

Practice Principles for tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm:

Practice Tool: Part 2

02



Part two:

Illustrative case study response and supplementary reflections

In this section, you can reflect on some of the things a professional might learn, think and do in responding to the case study in part one. It is important to note that this is one example of how a professional might respond when using the Practice Principles as a compass in their work. It is here to act as a spur for your own thinking and is not intended to be a prescriptive guide.

For more information about the concepts introduced in this document, please refer to the [Practice Principles](#) and the accompanying [Research Summary](#).



Practice Principle: **Putting children and young people first**

Our first introduction to Cassie relates to her having been found holding drugs. We learn that she has been referred to both the Youth Offending Service and a school counsellor, but don't yet know much about the context of why she had drugs. It seems that no professional working with her has, as of yet, got to the bottom of her story. It's not clear from this information whether Cassie carried drugs once, or on several occasions. She may still be doing so.

We also know little, at this stage, about the wider context of Cassie's life, beyond what the school notes about her being 'the ideal pupil'. Similarly, we don't yet know if this incident has involved any other children or young people.

Adopting a child / young person first approach in this scenario requires us to ask questions about the wider context of Cassie's life; to see beyond the presenting behaviour (holding drugs) and ask what might be driving this. As the Youth Justice Board explains of their Child First approach: 'the youth justice system [and wider partners] should treat children as children, see the whole child, including any structural barriers they face and focus on better outcomes for children.' This includes:

- Seeing Cassie as a child first, and prioritising her best interests
- Building a pro-social identity through constructive, strengths-based and future-focused work (think about the positive feedback from the school)
- Meaningfully collaborating with Cassie and her parents
- Diverting from stigma through preventative and diversionary responses.¹

In the first part of the scenario, we learn that the Youth Offending worker has reached out to the school to try to understand more about the context of Cassie's life. The school reports what has happened to be 'out of character', which, if correct, raises questions as to why this might have now occurred. What might have changed in her life? Might she be under duress to hold the drugs?

¹https://yjresourcehub.uk/images/YJB/Child_First_Overview_and_Guide_April_2022_YJB.pdf



We might also ask questions as to what Cassie's reluctance to speak about what has happened might be 'telling us':

- Does she feel shame or embarrassment?
- Might there be other influencing factors in the background, e.g. someone else involved who she may fear?
- Or, might it be that our approach is not (yet) creating the sense of safety and trust that she needs to feel to be able to share what is going on?

We might also observe that information about Cassie seems to be held in multiple different professional spaces. The school and the police each had pieces of information on the context of Cassie's life that the other did not. Information sharing (with due regard to confidentiality and keeping Cassie informed) will be important here.



Practice Principle: Recognise and challenge inequalities, exclusion and discrimination

The content of the police report shared for the multi-agency meeting invites some reflection in relation to this Principle, in terms of Cassie and her brothers' documented experiences. We do not know if others were questioned, or on what basis Cassie and her brothers were questioned, but the reported focus on three Black youths could raise questions about how Black youth are policed. Other matters noted in the police report invite curiosity about potential assumptions and negative stereotyping, for example:

- Comments that they were dressed inappropriately.
- The basis of the request for a body search.
- The line that 'my colleague recognised him from previous encounters' – were any assumptions made as to perceived guilt on this basis?
- The assumption that it was Cassie's brother who made her hold the drugs – might this assumption have diverted attention from the actual source of harm? Might Cassie's brother have been there in a protective capacity for her?

There is no reference to it in the report, and so we might also wonder how much attention has been paid to any potential harm being experienced by Cassie's younger brother or whether – given documented gendered assumptions about who causes and experiences harm – he has also been assumed to be a source of risk.

Practice issue: Negative stereotyping and discrimination

In reflecting on situations such as those outlined throughout this case study, it is important to attend to the potential presence and implications of negative stereotypes and discrimination. Children and young people can face discrimination in a number of ways, including racism, sexism, classism and ageism; all of which may potentially be at play in this case study.



Bernard (2019) and Beckett and Lloyd (2022), for example, note how young males are more likely to be seen as sources of harm, rather than as those experiencing harm. Davis and Marsh (2022) further observe how Black children are more likely to be seen as culpable, rather than vulnerable, due to a tendency to ascribe them more adult characteristics and overlook their innocence and childhood.² Such negative stereotypes and un-evidenced assumptions hold clear implications for the safeguarding of the children and young people affected by them. It is critical that all professionals proactively question whether any such influencing factors may be (knowingly or unknowingly) at play in situations they encounter, and identify ways in which they can constructively challenge them.

As well as this specific Practice Principle, think here about the Practice Principles of **respecting the voice, experience and expertise of children and young people** and **being curious and evidence informed**. Consider how exercising professional curiosity and learning from / attending to the views of these young people might help you better understand what is going on and more helpfully respond to Cassie, her brothers and the wider family circle. Think, also, about **recognising and responding to trauma**, particularly with regards to the impact of racism and how this may have influenced both the nature of this encounter and how Cassie and her brothers experienced it.

Implementing this Principle might entail:

- Taking time to reflect on how negative stereotyping can affect everybody's practice, including your own. What can you do to identify and challenge discrimination in your practice? And in that of others?
- Learning more about anti-discriminatory practice, the multi-faceted, overlapping nature of individuals' identities and disproportionality³ to help build confidence to challenge inequalities where you see them in your own agency, or in partner agencies.
- Seeking support from managers or colleagues as to how you might most effectively challenge both direct and indirect discrimination in professional settings, and any other actions you may be able to take outside of that multi-agency meeting.
- Seeking to understand from Cassie – and her brothers – how they experienced these encounters and the wider context of how discrimination has played out in their lives to date, and what this means for how they experience their engagement with you.
- Reflecting on how you might offer a culturally sensitive response in light of their experiences.

²See the [Research Summary](#) for further information.

³Explore definitions in the glossary section of the main Practice Principles document, found at <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/>



Practice Principle: **Be curious, evidence informed and knowledgeable**

In order to think further about this Practice Principle, we can analyse what Cassie has told the school counsellor.

- Jo and Cassie both drink alcohol, at least during some evenings.
- On the basis of what Jo has told Cassie, and Cassie's own observations, this alcohol use is related to why Jo appears willing to 'swap sex' for alcohol (and money).
- The exploitation is sexual and, at least on the basis of this information, seems to be happening outside of the home.
- Jo appears to trust Cassie enough to share with her what she is doing. She also makes sure Cassie has drinks and a taxi ride home. This indicates that Jo cares about Cassie and, because Cassie has told the counsellor about her worries, Cassie cares about Jo.
- Jo sees her actions as her business, that she is in control, and has dismissed Cassie's concerns.
- Cassie mentioned two different people when talking about the evening in question. She refers to them as 'men' not 'boys', suggesting they are older.
- This is Cassie's viewpoint. We don't yet know what Jo's perspective is.

Practice issue: Reconciling victimhood and agency

In this scenario, Jo is receiving money and alcohol in exchange for sexual activity, which (in Cassie's account) Jo is initiating herself. Research and serious case reviews show that when a young person is seen to be receiving something 'in exchange' for the sexual activity – particularly where they are seen to be the one initiating the exchange – their victimhood can be disguised.

Understanding the context of these encounters is critical to challenging victim-blaming attitudes and language. It counters perceptions that such young people are 'making active lifestyle choices' and, by default, are somehow less in need of support or intervention. We need to find a way to concurrently hold both young people's agency (self-initiated action) and their victimhood, and the concurrent presence of both harm and gain that can be seen in cases such as this, if we are to better identify and respond to experiences of harm that differ from the traditional 'groomed and exploited' victim model.



The concept of constrained choice may be helpful here. This means understanding that the degree of choice and control available to someone can be both highly constrained and externally influenced, so the ‘choices’ they make might be different if the circumstances were different. Recognising this can help us attend to the wider systemic issues that impact on the choices available to a child / young person (such as poverty, for example), and address the unhelpful conflation of agency, culpability and blame. It can also help us see that a young person’s seemingly irrational or self-destructive ‘choices’ may actually be self-protective or adaptive, given the circumstances in which they find themselves – needing alcohol to block out the trauma of prior abusive experiences, for example.⁴

Understanding the importance of context and ‘constrained choice’ we can then seek to explore:

- What might be driving Jo to initiate these exchanges? Is she trying to meet a ‘need’ or ‘want’ (as per the definition of child exploitation)?
- Whether this ‘need’ or ‘want’ might be being used by others who are taking advantage for their own benefit?
- What this might mean for how we best respond?
- The harm Jo may be experiencing, where responsibility for this lies (see the legislative learning box below) and therefore what protective measures could be employed.

Legislative learning:

Although Jo is 16 – the age of sexual consent in the UK – these offences are still covered by the Sexual Offences Act 2008, in which abuse of a child through sexual exploitation includes that perpetrated against 16 and 17 year olds. She is also a child under the Children Act 1989 and there is a legal duty to protect her as such. The men who ‘pay’ her for sexual activity are those offending, not Jo.

⁴See, for example, Beckett (2019). Moving beyond discourses of agency, gain and blame: reconceptualising young people’s experiences of sexual exploitation. In J. Pearce (Ed), *Child Sexual Exploitation: Why theory matters*. Policy Press.



Practice Principle: **Respect the voice, experience and expertise of children and young people**

The way this has been handled so far has left Jo feeling confused, annoyed and disrespected. She does not feel that her voice, experience and expertise have been heard. Trust has been broken in her friendship with Cassie. Jo thinks that the professionals are wasting their time. She may feel embarrassed and upset that her parents have found out, and been told in the way that they have.

We have learned more about Jo now, building on what we already know from what Cassie initially told the counsellor:

- Jo's reaction confirms what Cassie said – that Jo believes she is in control of the situation.
- The link between sexual activity and getting alcohol has been confirmed.
- Jo's parents appear not to have been aware of the situation until now.
- The professionals' initial approach to engaging with Jo is not working for her.

Starting from where Jo is right now, we might consider:

- Recognising how difficult talking about and thinking about these issues may be for Jo.
- The importance of the support worker investing in relationship building and creating a safe and trusted environment.
- Giving Jo an opportunity to reflect on what she thinks about being referred to the support worker, and the information that has been shared with her parents.
- Why would Jo say, 'It mightn't be ideal'? Can she tell you a bit more about why she thinks this? What is she worried about? Pregnancy? Sexually transmitted infection? People finding out? If we work in a way that speaks to Jo's concerns, she is more likely to feel heard and respected.
- Exploring with Jo what her priorities are at this point in time. It may, for example, be her parents, or alcohol, rather than the exploitation, which may be too difficult for her to talk and / or think about at the moment.

Thinking beyond Jo:

- Cassie has witnessed and is around this sexual exploitation. What support might she need?
- What support might Jo's parents need (there will be more thinking about this in the Practice Principle **Approaching parents as partners**)?



- What is known about the men perpetrating the abuse, and the locations where it is happening? How might this be responded to?

Practice issue: Through a young person's eyes

Part of respecting a young person's experiences is about putting ourselves in their shoes. When we work in this way, instead of always viewing the situation as a professional focused on risk and harm, we are more able to understand the reasons why a young person may act and react as they do. This is not always easy; it requires time, support and practice to consciously consider the world through a young person's eyes.⁵

Imagine you are Jo, consider the context of her life (as far as you understand it). What emotions might you feel here? Who might you want around you? What might help you to feel safe? What actions might upset or annoy you?

⁵See, for example, Brodie, (2022). TCE Children and Young People's Voice Evidence Review, or Warrington, C. (2017). Young person-centred approaches in CSE - promoting participation and building self-efficacy: Frontline Tool. Research In Practice.



Practice Principle: **Be strengths-based and relationship-based**

Jo noticed immediately that the support worker likely assumed that Jo's phone notifications were to do with sexual exploitation, rather than thinking about the wider context of her life. This is a strength that Jo is displaying – it is clear that Jo is sharp, smart and wise to people's reactions. She also has a sense of humour.

The support worker misread Jo's reaction of restlessness. Instead of her impatience being related to exploitation, it was simply about Jo wanting to get back to something she enjoyed rather than having (as Jo might see it) a pointless conversation.

In this scenario, we might consider:

- Apologising to Jo for making assumptions.
- Asking Jo about Fortnite - even if the support worker doesn't really understand the game, this might be something Jo will enjoy talking about.
- Trying discussing other things Jo enjoys, or perhaps things that she doesn't! Revisit the **about Jo and Cassie** section at the start of this Practice Tool. How might Jo's interest in art, for example, be integrated in your response?

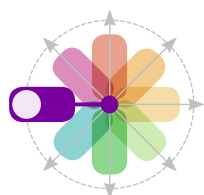
Practice issue: **Organisational support**

We are more likely to be able to work in a strengths-based and relationship-based way with children and young people if our organisation and team works in a strengths and relationship-based way with us as staff members. This not only means recognising our strengths as professionals, but also supporting us to feel confident in our abilities.⁶ For instance, it's very important that managers acknowledge the complexity of working with child exploitation and extra-familial harm, that there is a balance between addressing risk and upholding the rights of children and young people, and that working effectively might involve creative and innovative approaches. Longer-term success may also require holding ongoing risk, as the right conditions are built to meaningfully address the drivers of the exploitation.⁷ Where this is the case, organisations need to ensure that their staff are supported effectively in order to keep holding this risk.

What do you need to work in this way? What current support do you have? In what areas can you work with your manager to enhance organisational support?

⁶See, for example, Human Learning Systems (2021). Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World. <https://www.humanlearning.systems/>

⁷See, for example, Hickie, K., & Hallett, S. (2016). Mitigating harm: considering harm reduction principles in work with sexually exploited young people. *Children and Society*, 30(4). <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/chso.12145>



Practice Principle: Approach parents and carers as partners, wherever possible.

We can learn a lot about what might or might not work as a partnership approach with Jo's mum and her partner:

- Although we had initially thought that Jo's mum and her partner were unaware of the harm experienced by their daughter, we now understand that they were alert to changes in Jo, although they did not know the reasons for these changes.
- Jo and her mum / mum's partner are talking, although Jo is not confiding in them about what's going on in her life. Is there a strength to build on here?
- Jo's mum and her partner already have low levels of trust in services to help them and their daughter. Up until now, they have found no one to take their concerns seriously. Now they feel they are being blamed.
- There is no evidence that Jo's mum or her partner are contributing to the harm Jo is experiencing or that the context of their parenting is heightening the risk of harm. In fact, the evidence suggests the opposite – that they are worried about Jo, love and care for her, and have already tried to protect her.
- Jo's mum and her partner are afraid that social workers will 'take Jo away'. This may indicate that there have been negative experiences with social work in the family before, or it may be as a result of media representation of social work's role.
- The language used about Jo is blaming and locates the problem with Jo and her family.

Based on all of this, it is likely that it is safe – indeed vital – to work in partnership with Jo's mum and her partner (although we must always be alert to clues that it is not). An approach that might address some of the barriers to partnership working might involve:

- Acknowledging that Jo's mum and her partner were not taken seriously when they lodged their concerns.
- Reassuring them that you value them as partners in keeping Jo safe, and understand that home is where Jo may be safest.
- Finding out if they have good relationships with any professionals, such as healthcare services or the school.
- Apologising for unhelpful language used, and explaining clearly that you do not believe that this is their, or Jo's, fault.



- Listening to the clues they have picked up about Jo. As the people who live with her and love her dearly, they are likely to be able to fill in details about her life, what has particularly concerned them, what her personality is like, and their ideas for approaches that might work.
- Recognising the impact this has had on them as parents, and connecting them with support.

Keeping Cassie – and her brothers – in mind, we also need to think about how we might work in partnership with Cassie’s parents. There are likely to be some similarities with how we have already thought about working with Jo’s parents (such as acknowledging them as partners, exploring barriers to this, and listening to any clues they may have about possible reasons for Cassie’s behaviour). In addition:

- We wonder if Cassie – her brothers and wider family - have experienced racism and / or other forms of discrimination. The context of this needs to be acknowledged, including how it might affect how they view services. How might we offer a culturally sensitive response?
- How might we acknowledge and address the assumptions that have surfaced (and been proven to be unfounded) as to the risk that Cassie’s older brother poses to her?

Practice issue: Language

How we use language can be very revealing. In this example, using terms like ‘prostituting herself’ implies choice and shifts responsibility for abuse onto the victim.⁸ This is a very obvious example, but there are many other ways in which our language can more subtly imply responsibility for harm, such as being ‘involved in’ sexual exploitation, describing exploiters as ‘boyfriends’ or ‘girlfriends’ or a child or young person as being ‘beyond parental control’ or ‘hanging around with risky individuals’.

Acronyms and jargon can also be barriers to effective partnership working. If children, young people and families don’t understand what we’re talking about, they simply won’t be able to engage with us fully, or even understand what we are suggesting.

- What terms do you frequently hear in the course of your work that may be confusing, frightening, stigmatising or upsetting for children, young people and families?
- Are there different ways of expressing what is meant by these terms?
- For instance, consider the word ‘behaviour’. What are some possible implications of hearing the phrase ‘Jo’s behaviour’?
- Look again at the police report in the Practice Principle **recognise and challenge inequalities, exclusion and discrimination**. What language could be particularly stigmatising here?

⁸See, for example, The Children Society (2022). Appropriate language in relation to Child Exploitation.



Practice Principle: **Recognise and respond to trauma**

We have now learned that Jo experienced a traumatic sexual assault when she was 15. From this information, we can explore what it might mean in light of experiences of sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation:

- The sexual assault was not taken seriously by Jo's peers. In fact, she was seen to be the one at fault.
- The sexual assault was then used to exploit Cassie into carrying drugs.
- It may be possible that Cassie is not the only person who has been threatened with sexual assault if they do not carry drugs.
- Cassie only revealed that she was threatened with sexual assault when she trusted the school counsellor, indicating the importance of a relationship-based approach.
- Cassie and Jo's friendship continued through this period, even when Jo did not hang out with other people.
- Jo's drinking may be linked to the sexual assault. Consuming alcohol may be her way of managing the ongoing effects of the trauma she experienced, thereby meeting a 'need'. 'Selling sex' may be the only way she can see to meet this need.
- The sexual assault can also be linked to Jo's worsening attendance at school, and her 'run-ins' with staff. This may be because Jo feels that the school is not a safe space for her, given the assault was by classmates.
- We do not know the reasons why Jo withdrew her report as of yet. She may have felt the peer pressure of a large number of her classmates or felt unsupported by school staff, or she may have been directly asked to withdraw it by one or both of the classmates who allegedly assaulted her.



A trauma-informed response supports us to:

- Recognise the ways in which prior experiences of trauma (known or unknown) impact upon children and young people's lives and their encounters with us
- Attend to ways in which we might inadvertently replicate abusive power dynamics, through 'doing to' rather than 'working with', for example.
- Understand the importance of building in choice, voice and control, to counter the dynamics of abuse.
- Recognise the ways in which working with experiences of harm may also impact us.

A trauma-informed response for both Jo and Cassie will require sensitive and effective multi-agency working between social care, the school, the police, and possibly several other professionals.



Practice Principle: Create safer spaces and places for children and young people

We have now learned that there is an unsafe local space where criminal and possibly sexual exploitation is occurring. The park has no security features such as lighting or CCTV. It also doesn't have the safeguards of local people walking through and disturbing criminal actions. Yet, young people go there because they feel unwelcome in other spaces in their community.

Working to make places like this park safer might include things like:

- Understanding why the young people feel unwanted elsewhere in the community and exploring how this might be addressed.
- Recognising that work may have to take place directly in the park, especially when addressing the perpetrators of harm.
- Using 'disruption tactics'. Statutory agencies, such as the police and local authorities, have a range of tools that can be used in order to disrupt places where exploitation and / or extra-familial harm is occurring (or suspected to be occurring).⁹
- Providing alternative activities for young people, understanding what makes them feel safe, and why.

Practice issue: Thinking beyond traditional safeguarding partners

Making spaces and places safer requires a multi-agency approach. It is very unlikely that one agency alone will be able to undertake making a park such as this safer, or even that this can be achieved by just involving 'traditional' safeguarding partners. The police, local authorities, local schools, youth workers, voluntary services, local businesses, community-based roles (such as park wardens) and the local community will all have intelligence that can be employed in supporting safer spaces.¹⁰ It is especially important to bring young people in when designing and rethinking spaces – they will see things from their own perspective, and be able to offer ideas that professionals may not see.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-exploitation-disruption-toolkit>

¹⁰ See, for example, Contextual Safeguarding resources on responding to location-based harm: <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/toolkits/scale-up-toolkit/locations/>



Final reflections and other ways to use this Tool

Having worked through this example response, it may be helpful to make a note of any ways in which you intend to change your own practice.

Notes

If you wish to reflect further on your learning, you can substitute the case study used in this Practice Tool for one of your own, either a current piece of work or something that has been open to your team in the past. You don't have to work through the Practice Principles in the same order as they occur in this Tool. Instead, look at the diagram [here](#) and consider the Principles as they arise in your own practice example.

You can also use this Practice Tool in conjunction with the [other resources](#) that support the implementation of the Practice Principles.

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