

# Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026

## PRACTITIONER BRIEFING – WHAT’S CHANGED FROM 2023 AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR PRACTICE



Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 marks a major shift, rather than a routine update to the guidance. While the 2023 version strengthened multi-agency working, the 2026 guidance goes significantly further, reshaping how early help, child protection, accountability and anti-discriminatory practice are delivered across the safeguarding system. This briefing sets out the key changes between Working Together 2023 and 2026 and highlights what practitioners need to understand for their day-to-day safeguarding practice.

### ► Wider Scope – Who the Guidance Applies To

Working Together 2026 explicitly clarifies that the guidance applies to all children, including:

- children living with birth or extended family
- adopted children and children who are looked after
- unborn children where there are safeguarding concerns

While Working Together 2023 (WT23) stated that the guidance applied to all children, it did not clearly spell out its application to unborn children or children in kinship and special guardianship arrangements.

#### **What this means for practitioners:**

Safeguarding duties must be applied consistently across all family situations and placements. Practitioners should ensure unborn babies and children in kinship or adoptive arrangements are fully considered within assessments, planning and multi-agency safeguarding processes.

### ► Stronger Expectations on Anti-Racist and Anti-Discriminatory Practice

Working Together 2026 introduces explicit system-wide expectations around anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice. Leaders are expected to create inclusive cultures, and practitioners are explicitly required to challenge racism and discrimination in their work.

The guidance also places a clear duty on safeguarding partnerships to analyse data for disproportionality and racism, including within Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements.

While WT23 improved expectations around partnership working with families, it did not set out these requirements as clearly or systematically.

#### **What this means for practitioners:**

Practitioners should be confident in challenging discriminatory practice, reflect on how bias may impact decision-making, and understand that addressing disproportionality is now a core safeguarding responsibility, not an optional consideration.

### ► Introduction of Family Help – A Major Structural Change

One of the most significant changes in Working Together 2026 is the introduction of Family Help.

Family Help brings together Early Help and Section 17 (Child in Need) support into:

- a single pathway
- one multi-disciplinary team
- one Family Help Plan

The model emphasises continuity of practitioner relationships, earlier intervention and coordinated multi-agency support. It aligns directly with national children’s social care reforms and responds to children experiencing multiple and overlapping harms, including child sexual abuse, domestic abuse, exploitation and online harm.

Working Together 2023 treated Early Help and Section 17 as separate processes and did not introduce this integrated model.

#### **What this means for practitioners:**

Practitioners should expect closer alignment between early help, child in need and safeguarding pathways, with clearer planning and fewer handoffs between services.

### ► Stronger Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Guidance and Focus on Hidden Harms

Working Together 2026 significantly strengthens expectations around Child Sexual Abuse. It includes clearer guidance on:

- multi-agency strategy discussions
- robust CSA assessments
- group-based exploitation
- online sexual abuse
- hidden harms, including teenage relationship abuse

While CSA featured in the 2023 guidance, the 2026 version is far more detailed and prescriptive.

#### **What this means for practitioners:**

There is a stronger expectation that CSA concerns are identified early, explored thoroughly and addressed through coordinated multi-agency responses, including when abuse is less visible or occurs online.

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### ▶ Stronger Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA)

Working Together 2026 significantly strengthens expectations around MASA. Key changes include:

- explicit inclusion of children who are looked after within MASA responsibilities
- clearer expectations around accountability and governance
- more detail on how safeguarding partners are inspected
- strengthened expectations for data sharing
- annual reports must evidence impact and outcomes, not just activity

Working Together 2023 clarified partner roles but did not go this far in defining accountability or inspection expectations.

#### **What this means for practitioners:**

Multi-agency work must be demonstrably effective. Recording, information sharing and reflective practice all contribute to evidencing impact, not just compliance.

### ▶ Strengthened Child Protection Practice

The 2026 guidance sets out clearer and stronger expectations for child protection processes, including:

- Section 47 enquiries
- direct work with children
- effective multi-agency strategy discussions
- clearer links between assessments, Family Help Plans and care planning

Although Working Together 2023 included these areas, it did not connect them as clearly with the new Family Help model or specify practice expectations in as much detail.

#### **What this means for practitioners:**

Child protection practice should be more integrated, consistent and child-focused, with clear links between assessment, planning and intervention.

### ▶ A Stronger Safeguarding Role for Early Years and Education

Working Together 2026 introduces a dedicated section for early years and childcare providers. It clearly sets out expectations for:

- active integration with safeguarding partners
- consistent communication
- involvement in early identification, Family Help and child protection pathways

Education settings were included in earlier guidance, but not with this level of clarity or system-wide expectation.

#### **What this means for practitioners:**

Early years and education professionals are recognised as central safeguarding partners, with a proactive role in prevention, identification and response.

### ▶ Inspection, Accountability and National Reform Alignment

Finally, Working Together 2026 aligns safeguarding arrangements with the national children's social care framework. It strengthens expectations around:

- learning and continuous improvement
- measuring and evidencing impact
- early intervention
- multi-agency accountability

Working Together 2023 did not link safeguarding arrangements as directly to national reform or set out expectations around impact in the same way.

#### **What this means for practitioners:**

Safeguarding practice is increasingly outcome-focused. Learning from practice and evidence of difference for children and families is now central.

## In Summary – What Practitioners Need to Know

Working Together 2026 introduces major system changes, including:

- a new Family Help model replacing separate Early Help and Section 17 pathways
- explicit anti-racist and anti-discriminatory duties
- stronger multi-agency accountability and inspection expectations
- more detailed and robust CSA guidance
- a wider and clearer safeguarding scope, including unborn children and kinship care
- a strengthened role for early years and education
- a sharper focus on evidencing impact, not activity

Practitioners should familiarise themselves with these changes, reflect on how they affect their role, and consider how practice, decision-making and partnership working will need to adapt under the 2026 guidance.

You can read the DfE summary [here](#)