



1. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... put children and young people first

Summary

All children are entitled to the support and protection of a child-centred response. Prioritising this within the context of child exploitation and extra-familial harm is particularly important because, too often, this has not been the case. Putting children and young people first is at the heart of a child-centred approach. It means ‘keeping the child or young person in focus when making decisions about their lives and working in partnership with them and their families (Department for Education, 2018). It means seeing the child or young person behind the presenting behaviours, i.e. considering them holistically, including their family circumstances, trauma, physical and mental health, identity and experiences of inequalities.

A child-centred response must span the full spectrum of support, from prevention and early help through to specialist services, and include those children and young people who are in or leaving care. This approach may also need to be part of any transitional support - neither trauma nor young people’s development stops at the age of 18 and those facing exploitation and extra-familial harm may need support into adulthood.

Ensuring a child-centred response may be challenging if the child or young person is causing harm to others. However, it is very important to ensure that children and young people are not excluded from support and protection where a criminal justice response is required. This means understanding the needs and vulnerabilities that might be underpinning harmful behaviours, as part of managing risks. This aligns with the Child First approach established within youth justice.

What does putting children and young people first mean?

As noted in the Practice Principle description above, putting children and young people first means taking a holistic and child-centred approach, one that is tailored to each individual child or young person and the context of their lives. This is not a new concept, though it can be one that is challenging to implement in the context of child exploitation and extra-familial harm.

Working Together emphasises that ‘effective safeguarding is achieved by putting children at the centre of the system’. It explains that this means ‘keeping the child in focus when making decisions about their lives and working in partnership with them and their families (Department for Education, 2018 p.9). A child-centred approach is also reflected in Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which establishes the primacy of the best interests of the child in all actions affecting them (United Nations, 1989).



The specific term ‘child first’ is most frequently used in relation to the youth justice system in England and Wales, where it emphasises the need to:

- prioritise the best interests of children and young people, recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential
- ensure work is child-focused, developmentally informed and cognisant of structural barriers and adult responsibilities towards children.

Though presented with primary reference to those being worked with in youth justice settings, as the Youth Justice Board (YJB) for England and Wales observes, it holds clear wider resonance: ‘Child first goes beyond the youth justice system. The guiding principle of “putting children at the heart of what we do” is one that should steer intervention with all children, to recognise the potential they each bring.’ (Youth Justice Resource Hub, 2022, p2).

Why is putting children and young people first a Practice Principle?

Both statutory and supplementary guidance, and supporting research and practice evidence, demonstrate the importance of a child-centred response to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. Whilst important progress has been made in this regard in recent years through, for example, the move to seeing sexually exploited children as victims or the move towards a ‘child first’ approach within youth justice (Taylor, 2016; Youth Justice Board for England & Wales, 2021), Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (and previously Serious Case Reviews) and research evidence show the need for continued progress in relation to the practical implementation of a child-centred approach (Case & Haines, 2021; Beckett & Lloyd, 2022).

Both research and practice evidence indicate that the implementation of a ‘child first’ or child-centred approach can vary considerably across cases of child exploitation and extra-familial harm, depending on the nature of the harm and the presenting features of the affected child or young person. For example, research highlights examples of where some children and young people have been subject to negative stereotypes based on their sex, ethnicity or disability:

- Young females tend to be more visible in consideration of sexual, rather than criminal, forms of harm, with the reverse being true of young males (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022).
- Young males are more likely to be seen as sources of harm than those experiencing harm (Bernard, 2019).
- Young Black people are at heightened risk of having their needs and rights undermined through adultification bias, that fails to recognise their innocence and vulnerability (Davis & Marsh, 2022).
- Conversely, young people with disabilities are more likely to be infantilised by professionals (Franklin et al., 2015).



Children and young people do not, of course, have only a singular identity. They can experience challenges to the realisation of their rights that relate to multiple aspects of their lives. This includes, for example, the concurrent influences of gendered and racialised discourses on responses to young Black men (Ackerley & Latchford, 2017; Bernard, 2019).

The degree to which a welfare-driven response is prioritised can also vary according to perceptions of power and control, which commentators have suggested are unhelpfully influenced by an ‘idealised victim’ mentality that is premised on observable innocence, passivity and lack of understanding (Beckett, 2019). Those who fail to adhere to these ‘standards of victimhood’ – such as those exercising any degree of agency or choice or ‘receiving something’ as part of the abusive encounter – can be seen as ‘making active lifestyle choices’ and, by default, as somehow less in need of a welfare-driven response than those who are seen to be groomed or controlled by others (Warrington, 2013; Hallett, 2017; Woodiwiss, 2018; Beckett & Lloyd, 2022).

Research also demonstrates shortcomings in the practical application of a child-centred approach when a child or young person is both causing and experiencing harm (Firmin, 2017; Lloyd et al., 2020). This can include instances of directly harming other children and young people, introducing other children to exploitative contexts, or committing other offences (criminal damage, theft, etc.) within the context of the abuse they are experiencing (Firmin et al., 2022). As Beckett and Lloyd (2022, p. 64) observe: ‘Such instances require us to hold in tandem their support needs around the harm they have experienced, while simultaneously responding to their role as an instigator of harm, and ensuring others are protected from such harm. Managing these tensions requires a nuanced approach that moves beyond a victim / perpetrator conceptualisation and prioritises the child over the perpetration.’

What difference could putting children and young people first make to responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?

Children and young people tell us how important it is to them that they are treated holistically so that professionals are able to understand the wider context of their lives rather than being defined by a ‘narrow and misdirected’ focus on their exploitation (Hallett, 2017, p. 2146; Hill & Warrington, 2022). A child-centred approach supports this.

Putting a child or young person first means seeing beyond the harm they face, seeing them as a whole and working with them in a collaborative way that seeks to understand them, as they are, rather than defining them solely by (how we understand) what has happened / is happening to them (Warrington, 2016; 2017). It links closely with the Principle about respecting the voice and expertise of the child or young person, particularly in instances where there are differing opinions as to what is in ‘the best interests of the child’. Responding in a child-centred way means navigating differences of opinion between children, young people and professionals, whilst recognising that risk cannot always be eliminated (Hickle & Hallett, 2016). Working relationally and in a strengths-based way, ‘doing with’, not ‘doing to’ (Warrington, 2017;



Warrington & Brodie, 2017; Lefevre et al., 2019), is a key way of putting this into practice and is particularly important in countering the abusive power dynamics of child exploitation and extra-familial harm.

Putting children and young people first also supports a move from a punitive to a welfare-driven response to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. It reminds professionals that, even when a child or young person has committed a crime, they must still be treated as a child; they are more than their actions or behaviours. This does not mean the need for criminal justice responses is ignored, but that any consideration of these should also attend to the safety and wellbeing of the child, ensuring that those concerns remain paramount throughout. This is explicit in the youth justice approach ‘child first, offender second’ (Taylor, 2016), a premise that is echoed in both guidance and emerging approaches to child exploitation and extra-familial harm (see, for example, the extended text version of the Child Sexual Exploitation Guidance (Beckett et al., 2017) or the Contextual Safeguarding framework for responding to extra-familial harm (Firmin, 2017)).



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