

# Challenging Poor Practice

## Dictionary of Key Terms

*A plain-language reference for adoptive parents, special guardians, kinship and foster carers*

### **How to Use This Dictionary**

This dictionary defines the terms most commonly encountered by families navigating children's services, safeguarding processes, professional regulation and complaint routes.

Entries are arranged alphabetically. Where a term connects to another, a 'See also' note appears at the end of the entry.

Understanding the language professionals use is the first step to challenging it effectively.

This guide provides general information only and does not constitute legal, clinical or professional advice. Readers should seek specialist advice relevant to their circumstances.

## A

### ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)

A neurodevelopmental condition affecting attention, impulse control, activity levels and executive functioning. ADHD can present as inattentiveness, hyperactivity, impulsivity, or a combination of these. Children with ADHD may struggle with organisation, emotional regulation, memory, time management and understanding consequences. ADHD is frequently misunderstood as poor behaviour or lack of motivation when it is, in fact, a difference in brain development.

**See also:** Executive Function, Neurodevelopmental Differences, Dysregulation

### Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

A government fund in England that provides money to Local Authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies to pay for therapeutic services for adopted children and their families. Families do not apply directly — the agency applies on their behalf. Eligibility criteria apply.

### Adoption Support Worker

A professional who provides post-adoption support to adoptive families. They may be employed by a Regional Adoption Agency, a voluntary adoption agency, or a Local Authority.

### Allegation

A claim made that someone has done something harmful or wrong. An allegation is unproven until it has been properly investigated. The making of an allegation does not establish fact. Parents should record the date, exact wording and context of any allegation made against them.

*See also: Confabulation, False Allegation*

### Assessment (Child and Family Assessment)

A formal process carried out by a social worker to understand a child's needs, the family's circumstances and what support or intervention may be required. Assessments must consider the child's full history, including pre-placement experiences. Families have the right to see the completed assessment and to respond to it in writing.

### Attachment

The emotional bond between a child and their primary caregiver, formed in early life. Children who have experienced neglect, abuse or multiple placement changes may have disrupted attachment patterns, which can significantly affect their behaviour, relationships and ability to regulate emotion.

*See also: Developmental Trauma, Early Trauma*

## Attachment Disruption

A term used to describe the impact on a child when early attachment relationships have been broken, inconsistent or harmful. This can manifest as controlling behaviour, indiscriminate affection, extreme distress at separation, emotional dysregulation or difficulties in forming trusting relationships.

## Autism

A neurodevelopmental difference that affects communication, social interaction, sensory processing and understanding of the world. Autism presents differently in every individual. Autistic children may experience sensory sensitivities, difficulties with change, intense interests, social communication differences and increased vulnerability to anxiety. Autism should not be viewed as a behavioural problem but as a different way of experiencing and processing the world.

**See also:** Neurodevelopmental Differences, Executive Function, Dysregulation

## B

### Best Interests

A legal and welfare principle requiring decisions affecting a child to prioritise the child's needs, safety, wellbeing and long-term outcomes. Determining a child's best interests requires consideration of their wishes and feelings, developmental needs, family relationships, identity and individual circumstances. Professionals should be able to explain clearly how a decision is considered to be in the child's best interests.

**See also:** Child Protection, Care Plan, Permanence

### Blame Culture

A pattern in which professionals who do not adequately understand the complexities of trauma, FASD or neurodevelopmental difference attribute difficulties to the parent or carer rather than the child's underlying needs. This can lead to inappropriate investigations, child protection processes and the withdrawal of support from families who most need it.

*See also: Systems-Generated Trauma, Misattribution*

## C

### CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)

NHS services that assess and treat children and young people with emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties. CAMHS operates at different tiers of need. Families often report difficulty accessing CAMHS and long waiting times. CAMHS records can be important evidence in complaints.

### Care Plan

A written document setting out the support and services to be provided to a child and family. All children subject to child protection or looked-after processes should have a care plan. Families are entitled to see and comment on care plans that relate to their child.

### Care Quality Commission (CQC)

The regulator for adult social care services in England. If concerns relate to adult social care rather than children's services, the CQC is the relevant oversight body. Website: [www.cqc.org.uk](http://www.cqc.org.uk)

*See also: Ofsted*

### Child and Family Assessment

See: Assessment

### Child in Need (CIN)

A child who requires services or support from a Local Authority under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development, or because they are disabled. A Child in Need Plan sets out the support to be provided. Being identified as a Child in Need does not mean a parent has harmed their child.

**See also:** Section 17, Early Help, Care Plan

### Child Protection

Processes and procedures designed to protect children from abuse and neglect. Child protection processes include Section 47 enquiries, child protection conferences and child protection plans. Being subject to child protection processes does not mean a parent is guilty of anything.

### Child Protection Conference

A formal multi-agency meeting at which professionals and family members discuss concerns about a child's safety and decide whether a child protection plan is needed. Families have the right to attend, to be represented, and to see the conference report.

### Child Protection Plan

A written plan produced following a child protection conference, setting out the actions to be taken by professionals and the family to keep a child safe. Being on a child protection plan does not mean a parent has abused their child.

### Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR)

A review carried out when a child has suffered serious harm or death, to identify learning and improve safeguarding systems. CSPRs are not a complaints process. They focus on system learning, not individual blame. Parents cannot request a CSPR directly but can ask safeguarding partners to consider whether one is appropriate.

*See also: Local Safeguarding Children Partnership, Rapid Review*

### Child-to-Parent Violence and Abuse (CPVA)

Violence, aggression or controlling behaviour directed by a child or young person towards a parent or carer. CPVA is a recognised and significant safeguarding issue that is often poorly understood by professionals. It can include physical violence, threats, property damage, emotional abuse and financial abuse. Parents experiencing CPVA are victims and should be supported accordingly.

### Children's Commissioner

An independent body that promotes and protects the rights and interests of children in England. The Children's Commissioner is most relevant for systemic or policy-level concerns rather than individual complaints.

### Chronology

A dated, sequential record of significant events. A well-maintained chronology is one of the most powerful tools available to families challenging poor practice. It should record facts — objective, verifiable events — with dates, times, those present and the impact.

*See also: Facts, Evidence*

## Complaints Procedure (Children Act)

The statutory process used by Local Authorities in England to investigate complaints about children's social care services. The procedure normally consists of three stages: Local Resolution, Independent Investigation and Review Panel. If the complaint remains unresolved after completion of the process, it may be referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

**See also:** LGSCO, Ombudsman, Maladministration

## Confabulation

The production of fabricated or distorted memories without the conscious intention to deceive. Confabulation is associated with FASD, traumatic brain injury, early trauma and certain neurodevelopmental conditions. A child who confabulates is not deliberately lying — their brain is filling gaps in memory with material that feels true to them. Confabulated accounts can be highly convincing and may be mistaken for deliberate false allegation.

*See also: FASD, False Allegation, Allegation*

## Core Assessment

An older term (now replaced by Child and Family Assessment) for a detailed social work assessment of a child's developmental needs and family circumstances.

## Corporate Parenting

The collective responsibility of Local Authorities and partner agencies to promote the welfare, safety and life chances of children in care and care leavers. Corporate parenting requires organisations to act as a responsible and supportive parent would, ensuring children receive appropriate care, support, opportunities and advocacy.

**See also:** Looked After Child, Care Plan, Permanence

## D

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## Data Subject Access Request (DSAR / SAR)

A formal request made under data protection law to receive copies of personal data held about you or your child by an organisation. Local Authorities, schools, NHS bodies and other public organisations are legally required to respond within one month. DSARs are an important tool for obtaining records, checking accuracy and identifying what information has been shared.

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*See also: GDPR, Information Commissioner's Office*

### Demand Avoidance (PDA)

A profile sometimes associated with autism in which an individual experiences an overwhelming need to avoid everyday demands and expectations. Demand avoidance is generally understood as being driven by anxiety, a need for control or difficulties managing uncertainty rather than deliberate oppositional behaviour. Children with demand avoidance may require flexible, collaborative and low-demand approaches.

**See also:** Autism, Dysregulation, Neurodevelopmental Differences

### Developmental Trauma

The cumulative impact of early, repeated trauma — particularly abuse, neglect, domestic violence or disrupted caregiving — on a child's developing brain and nervous system. Developmental trauma affects the capacity to regulate emotion, form relationships, learn and manage stress. It is distinct from single-incident trauma and requires specialist understanding.

*See also: Attachment Disruption, Early Trauma, FASD*

### Dissociation

A psychological response to overwhelming stress or trauma in which a person feels detached from their thoughts, feelings, body or surroundings. Dissociation can appear as blankness, absence, confusion or apparent indifference. In parents, it may be mistaken by professionals for lack of engagement or guilt.

*See also: Freeze Response, Shock Response, Fog of Trauma*

### Dysregulation

The inability to manage emotional or physiological responses in ways that are proportionate to the situation. In children with developmental trauma or neurodevelopmental differences, dysregulation can manifest as explosive anger, shutdown, self-harm, aggression or extreme anxiety. Dysregulation is neurologically driven, not a behaviour choice.

*See also: Emotional Dysregulation, Developmental Trauma*

## E

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### Early Help

Support offered to children and families at the first signs of difficulty, before problems escalate to the point of requiring statutory intervention. Early help services vary significantly between Local Authorities.

### Early Trauma

Trauma experienced in the earliest years of life, including during pregnancy, infancy and early childhood. Early trauma has a profound and lasting impact on brain development, attachment, emotional regulation and physical health.

*See also: Developmental Trauma, FASD, Prenatal Alcohol Exposure*

### EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan)

A legal document for children and young people aged up to 25 who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) that cannot be met through standard support. An EHCP sets out the child's needs, outcomes and the provision to be made. Families can request an EHCP assessment.

### Emotional Dysregulation

See: Dysregulation

### Evidence

The information, records and data used to support a claim, demonstrate a fact or draw a conclusion. Evidence is built from facts. The strongest complaints and challenges are those grounded in contemporaneous, independently verifiable evidence gathered from multiple settings.

*See also: Facts, Chronology*

### Executive Function

The set of mental processes responsible for planning, organisation, attention, working memory, impulse control, emotional regulation and task completion. Difficulties with executive functioning are common in individuals with ADHD, autism, FASD and other neurodevelopmental differences. Executive function difficulties can affect daily living, learning and behaviour despite a child's best efforts.

**See also:** ADHD, FASD, Neurodevelopmental Differences

## F

### Facts

Objective, verifiable realities that have occurred. A fact is something that happened, was said, was observed or was recorded — independent of interpretation or opinion. When building a complaint or challenge, the starting point is always the facts: what happened, when, who was present, and how it can be verified.

*See also: Evidence, Chronology*

### False Allegation

A claim made against a parent or carer that is untrue. False allegations may arise from confabulation, misinterpretation, deliberate fabrication or a child's distorted perception shaped by trauma or neurodevelopmental differences. A false allegation does not become a fact simply because it has been made. Parents facing false allegations should seek legal advice promptly.

*See also: Confabulation, Allegation*

### FASD (Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder)

A range of lifelong conditions caused by prenatal alcohol exposure. FASD affects brain development and can cause difficulties with memory, attention, impulse control, cause and effect reasoning, emotional regulation, communication and social understanding. Children with FASD may confabulate, struggle to understand consequences or behave in ways that are easily misunderstood by professionals unfamiliar with the condition.

*See also: Prenatal Alcohol Exposure, Confabulation, Neurodevelopmental Differences*

### Fitness to Practise

The standard required of a registered professional to practise safely and effectively. Social Work England investigates concerns about whether a social worker's conduct falls below the standard required for them to remain on the register. Fitness to practise concerns are distinct from complaints about poor service or decisions families disagree with.

*See also: Social Work England, Professional Standards*

### Fog of Trauma

A term used to describe the profound disorientation experienced by parents and carers when trauma accumulates from multiple directions simultaneously — from the child, from professionals and from systems. The fog impairs sequential thinking, communication and decision-making. It is a recognised trauma response, not a sign of weakness or guilt.

*See also: Freeze Response, Shock Response, Dissociation, Secondary Trauma*

### Foster Carer

A person who provides a temporary home and care for a child who cannot live with their birth family, under an agreement with a Local Authority or independent fostering agency. Foster carers are not the child's legal guardians and the Local Authority retains parental responsibility for looked-after children.

### Freeze Response

A physiological response to overwhelming threat in which the body and mind become temporarily immobilised. The freeze response can cause silence, apparent blankness, inability to respond, and visible stillness. In parents facing accusations or professional confrontation, it may be misread by professionals as guilt or lack of engagement.

*See also: Shock Response, Dissociation, Fog of Trauma*

### Family Rights Group (FRG)

A charity providing advice, guidance and support to families involved with children's services in England and Wales. The FRG offers a helpline, online resources and information about rights and complaint routes. Website: [www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)

## G

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### GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation)

The legal framework governing the collection, storage and use of personal data. Under GDPR and the UK Data Protection Act 2018, individuals have rights including the right to access their data, have inaccurate data corrected, and have data erased in certain circumstances. Inaccurate records held by public bodies can be challenged under GDPR.

*See also: Data Subject Access Request, Information Commissioner's Office*

## H

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### Human Rights

The fundamental rights and freedoms to which every person is entitled, protected in UK law primarily through the Human Rights Act 1998. Relevant articles include Article 8 (right to respect for private and family life). Where public authorities act in ways that breach human rights, legal action may be possible.

*See also: Judicial Review*

## I

### ICO (Information Commissioner's Office)

The independent body responsible for enforcing data protection law in the UK. Concerns about how personal data has been handled — including inaccurate records, unauthorised sharing or failure to respond to a subject access request — can be reported to the ICO.

Website: [www.ico.org.uk](http://www.ico.org.uk)

*See also: GDPR, Data Subject Access Request*

### Independent Advocate

A trained professional who helps children, young people or vulnerable adults express their views, understand their rights and participate in decisions affecting them. Advocates act independently of the organisations involved in the case and help ensure the individual's voice is heard.

**See also:** NYAS, Children's Commissioner.

### Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

A professional responsible for overseeing the care planning process for looked-after children and ensuring that the Local Authority fulfils its legal responsibilities. The IRO chairs review meetings, monitors the child's care plan and can challenge poor practice where necessary.

**See also:** Looked After Child, Care Plan, Corporate Parenting

### Integrated Care Board (ICB)

The NHS body responsible for planning and funding health services in a local area. ICBs are one of the three statutory partners in Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships.

## J

### Judicial Review

A legal process by which a court reviews the lawfulness of a decision or action taken by a public body. Judicial review does not re-take the decision — it examines whether the decision was made lawfully, fairly and rationally. It can be used where a Local Authority or other public body has acted unlawfully in relation to a family.

*See also: Human Rights, Legal Advice*

## K

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### Kinship Carer

A family member or friend who cares for a child who cannot live with their parents. Kinship carers may be informal carers, connected persons foster carers or Special Guardians. Support available to kinship carers varies significantly and is often significantly less than that available to adoptive parents.

## L

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### Looked After Child (LAC)

A child who is in the care of a Local Authority, either through a court order or by agreement with their parents. Looked-after children may live with foster carers, kinship carers, in residential settings or, in some circumstances, with parents. Local Authorities have specific legal duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of looked-after children.

**See also:** Foster Carer, Corporate Parenting, IRO

### LGSCO (Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman)

The independent body that investigates complaints about Local Authorities and social care providers in England that have not been resolved through the organisation's own complaints process. The LGSCO can investigate maladministration, delay, procedural failures and injustice. It can recommend apologies, service improvements and financial remedies.

Website: [www.lgo.org.uk](http://www.lgo.org.uk)

*See also: Maladministration, Ombudsman*

### Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP)

A multi-agency body in each local area responsible for coordinating and overseeing safeguarding practice. The LSCP brings together the Local Authority, Police and Integrated Care Board. It commissions reviews into serious safeguarding concerns and oversees the quality of local safeguarding arrangements.

*See also: Child Safeguarding Practice Review, Rapid Review*

## M

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## Maladministration

A term used by the Ombudsman to describe failures in the way an organisation has managed a process — including delay, failure to follow procedure, poor record keeping, failure to communicate and unreasonable decisions. Maladministration does not require deliberate wrongdoing; it can result from systemic or organisational failures.

*See also: LGSCO*

## Misattribution

The incorrect attribution of a child's behaviours or difficulties to the parent or carer's actions, rather than to the child's underlying trauma, neurodevelopmental profile or history. Misattribution is a common feature of blame culture and can lead to harmful and inappropriate professional responses.

*See also: Blame Culture*

## N

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### Neurodevelopmental Differences

Variations in the way the brain develops that affect cognition, communication, social understanding, attention, sensory processing and behaviour. Neurodevelopmental conditions include ADHD, autism, dyslexia, developmental coordination disorder (DCD/dyspraxia), tic disorders and FASD. Many children in adoptive, kinship or foster care have neurodevelopmental differences that are undiagnosed.

*See also: FASD, ADHD, Autism*

### NISCC (Northern Ireland Social Care Council)

The regulatory body for social workers and social care workers in Northern Ireland. Website: [www.niscc.info](http://www.niscc.info)

*See also: Social Work England, SSSC, Social Care Wales*

### NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service)

A charity providing advocacy services for children, young people and families involved with care proceedings and related processes. Website: [www.nyas.net](http://www.nyas.net)

## O

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## Ofsted

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Ofsted inspects and regulates children's social care in England, including Local Authority children's services. Ofsted does not investigate individual complaints but may consider concerns as part of inspection activity. Email: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)

*See also: Care Quality Commission*

## Ombudsman

An independent official who investigates complaints against public bodies. For Local Authority children's services in England, this is the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). The Ombudsman is usually the final stage after the organisation's own complaints process has been completed.

*See also: LGSCO, Maladministration*

# P

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## Parental Responsibility

The legal rights, duties, powers and responsibilities a parent has in relation to their child. Adoptive parents have full parental responsibility. Special Guardians have enhanced parental responsibility. Foster carers do not hold parental responsibility — this remains with the Local Authority and/or birth parents.

## Prenatal Alcohol Exposure (PAE)

Exposure of a developing foetus to alcohol during pregnancy. Prenatal alcohol exposure can cause a range of lifelong effects on brain development, known collectively as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). PAE is one of the most common preventable causes of neurodevelopmental disability.

*See also: FASD*

## Professional Standards

The standards published by Social Work England (and equivalent bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) that set out what registered social workers are required to do. These include promoting the rights of families, maintaining trust, making sound decisions, acting with professional integrity, making ethical decisions and not treating anyone less favourably because they have made a complaint.

*See also: Social Work England, Fitness to Practise*

## PLO (Public Law Outline)

The legal framework governing care proceedings and pre-proceedings work involving Local Authorities. The Public Law Outline sets out the steps that must be taken before care proceedings are issued, including attempts to work with families to address concerns. Parents involved in the PLO process are entitled to free legal advice and representation.

**See also:** Legal Advice, Child Protection, Section 47

## R

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### Rapid Review

A review carried out by the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership within 15 working days of notification of a serious safeguarding incident, to establish the basic facts and decide whether a full Child Safeguarding Practice Review is required.

*See also: Child Safeguarding Practice Review, Local Safeguarding Children Partnership*

### Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)

A regional body responsible for adoption services, usually covering multiple Local Authorities. RAAs manage adoption assessments, matching, post-adoption support and access to the Adoption Support Fund.

## S

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### Secondary Trauma

Trauma experienced by a caregiver as a result of exposure to the traumatic experiences and behaviours of the child they care for. Also known as vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue. Secondary trauma is a recognised occupational and caregiving hazard that can cause symptoms similar to PTSD, including hypervigilance, emotional numbing, intrusive thoughts and exhaustion.

*See also: Fog of Trauma, Carer Wellbeing*

### Section 17 (Children Act 1989)

The duty on Local Authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area, and to promote the upbringing of such children by their families, by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs.

### Section 47 (Children Act 1989)

The duty on Local Authorities to make enquiries where they have reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. A Section 47 enquiry is a formal investigation. Being the subject of a Section 47 enquiry does not mean a parent has harmed their child.

### SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator)

The member of school staff responsible for coordinating provision for pupils with special educational needs. The SENCO is often a key professional witness in complaints involving educational difficulties.

### Shock Response

The physiological and psychological response to sudden, overwhelming threat or distressing news. Shock can manifest as silence, inability to speak, dissociation, visible shaking, blankness or apparent emotional flatness. In parents confronted with false allegations, the shock response may be misread by professionals as an indicator of guilt. It is not.

*See also: Freeze Response, Dissociation, Fog of Trauma*

### Social Care Wales

The regulatory body for social workers and social care workers in Wales. Website: [www.socialcare.wales](http://www.socialcare.wales)

*See also: Social Work England, SSSC, NISCC*

### Social Work England

The professional regulator for social workers in England. Social Work England investigates fitness to practise concerns about registered social workers. It does not investigate complaints about poor service or decisions families disagree with — those go through the Local Authority complaints process. Website: [www.socialworkengland.org.uk](http://www.socialworkengland.org.uk)

*See also: Fitness to Practise, Professional Standards, SSSC, NISCC, Social Care Wales*

### Special Guardian

A person appointed by a court to care for a child under a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). Special Guardians have enhanced parental responsibility that overrides that of the birth parents in most circumstances. Special Guardians are entitled to support services from their Local Authority.

### SSSC (Scottish Social Services Council)

The regulatory body for social workers and social care workers in Scotland. Website: [www.sssc.uk.com](http://www.sssc.uk.com)

*See also: Social Work England, NISCC, Social Care Wales*

### Subject Access Request (SAR)

See: Data Subject Access Request

### Systems-Generated Trauma

Trauma caused not by the child's original history, but by the actions of professional systems — through mishandling of referrals, inappropriate investigations, blame culture, withdrawal of support or repeated re-traumatisation through intrusive or harmful processes. Systems-generated trauma is a recognised phenomenon that compounds the difficulties faced by families.

*See also: Blame Culture, Secondary Trauma*

## T

### Therapeutic Parenting

A parenting approach that prioritises connection, safety and emotional co-regulation over traditional behaviour management techniques. Therapeutic parenting is designed for children who have experienced developmental trauma and attachment disruption. Strategies that appear effective with most children may be ineffective or harmful for traumatised children.

### Trauma-Informed Practice

A professional approach that recognises the widespread impact of trauma, integrates knowledge about trauma into policies and practices, and seeks to avoid re-traumatising individuals. Many families report that the professionals they encounter do not practise in a trauma-informed way.

## V

### Vicarious Trauma

See: Secondary Trauma

## W

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### Witness Log

A record maintained by a family identifying professionals who can independently verify specific facts relevant to a complaint or challenge. A witness log should record the person's name, role and exactly what facts they can verify.

*See also: Facts, Evidence, Chronology*

## A Note on Language

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The language used in children's services, safeguarding and professional regulation can feel designed to confuse rather than to clarify. Terms like 'maladministration', 'fitness to practise' and 'confabulation' carry precise meanings that matter — and understanding them can make the difference between a complaint that is heard and one that is dismissed.

This dictionary does not replace legal advice, specialist support or professional guidance. It is a starting point: a way of navigating the language so that you can ask better questions, write clearer records and challenge more effectively.

If a term you have encountered is not included here, note it down and seek clarification. You are entitled to ask any professional to explain, in plain language, what they mean.

### **Remember**

The most powerful tool you have is not legal knowledge or professional jargon.

It is facts — recorded clearly, contemporaneously and consistently.

The language in this dictionary is the framework. The facts are yours.