference about how they wish to be informed, this should be recorded in the assessment and communicated to the court and / or local authority. This ensures that the child's voice is meaningfully considered in planning and that information is shared in a way that feels safe and manageable for them.

2.8 Judicial Communication with Children

Judges may, in some cases, write directly to children to explain the outcome of proceedings or to clarify how their views were considered. This can occur in both private and public law decisions, particularly where direct communication may help

the child understand the reasoning behind a difficult or emotionally complex outcome.

If a child expresses a wish to receive communication from the judge, you should record this preference clearly and draw it out within your analysis and recommendations, while acknowledging that the final decision rests with the court. You may also comment on whether a judicial letter could support the child's understanding, sense-making, or emotional wellbeing where this is appropriate and proportionate.

In public law proceedings, where decisions may involve care orders, placement changes, or ongoing statutory intervention, judicial communication may help children feel heard and bring clarity to decisions that can otherwise feel unclear or unsettling. We should consider this option sensitively, taking into account the child's age, developmental stage, and emotional readiness.



3. Understanding Trauma and Trauma-Informed Practice

3.1 What Is Trauma?

Trauma can be understood as an experience, or series of experiences, that overwhelms a person's ability to manage emotionally, physically, or psychologically. It is shaped not only by what has happened, but by the individual's interpretation and response. Within family justice, trauma is common in the lives of both children and adults and often influences how they present, communicate and engage.

Children may be affected by trauma through exposure to coercive control, physical or emotional abuse, sustained parental conflict, or instability within their caregiving environment. Separation itself, particularly when it is abrupt, hostile, or accompanied by fear or uncertainty, can intensify existing distress. The court process can add further pressure as families navigate unfamiliar systems, revisit difficult events, or experience concerns about future outcomes. Trauma may also arise from neglect, inconsistent caregiving, or witnessing harmful behaviours within the home.

Recognising trauma involves adopting a reflective and curious stance towards behaviour and emotional responses. A child's anxiety, withdrawal, anger, or avoidance may represent adaptive strategies rather than opposition or disengagement. Likewise, a parent who appears guarded, reactive, or overwhelmed may be responding to earlier or ongoing trauma rather than demonstrating a lack of willingness to participate. Being aware of these dynamics supports more accurate assessment, helps to reduce the risk of re-traumatisation, and contributes to practice that remains grounded in empathy, evidence, and a clear focus on the child's safety and wellbeing.

3.2 Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice

[Cafcass Cymru's trauma informed practice guidance](#) highlights the following principles:

- Universal "Do No Harm"
- Person-Centred Practice
- Relationship- and Safety-Focused Practice
- Strengths- and Resilience-Focused Approaches

3.3 Applying Trauma-Informed Practice

Applying trauma-informed practice involves recognising how trauma shapes communication, behaviour, and engagement. It requires reducing the need for children and adults to revisit distressing experiences unnecessarily, while being clear, measured, and purposeful in how sensitive information is explored.

Predictable, well-structured interactions help reduce anxiety and support safer, more effective participation.

A trauma-informed approach also acknowledges how trauma can influence emotional responses, memory, narrative coherence, and presentation. Attentive listening, curiosity, and awareness of these factors ensure that assessments reflect the broader context rather than moment-to-moment reactions. Patterns of behaviour, and their cumulative impact on the child, remain central to analysis, offering a clearer understanding of risk and need than isolated incidents alone.

In public law proceedings, it is important that all professionals involved adopt a consistent trauma-informed approach. This may require proactive discussions with the child's social worker, key agencies, and any specialist services supporting the child or family. Shared understanding helps reduce duplication, prevents children from having to repeat distressing information, and ensures that agency responses are aligned, supportive, and sensitive to the child's lived experience.

Working collaboratively with other professionals contributes to a fuller and more accurate picture of the child's experience while avoiding duplication or unnecessary questioning. Understanding behaviour as a potential response to trauma, rather than a fixed attitude or resistance, enables balanced assessment and proportionate recommendations, keeping the child's safety and wellbeing at the forefront.

For further resources to support trauma-informed practice, you can refer to [Community Care Trauma-informed knowledge and practice hub](#), which provides accessible guidance on recognising and responding to trauma in child-centred work.



4. Working With Parents and Carers

4.1 A Domestic Abuse Informed Approach to working with adults

Cafcass Cymru's Domestic Abuse Practice Guidance emphasises that domestic abuse should be understood as a pattern of coercive, controlling, or harmful behaviour, rather than a series of isolated incidents. This pattern shapes family functioning, affects children's wellbeing, and alters how both adults and children perceive safety and relationships. The guidance also stresses that domestic abuse leaves enduring emotional and developmental impacts on children, often extending well beyond the immediate behaviour itself.

This approach moves us beyond framing parental concerns as "high conflict," recognising instead the power imbalances, coercive control, and cumulative harm that often underpin abusive dynamics. It positions domestic abuse as a lived experience requiring validation, empathetic understanding, and structured assessment of its short and long-term impacts on the child and the non-abusive parent.

In line with Cafcass Cymru's trauma-informed expectations, we should approach domestic abuse work using a needs-led, domestic-abuse-informed lens. Most practitioners are trained in the [Safe & Together](#)TM model and we are committed as an organisation to training all practitioners and applying this framework to our enquiries, recognising that previous trauma and coercive control may present as heightened distress, fear, or mistrust in both children and adults.



Practice Tips:

Preparing & Establishing Safety

- Ensure the adult is in a safe and private space before beginning the conversation.
- Introduce yourself clearly, explain your role, the purpose of the conversation, and how information may be shared.
- Confirm basic details gently and non-intrusively (names, address, who lives in the household).
- Clarify school or nursery details so that SDQ, attendance, or relevant school information can be obtained as needed.

Screening for Domestic Abuse

- In private law, consider offering a DASH RIC confidentially when safe and appropriate.
- In public law, explore whether the parent is already linked with domestic abuse agencies, IDVAs, or community support, and liaise appropriately within safeguarding parameters.

Good Practice During The Interview

- Allow the parent time to settle emotionally before beginning substantive questions.
- Avoid interviewing parents together where domestic abuse is known or suspected.
- Use clarity and warmth: “Help me understand...,” “When you say X, what does that look like day to day?”
- Be aware of trauma responses, freeze, appeasement, confusion, over disclosure, or minimisation.
- Check the person’s immediate safety needs at the end of the session and agree a safe method of follow up contact.

4.2. Supporting Change Through Problem-Solving Approaches

When domestic abuse is not present, or where risk is clearly understood and safely managed, problem-solving approaches can help parents move toward safer, more stable arrangements for their children. These approaches do not replace safeguarding, they support it by helping families build insight and identify practical steps that reduce stress for children.

A problem-solving approach brings together strengths-based thinking, motivational interviewing techniques, and inclusive engagement with parents and wider family networks. It helps families identify what is working, recognise realistic options for change, and take small steps toward safer and more stable arrangements. This approach does not replace safeguarding or minimise concerns. Instead, it strengthens assessment by supporting families to reflect on their role in change, while we maintain a clear, evidence-informed analysis of risk, behaviour, and impact.

To support structured and meaningful conversations, we can draw on elements of the [GROW model](#), alongside Motivational Interviewing skills and inclusive engagement methods. Used together, these approaches help keep discussions purposeful, proportionate, and focused on the child’s lived experience.

It is important to recognise the parameters of the court and our role in family proceedings:

In private law cases, the court’s role is to make decisions without drawing out proceedings unnecessarily, based on the evidence available about the child’s welfare as it is now. It is not the role of the court, or of us, to resolve every issue concerning future arrangements or to extend proceedings in an attempt to progress arrangements beyond what works for the child and meets their welfare needs in the here and now.

Within public law proceedings, a problem-solving approach also has a place, but its purpose is different. It does not replace safeguarding or alter the statutory purpose of the proceedings. Instead, it can help you:

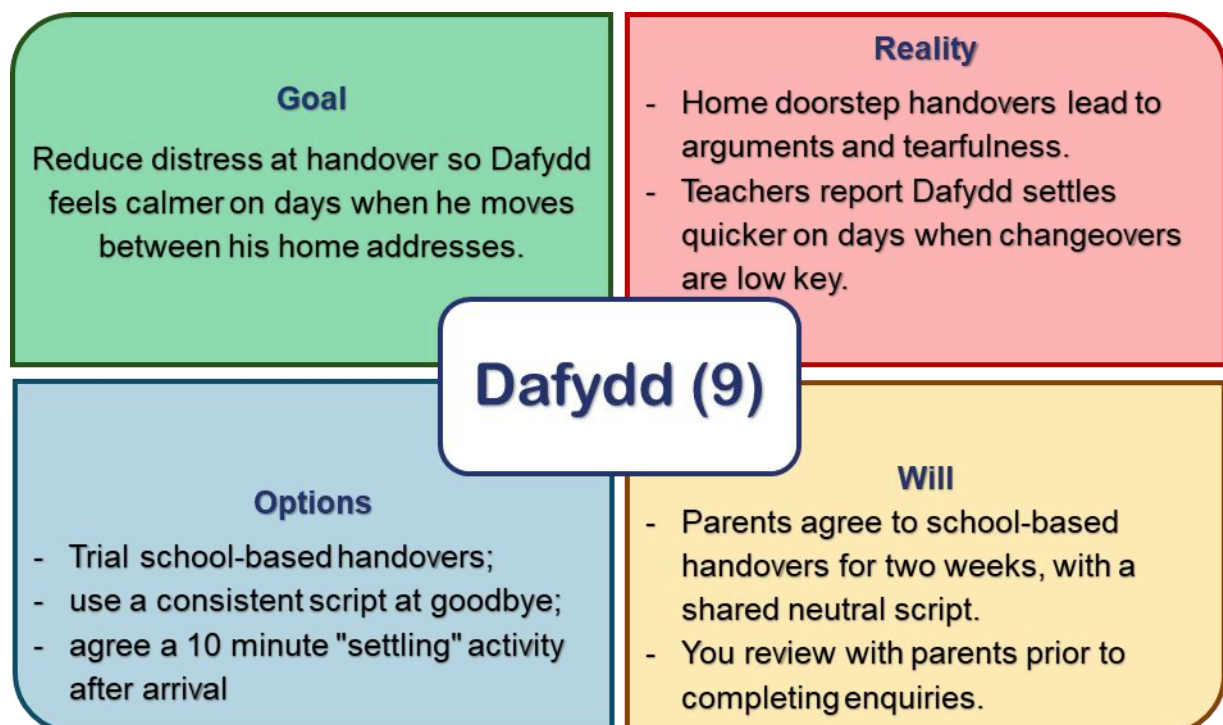
- maintain constructive engagement support parents' insight
- identify practical safety steps
- gather clearer evidence
- strengthen the quality of your analysis
- keep discussions child-focused and grounded in lived experience

In public law work, a problem-solving approach is therefore a supportive tool, not to move families toward negotiated arrangements, but to enhance understanding, clarity, and evidence so the court can make safe and timely decisions about the child's future.

4.3 Applying a Solution-Focused Lens

[A solution-focused lens](#) highlights strengths, exceptions and possibilities, shifting attention from entrenched disagreements to moments where the child was safer, calmer, or better supported. This supports parents to notice what has helped in the past and to scale up those helpful elements in the present.

Case Example: Improving Transitions





- Using the parents' past success with school-based handovers made it easier for them to choose a practical step that reduced tension and increased predictability for Dafydd.
- Safeguarding remained central, the plan proceeded only because there were no indicators of coercive control affecting the school setting.
- Where abuse is present, options are adjusted to prioritise safety and avoid contact arrangements that obscure risk.

4.4 Supporting Change Through Motivational Interviewing

Motivational interviewing (MI) helps parents explore their own motivations for change and consider how their behaviour affects their child's experience. It is particularly effective when a parent feels conflicted, defensive, or emotionally overwhelmed. The approach emphasises empathetic, non-judgemental conversation and uses techniques such as reflective listening, affirmations, exploring discrepancies, and eliciting "change talk" to reduce resistance and support clearer thinking.

MI allows you to slow the pace of the conversation, acknowledge ambivalence, and help the parent identify the values and goals that matter most to them. Rather than directing or persuading you support the parent to generate their own reasons for change. This can reduce defensiveness, increase ownership of decisions, and create realistic steps that can be reviewed as part of ongoing assessment.

Case Example: Exploring Ambivalence

Sara and Eleri (7)

- Sara wanted her daughter, Eleri, to feel less burdened during handovers, yet she found herself making negative comments about Rhys (father) when emotions ran high.
- She understood this upset Eleri but felt stuck between strong feelings from past difficulties and her intention to protect her daughter.

Using MI techniques, you:

- Reflected Sara's feelings (*"You're torn between how angry you feel and how much you want Eleri to feel at ease."*)
- Affirmed her protective intentions (*"It's clear you want to shield her from adult tension."*)
- Explored discrepancies (*"On one hand you want calmness, on the other, these comments are making things harder for her."*)
- Elicited change talk (*"When you picture handovers going better for Eleri, what would you be doing differently?"*)

- Through this conversation, Sara generated small, realistic steps she felt confident to try within the next few weeks. These included:
 - preparing a brief, neutral statement to use consistently at handover
 - taking a 10 second pause before speaking if she felt triggered
 - agreeing a simple handover routine with Rhys to reduce unpredictability

- She committed to trial these strategies during your enquiries.

- You agreed a brief check in at your next scheduled session to review how the changes were going, what felt easier, and what still felt challenging.
- Sara also agreed to pause and consider after each handover (e.g., “What went well / What I’d change next time”) to support reflection between meetings.



- The MI conversation helped Sara reconnect her behaviour with her own stated goals for Eleri i.e. reducing “adult stress.”
- By keeping the steps small, specific, and reviewable, Sara was more confident in trying the changes, and early improvements gave her momentum to continue.

MI Quick Questions We Can Use

These prompts are designed to support calm, reflective conversations and to encourage parents to consider change in a way that feels safe and manageable.

Exploring Ambivalence

- “What feels difficult about this at the moment, and what feels important to you about changing it?”
- “When you think about things staying the same versus things improving, what stands out for you?”

Eliciting Change Talk

- “What would you like to be different for your child over the next few weeks?”
- “If things improved even slightly, what you notice first in your child?”
- “What do you think your child would say they need from you right now?”

Exploring Values and Goals

- “What matters most to you as a parent in this situation?”
- “How does your current approach fit with the kind of parent you want to be?”
- “What would ‘a good day’ look like for your child from their point of view?”

Highlighting Discrepancy (gently)

- “You’ve said you want less stress for your child. How do you think the current handovers feel for them?”
- “How does what happened yesterday match up with what you said you’re aiming for?”

Building Confidence

- “What strengths have helped you get through difficult times before?”
- “What small step do you feel most able to take this week?”

Identifying Options

- “What ideas have you already considered, even if you’re not sure they will work?”
- “If you were giving advice to a friend in the same situation, what might you suggest?”

Commitment and Next Steps

- “What is the first step you feel comfortable trying?”
- “Who or what might help you stick with that change?”
- “How will you know the change is making a difference for your child?”

4.5 Engaging Parents and Family Networks Constructively

Constructive engagement is a core social work skill and involves working with parents or carers, and, where appropriate, wider kinship networks, in a way that is inclusive, trauma-aware, and focused on safety. Families differ in culture, language, structure, and communication styles, and we should adapt our approach accordingly. This may include arranging interpreters, using visual tools, adjusting meeting formats, or creating sensory-aware spaces to support meaningful participation.

When parents or family members are distressed, overwhelmed, or under significant emotional strain, a calm, steady and respectful approach helps reduce defensiveness and keeps the focus on the child.

Case Example: Using Wider Family Support in Spending time arrangements

Lowri & Rhys and twins Tomos & Seren (6)

- **Lowri and Rhys were in ongoing disagreement about their children’s spending-time arrangements.**
- **Each held different views about what was “fair,” and discussions frequently escalated, leaving Tomos and Seren confused and anxious, particularly around weekends and transitions.**
- **Attempts to negotiate directly often resulted in blame and heightened emotion, making progress difficult and increasing the children’s exposure to conflict.**

- During direct work, both children described feeling calm and safe when spending time with their maternal grandmother, Nain, who they saw regularly.
- You explored this further and learned that Nain had a warm and consistent relationship with the twins and was considered a neutral, trusted adult by both parents.

- Using a safety-first and child-centred approach, you introduced the possibility of involving Nain to help stabilise the arrangements.
- Rather than positioning her as a mediator between the adults (a role that would be inappropriate) you focused on how her existing involvement could create predictability for the children.

- With Nain's agreement, a plan was developed in which she would manage the Friday afternoon collection and Sunday evening return for a temporary period.
- This reduced the direct contact between Lowri and Rhys at the most contentious transition points and provided the twins with a familiar, low-stress routine.
- To minimise misunderstandings, you supported the family to introduce a written rota shared via a neutral communication platform, and the adults agreed to use brief, factual updates only.



- By drawing on a safe and trusted family member, you helped the parents create a child-focused arrangement that reduced conflict, supported emotional security, and provided valuable space for longer-term planning
- Problem-solving in this context is not about compromise for its own sake rather it is about identifying practical, safe, and proportionate steps that genuinely support the child's emotional stability and security.



5. Analysing Risk and Safe, Realistic Recommendations

Safe and realistic recommendations to the family court depend on clear, balanced, and evidence-informed analysis. We are required to consider information from a range of sources, triangulate what is known, and apply our professional judgement that is grounded in safeguarding, children's rights, and the lived reality of the child's circumstances. This involves drawing together the child's voice, the behaviour and patterns of the adults involved, background information, and any relevant safeguarding assessments, including where appropriate in private law cases information contained in the [DASH-RIC](#) (Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment Risk Indicator Checklist).

5.1 Triangulation, Safeguarding Analysis and Consideration of Fact-Finding

A robust analysis of risk relies on bringing together information from multiple sources and evaluating it through a trauma-informed, safeguarding-led lens. Triangulation remains a core component of high-quality assessment across both private and public law. This includes considering and cross-referencing information gathered through direct work with children, parents' accounts, observations, police or agency checks, school and health information, historical patterns, contextual safeguarding data, and, where relevant, the impact of cumulative concerns or previous local authority involvement. Approaching assessment in this way ensures that decisions are grounded in the child's lived experience rather than any single narrative.

The DASH-RIC supports and enhances professional judgement by highlighting patterns such as coercive control, escalating behaviours, and contextual factors that may be useful to explore further. Any risk indicators identified should be interpreted within the broader dynamics of the case, taking into account how trauma, fear, or cumulative harm may be affecting both children and adults.

Where disputed issues are central to understanding whether a child can be kept safe, you should consider whether a fact-finding hearing may be necessary. Any such recommendation must be clearly justified, proportionate, and directly linked to safeguarding concerns that cannot be resolved through other means. [Practice Direction 12J](#) outlines the court's duties when a child or party has, or may have been, affected by domestic abuse. A fact-finding hearing may be needed where clarification of disputed behaviours such as domestic abuse, coercive control, or other significantly harmful parenting would materially influence the assessment of risk and the range of safe options available for the child.

When considering whether to recommend a fact-finding hearing, you should focus on how the disputed matters relate to the child's immediate and long-term safety, the capacity of adults to promote the child's wellbeing, and the feasibility of arrangements without judicial findings. The rationale should be explicit about why

fact-finding is necessary, how it will support safe decision-making, and why alternative approaches would not provide the court with the certainty it needs. This clarity assists the court in determining whether a fact-finding is proportionate and ensures that recommendations remain grounded in evidence, contextualised analysis, and the child's best interests.

If despite there being conflicting accounts, the concerns raised would not, if found to be true, materially affect the welfare decisions for the children, the court is unlikely to decide to hold a fact-finding hearing. For example, if the age of the children and their views mean there is no realistic prospect of the children themselves agreeing to spend time with a parent, or if a child is already spending substantial unsupervised / overnight time with a parent, this is considered to be safe and the dispute between parents is about the quantum of time spent.

The recent 2024 case [A v K \(Appeal: Fact-Finding: PD12J\)](#), which references and builds upon Re H-N and Others, sets out recent caselaw and how the law is to be applied, maintaining focus on the individual circumstances of the particular case and what is relevant to the precise welfare issues that require adjudication.

5.2 Assessing Safe Family Time (Direct and Indirect)

Family time plays an important role in many children's lives, and when it can be supported safely, it can contribute positively to their wellbeing. Decisions about family time should be informed by a clear understanding of each child's needs, experiences, and circumstances. Our primary responsibility is to ensure that any arrangements are shaped by the child's lived experience and safety. This means our approach may look different in situations where risks are low and well-managed compared with cases that require careful exploration or safeguarding action.

When making recommendations for family time, our starting point should always be a clear safeguarding analysis and an understanding of the child's emotional and physical safety, developmental needs, and daily lived experience. We should focus on what arrangements are safe, positive, and genuinely supportive for the child. This means emphasising the quality and psychological safety of family time rather than adult expectations or assumptions about how often it should occur. We should also use the term family time instead of contact to keep the language centred on the child's experience and the importance of nurturing healthy relationships with the people who matter to them.

Direct family time can be appropriate when risk is understood and can be managed safely, and when a child is able to participate without pressure, fear, or coercion. Supervised settings should not be used to "test" risk or to reassure concerned adults, they are not a substitute for thorough safeguarding enquiries, nor an alternative to obtaining clarity where serious allegations remain unresolved. Where disputed

issues are central to determining safety, you may need to consider whether a fact-finding hearing is required before recommending any form of family time.

Where safety cannot yet be assured, or where a child would benefit from a more gradual approach, particularly when there are trauma-related needs, indirect contact may provide a safer and more appropriate option in the short or longer term. Letters, cards, or recorded messages can support a child's sense of connection while protecting them from dynamics that may feel unsafe or overwhelming. Indirect contact should always have a clear purpose, appropriate boundaries, and regular review. For practical considerations on planning, preparing, and reviewing family time (including indirect contact), we can draw on the [FJYPB Practitioner Guide for arranging Safe Family Time](#).

In most cases, practitioner-led observations offer a more consistent and informative approach than relying on third-party settings, as they allow us to observe the child's presentation with each parent and understand the interaction in context.

In private law cases, we should be cautious about long-term use of supervised family time, through privately funded centres or community provisions. Such services are designed for short-term, purposeful re-introductions with a clear move-on plan, not as ongoing solutions in cases where risk remains unassessed or unresolved.



Practice Tip:

Keep the child's lived experience at the centre

- Focus on their needs, views, emotional world and developmental stage.
- Prioritise what is safe, meaningful and manageable for this child.

Analyse risk, harm and safety robustly

- Identify risks, unsafe dynamics and any coercive or harmful behaviours
- Balance concerns with clear evidence of strength and protective factors
- Avoid assumptions or relying on change that is not yet demonstrated

Ensure recommendation are realistic and workable

- Consider practicalities, routines and emotional readiness
- Propose arrangements that can be delivered safely and consistently

Use supervised family time only when justified

- Recommend supervision to manage unknown risks not to "test" risk or reassure adults
- If unresolved serious allegations affect safety, consider whether a fact-finding hearing is needed first
- Use indirect arrangements when it is the safer option, ensuring it has a clear purpose

Communicate recommendation safely and sensitively

- Use trauma-informed communication, mindful of impact and timing
- Avoid conversations that could retraumatise

Plan for your own safety

- Seek advice from Practice Managers if risks escalate
- Prepare carefully to maintain calm, clear, safe communication

Reflect the family's views accurately

- Capture children's and adults' responses to recommendations
- Agreement is not required, degree of insight and perspective are what matter

Keep safety central

- Show clearly how risk, need, strengths and practical realities inform your analysis

Overall, recommendations should be realistic, proportionate, and clearly linked to the analysis. If safe arrangements cannot be recommended at this stage, you should set this out clearly and identify what further clarity may be required. Above all, family time recommendations should keep the child's voice, safety, and wellbeing central, and remain responsive to new information as the assessment progresses.



References, Useful Links & Additional Resources

1. Child Centred Practice and System Reform

Seminal review emphasising professional judgement, early identification of risk, and keeping the child's experience at the centre of assessment and decision-making.

[Munro review of child protection: a child-centred system](#)

2. Cafcass Cymru Practice Framework

Sets out the organisation's core practice principles, values, and expectations for analytical, child-centred, evidence-informed work across private and public law

[49336 Cafcass Cymru Framework](#)

3. Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-Informed Wales: A Societal Approach

Welsh Government's national framework outlining principles and levels of trauma-informed practice across all services in Wales.

<https://traumaframeworkcymru.com>

4. Cafcass Cymru Trauma-Informed Practice Guidance (2025)

Organisation-specific guidance supporting trauma-aware engagement, understanding of trauma impacts on children and adults, and embedding safety, trust and empowerment in assessments and reports

[Download PDF](#)

5. Domestic Abuse

- Cafcass Cymru Domestic Abuse Guidance

<https://www.gov.wales/cafcass-cymru-domestic-abuse-practice-guidance>

- Legislation & System Reviews

[Domestic Abuse Act 2021 \(UK\)](#)

[Ministry of Justice \(2020\). Harm Panel Report: Assessing Risk of Harm in Private Law Cases.](#)

- Independent scrutiny, national findings and recommendations relating to safety, accountability and system response.

[Domestic Abuse Commissioner Reports](#)

- [Karma Nirvana Honor Based Violence Tool](#)

- [Bawso | Supporting ethnic minorities affected by violence and exploitation](#)

6. Meaningful Child Participation (Including the Lundy Model)

- The Lundy Model (UNCRC Article 12) – Four-element framework: *Space, Voice, Audience, Influence*.

UNICEF UK overview:

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/.../the-lundy-model-article-12-in-practice>

- Queen's University Belfast research summary:
<https://www.qub.ac.uk/.../childrens-participation-lundy-model>
- **EU Children's Participation Platform – Lundy Model**
https://eu-for-children.europa.eu/about/lundy-model_en

7. Direct work tools

Practical tools and creative approaches for engaging children and young people in assessments, understanding their lived experience, and capturing their wishes and feelings.

[CC CAWAC](#)

[Direct work resources.](#)

[What Do you Know About Me?](#)

[‘What makes me ‘me?’ for children and young people](#)

[All About Me](#)

[Top Tips – Helping Your Child Manage Change](#)

8. Cafcass Cymru's commissioned literature review

Independent review summarising evidence on effective direct work, child participation, analysis, and safeguarding in family justice settings

[Cafcass Cymru's commissioned literature review \(CASCADE, 2018\)](#)

9. Writing, Reporting and Analytical Guidance

Supports practitioners to produce clear, analytical, evidence-based reports grounded in child impact, triangulation, and proportionality

10. Additional Relevant Guidance

- [Welsh Government – Ending Physical Punishment of Children in Wales](#)
- [Section 37 Request Guidance](#)
- [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#)
- [Public Law Working Group Guidance](#)
- [Nuffield Family Justice Observatory Research](#)
- [Welsh Government – Guidance on Elective Home Education](#)