

FIELDNOTES v1.0
On Fulfilling The Promise
To protect a child, a parent must be seen

An independent field paper
Prepared January 2026

CONTENTS

Opening Thesis
Promise Context
Practice Implications
Procedural Dignity
Two Models of Assessment
Reframing Accuracy
Conclusion

1 — Opening Thesis

Scotland's Promise is clear: children deserve to grow up loved, safe, and respected.

A child's dignity cannot be safeguarded by a system that withholds dignity from the adult responsible for their world. Therefore, The Promise cannot be fulfilled while parents under assessment are treated simply as cases rather than persons within a case.

A child does not exist as an isolated subject. Their life takes place within the lived reality of the parent. The child's world is the parent's subjectivity: their routines, their decisions, their values, their limitations, their supports, their culture, their history, and their voice.

Assessment cannot abstract the child from this world without creating a fiction. A fictional child cannot be safeguarded, and fictional safeguarding cannot fulfil The Promise.

When a parent is reduced to a case, the world in which the child actually lives is made invisible. Assessment then compensates for this absence by increasing surveillance, compliance demands, and correctional instruction. Presentation becomes distorted; communication becomes defensive; dignity becomes conditional.

This does not produce clarity. It produces performance. And performance cannot be assessed accurately.

To protect a child, a parent must be seen.

We do not protect children by turning parents into performers. We protect children by making parents safe enough to be seen, heard, and given the chance to be understood.

There is no other route to The Promise.

2 — Promise Context

Scotland committed to The Promise on the belief that care should be rooted in love, dignity, and respect. At its heart, The Promise recognises that children deserve more than safety; they deserve to grow within a world where they are understood, protected, and given space to flourish.

This vision cannot be delivered at the child's level alone. A child's world is constructed through the parent's world. While The Promise gestures toward this through its emphasis on relationships and belonging, current practice has not yet adapted to the reality that safeguarding a child requires safeguarding the dignity of the adult who builds the child's everyday environment.

If a parent under assessment is treated as a problem to be managed rather than a person to be understood, The Promise becomes aspirational rather than operational. Its intentions remain sound, but its delivery becomes dependent on a framework that cannot sustain the vision it declares.

The gap between Promise and practice is not a matter of bad will or lack of care. It is a structural contradiction: one axis promises dignity to the child while the other withholds dignity from the adult responsible for the child's world.

Under these conditions, the child cannot fully receive what has been promised.

3 — Practice Implications

For The Promise to function in practice, assessment must recognise that a parent's subjective world is part of the safeguarding environment. Without access to this world, assessment becomes limited to presentation, compliance, and performance. These are weak indicators of a child's lived reality.

Supervision and case management often operate as if accuracy can be achieved without relational dignity. This assumption is structurally unsound. A parent who is assessed without dignity becomes defensive, cautious, withdrawn, or overly compliant. Each of these responses distorts evidence.

Dignity is therefore not an ethical luxury. It is a requirement for accuracy.

If assessment seeks to understand a child's world, it must make the adult safe enough to be seen within it. This requires a shift away from compliance-based intervention and toward relational understanding.

The Promise cannot be delivered through surveillance, performance, or correction. It can only be delivered through clarity, context, and dignity.

4 — Procedural Dignity

Safeguarding requires relational continuity. Parents cannot contribute meaningfully to the assessment of their child's world if they are excluded from it. Communication must be reciprocal, predictable, and grounded in shared responsibility.

A system cannot claim to work with families while failing to maintain the basic continuity that cooperation depends on. Silence, delay, and non-reciprocal communication do not produce trust; they produce uncertainty. Uncertainty weakens engagement, distorts evidence, and undermines safeguarding outcomes.

Procedural dignity is not an optional courtesy. It is a core safeguarding requirement.

If The Promise is to become operational rather than aspirational, procedural dignity must be treated as structural, not discretionary.

5 — Two Models of Assessment

Current assessment practice often relies on compliance-based tasks and observational performance. These tasks give the appearance of engagement, but they measure neither capacity nor understanding. They measure a parent's ability to perform under scrutiny.

A Promise-aligned system would assess the world a child actually inhabits. This requires understanding the parent's rhythms, decisions, relationships, supports, and constraints. These are the components of a child's lived environment, and they cannot be captured through performance.

If assessment prioritises compliance, it produces accuracy for the institution. If assessment prioritises understanding, it produces safety for the child.

The first model protects the system. The second protects the child.

Only one fulfils The Promise.

6 — Reframing Accuracy

To operationalise The Promise, three structural shifts are required:

Dignity as Method — Parents must be safe enough to speak from the world the child actually lives in. Dignity is the condition that makes truthful assessment possible.

Understanding as Evidence — Information gathered must relate to the child's environment, not the parent's performance. Evidence must be contextual rather than theatrical.

Clarity as Outcome — Assessment should aim for clarity rather than compliance. Clarity enables proportionate decisions, reduces conflict, and creates safer futures for children and families.

These changes do not weaken safeguarding. They strengthen it by replacing performance with accuracy.

7 — Conclusion

If parents must perform to be seen, then children will be protected only in theory.

The Promise was not written for theory. It was written for children.