



SEND & Safeguarding Reforms 2026

What schools need to do now

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I *At a glance: what schools need to do now*

The 2026 reforms ask schools to work differently, not just do more.

Schools must:

Understand modern childhood: recognise how technology, social comparison, financial stress, and lifestyle changes are reshaping children's neurobiology, behaviour, and capacity to learn.

Make universal provision emotionally safe: ensure that everyday classroom practice, routines, and adult responses create the conditions for regulation, connection, and learning for all children.

Teach expectations explicitly: move away from assuming children already know how to behave, and instead teach, model, and rehearse expectations with clarity and consistency.

Maintain dignity in all interactions: ensure that even when boundaries are held firmly, children are never shamed, isolated without purpose, or made to feel unsafe.

Measure emotional safety: develop indicators that track whether children feel safe, seen, and supported - not just whether they are compliant.

Upskill all adults: invest in ongoing professional development so that every adult in the school community can respond to distress, dysregulation, and challenge with skill and safety.

The core argument

The 2026 SEND and safeguarding reforms do not simply ask schools to do more. They ask schools to work differently. They require a shift in how adults understand children, how systems respond to need, and how safety is defined and measured.

Modern childhood has changed. Technology, social comparison, financial stress, and lifestyle shifts are reshaping children's neurobiology, behaviour, and capacity to learn. The adults around them must understand this context if they are to respond with skill rather than frustration.

The reforms call for universal provision that is emotionally safe — where everyday classroom practice, routines, and adult responses create the conditions for regulation, connection, and learning. This is not about being soft. It is about being safe.

Safety is the foundation. Without it, children cannot access learning, relationships, or growth. With it, schools create the conditions in which all children, including those with SEND, can thrive.

This paper sets out what schools need to understand, and what they need to do, to meet the demands of the 2026 reforms with confidence, clarity, and care.

"Safety is the foundation for learning and reform."

A system at turning point

The 2026 reforms represent a generational shift in how the education system understands and responds to children's needs. They move away from a model built on crisis response and towards one rooted in early intervention, relational practice, and emotional safety.

For years, schools have operated within a system that waits for children to fail before offering support. The reforms challenge this. They ask schools to build environments where fewer children reach crisis point - not because problems are ignored, but because the conditions for safety and learning are embedded in everyday practice.

This is not a small adjustment. It requires schools to rethink their universal provision the routines, language, expectations, and adult responses that shape every child's daily experience. It asks leaders to look beyond behaviour policies and attendance data, and to consider whether children feel safe enough to learn.

The destination is clear: a system where every child has access to emotionally safe, inclusive provision as a starting point - not as an intervention. Where adults are skilled, supported, and regulated. Where dignity is non-negotiable, and where safety is understood not as the absence of risk, but as the presence of connection, consistency, and care.

Why reform, and why now?

The pressure on schools is not new. Rising rates of anxiety, self-harm, school refusal, and exclusion have been building for over a decade. What is new is the recognition, at policy level, that the system itself must change.

Attendance is falling. Exclusions are rising. The number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans has increased significantly, and local authority budgets are under unprecedented strain. Schools are being asked to do more with less, while the children in front of them are arriving with more complex needs than ever before.

But the 2026 reforms do not simply ask schools to absorb more pressure. They ask schools to respond differently. To move from reactive, deficit-based models towards proactive, relational, and inclusive ones.

The gap the reforms seek to close is not just structural, it is philosophical. It is the gap between what we know about child development, neuroscience, and trauma, and what we actually do in classrooms every day.

Many schools already understand this. But understanding is not the same as implementation. The reforms provide the framework. What schools need now is the practical knowledge, skill, and confidence to bring that framework to life.

Scaffolding the destination: reconnecting with the why

Before schools can respond differently, they must understand why the response needs to change. The 2026 reforms are not built on ideology. They are built on evidence about how modern childhood is shaping children's development, behaviour, and capacity to learn.

The world children are growing up in today is fundamentally different from the one most adults experienced. The pace of change has accelerated dramatically, and the cumulative impact on children's neurobiology, emotional regulation, and social development is significant.

This section explores the key contextual factors that are reshaping childhood not to excuse behaviour, but to explain it. Understanding context is not about lowering expectations. It is about scaffolding the journey towards them.

When adults understand why children are struggling, they are better equipped to respond with skill rather than frustration. They can hold boundaries with warmth, maintain expectations with dignity, and build the relational safety that makes learning possible.

Context: a changing landscape

Mobile devices and social media: Children today are growing up with unprecedented access to technology. Smartphones, tablets, and social media platforms are not simply tools, they are environments. They shape how children think, feel, relate, and regulate. The dopamine-driven feedback loops of likes, notifications, and infinite scroll are rewiring attention spans and reward systems at a neurological level.

Comparison and constant awareness: Social media creates a world of constant comparison. Children are exposed to curated, idealised versions of other people's lives from an increasingly young age. This drives anxiety, low self-worth, and a sense of never being enough. The psychological impact is cumulative and pervasive.

Information overload: Children are exposed to more information in a single day than previous generations encountered in a week. Much of it is unfiltered, distressing, or age-inappropriate. The developing brain is not equipped to process this volume of input without support.

Cost of living: Financial stress within families has a direct impact on children's emotional safety. When parents are anxious, stretched, or absent due to work pressures, children lose access to the co-regulation and connection they need.

The biology of behaviour

Understanding the biology of behaviour is essential for any adult working with children. Behaviour is not simply a choice it is a reflection of what is happening in the body and brain. When adults understand this, they are better equipped to respond with skill rather than judgment.

Dopamine: Dopamine drives motivation, reward-seeking, and attention. In a world of instant gratification - likes, notifications, gaming rewards - children's dopamine systems are being shaped to expect constant stimulation. When the classroom cannot compete, disengagement is not defiance. It is neurochemistry.

Oxytocin: Oxytocin is the hormone of connection and trust. It is released through safe, warm, predictable relationships. Children who lack consistent relational safety often have depleted oxytocin systems, making trust, collaboration, and social engagement harder.

Serotonin: Serotonin supports mood regulation, self-worth, and a sense of status or belonging. Children who feel unseen, excluded, or shamed experience serotonin depletion, leading to withdrawal, low mood, or reactive behaviour.

Endorphins: Endorphins are the body's natural pain relief and reward system. Physical activity, laughter, and play release endorphins. Sedentary, screen-heavy lifestyles reduce children's access to these natural regulators.

Cortisol and adrenaline: These stress hormones prepare the body for threat. In children who experience chronic stress, the system becomes dysregulated - stuck in fight, flight, or freeze. What looks like defiance, aggression, or withdrawal is often a stress response, not a behavioural choice.

The structure of response

Doing no harm:

The first principle of emotionally safe practice is to do no harm. This means that adult responses, however well intended, must not add to a child's distress, shame, or sense of unsafety. Public reprimands, sarcasm, withdrawal of relationship, and punitive consequences that humiliate rather than teach all cause harm. This does not mean adults cannot hold boundaries. It means they must hold them without weaponising the relationship.

Adjusting the lens:

When adults see behaviour as communication rather than defiance, everything changes. The question shifts from 'What is wrong with this child?' to 'What has happened to this child, and what do they need right now?'

This is not about excusing behaviour. It is about understanding it well enough to respond effectively. A child in fight-or-flight cannot process a lecture. A child who feels shamed will not reflect.

Safe, not soft:

Emotional safety is not permissiveness. It is not the absence of boundaries or expectations. Safe practice is boundaried, consistent, and clear but it is delivered with warmth, dignity, and an understanding of what the child needs to succeed. Safe adults are predictable. They regulate themselves before they respond. They hold the line without breaking the relationship. They understand that accountability without safety is just control.

The other adults

The reforms do not only apply to teachers. Every adult in a child's life — support staff, lunchtime supervisors, office teams, parents, carers — shapes the emotional climate a child experiences. If only some adults are skilled and regulated, the system remains inconsistent. Children cannot feel safe in an environment where safety depends on which adult they encounter.

This means training must extend beyond the classroom. It must reach every adult who interacts with children and it must go beyond awareness-raising. Adults need practical, repeatable skills that they can use under pressure. They need to know what to say, how to say it, and what to do when things escalate.

Schools must also recognise that adults are not immune to dysregulation. Staff who are stressed, unsupported, or overwhelmed cannot consistently offer safety to children. Investment in adult wellbeing is a prerequisite for sustainable, emotionally safe practice.

The reforms ask schools to build cultures where adults are learners too. Where feedback is safe, reflection is normal, and skill development is ongoing. This is not about blame or deficit. It is about recognising that the work is hard, and that adults deserve the same scaffolding we offer children.

Setting expectations

Expectations are essential. Children need to know what is expected of them and so do adults. But expectations only work when they are taught, scaffolded, and revisited. Telling a child to 'behave' without teaching them what that looks like, and supporting them to get there, is not an expectation. It is a demand.

The reforms ask schools to move from assumed expectations to explicitly taught ones. This means being clear about what good looks like, modelling it consistently, and creating the conditions in which children can meet those expectations.

Shared expectations must also apply to adults. If we expect children to regulate, we must model regulation. If we expect children to communicate respectfully, adults must do the same. Consistency is not about rigidity, it is about predictability. Children feel safe when they know what to expect from the adults around them.

This also means revisiting expectations regularly. Not as a one-off assembly at the start of term, but as an ongoing, embedded part of school culture. Expectations are living agreements, not static rules. They must be responsive to context, developmental stage, and individual need.

Leading with safety

Emotionally safe leadership is not about being soft or avoiding difficult conversations. It is about creating the conditions in which accountability can exist without shame. When leaders communicate with clarity, warmth, and consistency, they model the very practice they are asking others to adopt.

Leading with safety means being transparent about expectations, honest about challenges, and willing to be vulnerable. It means creating spaces where staff can reflect without fear of judgment, ask for help without stigma, and make mistakes without punishment.

This kind of leadership builds trust. And trust is the foundation of every effective team, every safe classroom, and every inclusive school. Without it, policies remain words on paper. With it, culture shifts.

Safe leadership also means holding boundaries. It means being clear when practice falls below standard but doing so in a way that maintains the dignity of the adult, just as we would with a child. Feedback delivered with safety is feedback that lands. Feedback delivered with shame creates defensiveness, not growth.

The reforms require leaders who can hold complexity, who can be both compassionate and accountable, both flexible and consistent. This is skilled work, and it requires ongoing development, reflection, and support.

When universal provision is not enough

Even in the most emotionally safe environments, some children will need more. Universal provision, however well designed, cannot meet every need. The reforms recognise this, and ask schools to build graduated responses that maintain dignity and safety at every level.

When additional support is needed, it must not feel like punishment. Children who are struggling should not be removed from belonging in order to receive help. Targeted provision must be delivered with the same warmth, respect, and relational safety as universal practice.

This means rethinking how we talk about intervention. Language matters. 'Withdrawal' implies removal. 'Support' implies care. The framing we use shapes how children experience the help they receive and whether they are willing to accept it.

Schools must also guard against the assumption that additional need equals deficit. Many children who require targeted support are resourceful, resilient, and capable. They simply need scaffolding that the universal environment cannot provide.

The goal is not to make every child fit the system. It is to build a system flexible enough to hold every child with safety, dignity, and high expectations intact.

Measuring impact

Traditional metrics of attendance, exclusions, attainment tell part of the story. But they do not tell us whether children feel safe. They do not tell us whether adults are regulated. They do not tell us whether the culture is shifting.

The reforms ask schools to look beyond outcomes and measure the conditions that make outcomes possible. Emotional safety is one of those conditions. And it can be measured not through tick-box audits, but through careful observation of culture, language, and behaviour.

Indicators of emotional safety in learners include: willingness to ask for help, ability to name and express feelings, capacity to reflect on behaviour, reduced fight-or-flight responses, increased engagement and collaboration, and a sense of belonging.

Indicators of emotional safety in adults include: calm, consistent responses under pressure, willingness to seek support, reflective practice, reduced reliance on punitive measures, and a sense of professional trust and autonomy.

These indicators are not soft. They are observable, measurable, and directly linked to the outcomes schools are already trying to improve. When children feel safe, they learn. When adults feel safe, they teach. Measuring emotional safety is the foundation of creating an inclusive culture where everyone is able to access the conditions they need to thrive.

Upskilling

There is a difference between inspiration and implementation. Many schools invest in training that raises awareness but does not build skill. Adults leave sessions feeling motivated but without the practical tools to change their practice under pressure.

The reforms require something different. They require adults who can pause before they respond. Who can regulate their own nervous system before attempting to regulate a child's. Who can structure their language to de-escalate rather than inflame. Who can maintain both their own dignity and the child's, even in the most challenging moments.

These are not innate qualities. They are skills. And like all skills, they must be taught, practised, and reinforced over time. One-off training days are not enough. Adults need ongoing coaching, reflection, and feedback to embed new ways of working.

Upskilling also means being honest about what we are asking of adults. This work is emotionally demanding. It requires vulnerability, self-awareness, and a willingness to unlearn patterns that may have been reinforced for years. Schools must create the conditions in which this kind of growth is possible with safety, support, and time.

The goal is not perfection. It is consistency. Adults who are good enough, often enough, to create a predictable, safe environment for every child.

Moving forwards

The 2026 reforms ask schools to rethink not just what they do, but how they do it and why. This is not a quick fix. It is a long-term commitment to building environments where every child can access safety, belonging, and learning.

This requires courage. It requires leaders who are willing to challenge existing practice, invest in adult development, and hold a vision of inclusion that goes beyond compliance. It requires staff who are willing to learn, reflect, and grow. And it requires systems that support this work, not just in policy, but in practice.

Navigate Education exists to support schools on this journey. We offer training, consultancy, and ongoing partnership to help schools build emotionally safe, inclusive, and sustainable cultures. We believe that when adults are skilled, supported, and safe, children thrive.

If you would like to explore how we can support your school or trust in preparing for the 2026 reforms, please visit www.letusnavigate.com or get in touch directly. We would be glad to walk alongside you.

