



## 4. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... be strengths-based and relationship-based

### Summary

Being strengths-based and relationship-based means seeing a child or young person holistically and identifying their strengths and assets and the positive factors in their lives, rather than just seeing them as at risk, being harmed or causing harm to others. It also means understanding and using the positive power of relationships as a way to support growth and change.

Working in this way, particularly in the context of child exploitation and extra-familial harm, requires professionals to exercise power with care, recognising that children, young people, parents, carers and wider family networks may feel worried, upset or angry with professionals.

Strengths-based and relationship-based approaches can help ensure safeguarding activity moves beyond a focus on risk and behaviours to include building genuine connections and relationships with children and young people - and those who care about them. This can allow a better understanding of their lives, thereby enhancing their protection, safety and resilience.

Being strengths-based and relationship-based is important in inter-agency working too, and this needs to be modelled and promoted in management and leadership in order to be embedded in practice. Strong multi-agency relationships can enable greater alignment and coherence, and may support effective information sharing and resource allocation, which can help to ensure children and young people receive the most effective support at the right time.

### What do we mean by relationship-based approaches?

In its most basic form, a relationship refers to the way in which two or more things are connected (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). Relationship-based practice is a term widely used in social work, but is not well-defined or understood (Ruch, 2020). In essence, it is a way of working that acknowledges the centrality of relationships in people's lived realities; humans are fundamentally relational beings (drawing from psychoanalytic theory (Hollis, 1964). Everyone has past experiences of relationships that can impact on future ones (Ruch, 2005). This means that when professionals are working with children and young people, and their parents / carers, those relationships are also being influenced by a range of other relationships in that person's life, for example, with family or peers (Ruch, 2018). Human behaviour is complex and multi-faceted, which makes it important to engage with the roots of experiences, such as trauma, on an individual - rather than procedural - basis (Parton, 2012; Ruch, 2005).

Therefore, a relationship-based approach refers to the benefits of positive and purposeful relationships, both in terms of, a) the interpersonal relationships between professionals,

children, young people, parents / carers and communities, and, b) the relationships between professionals at different levels, both within and across agencies, sectors and geographical areas.

## What do we mean by strengths-based approaches?

Working in a strengths-based or asset-based way means focusing on individuals' strengths (including personal strengths and social and community networks) and not on their deficits (Saleebey, 1996; SCIE, n.d.). It is an established concept within safeguarding adults (Care Act Guidance, 2014). The concept originates from a core belief that humans (and, by extension, organisations) have the capacity for growth and change (Early & GlenMaye, 2004; Pulla & Francis, 2014). Strengths-based approaches avoid deficit model thinking, which sees the individual and their actions as the problem, seeing them instead as part of the solution, utilising their strengths, skills and interests (Morgan & Ziglio, 2007). These messages are consistent with the research evidence on what children and young people value in relationships with professionals. The importance of being listened to, respected and treated holistically, and being seen as 'more than the harms they face' are central themes in the evidence from young people themselves (see Practice Principles 1 and 3).

## Why is responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm in a relationship and strengths-based way a Practice Principle?

Positive relationships are described as the 'golden thread' in children's lives (Care Inquiry, 2013) and the foundation of effective professional practice with children, young people and their families (Trevithick, 2003; Mason, 2012; Beckett et al., 2015; Lefevre et al., 2017). In the context of child exploitation and extra-familial harm, relationships between adults (whether parents, carers, professionals or community members) and children and young people can form a key part of protective responses (Owens et al., 2020). When these relationships build on the strengths, skills and resilience of those affected by these types of harm, this capacity for protection can be further amplified.

The research evidence consistently documents the importance of developing 'trusted relationships' between young people and professionals (Berelowitz et al., 2012; Coffey, 2014; Lefevre et al., 2017; Lewing et al., 2018), showing that trusted relationships can:

- counter the coercion and manipulation that happens in the context of child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Hickle & Lefevre, 2022)
- contribute to resilience, as children and young people are increasingly able to seek support, advice and protection (Shuker, 2013; Bellis et al., 2017)
- help children and young people develop a sense of self and the capacity to recognise and value their own feelings that will make them less vulnerable to grooming and coercion in adolescence (Lefevre et al., 2017)

- help to overcome barriers to disclosure (Allnock, 2018) through reducing, for example, children and young people’s fear that they will not be believed (Crisma et al., 2004).

It is not just professional relationships that can have a protective effect on children and young people. There is evidence that peer relationships can also provide safety (Catalano et al., 2012, Allnock et al., 2022), as can parent-child, sibling and wider family relationships (Pike & Langham, 2019).

Working in relational, strengths-based ways requires reflective management in order for practitioners to feel a coherent alignment between practice expectations and the context within which they work (Moriarty et al., 2015). This could include engaging with local networks to model these ways of working within and across agencies and cross-boundaries (Rapp et al., 2006; Ghate, 2015; Sebba et al., 2017).

The capacity and capability for professionals to work in these ways are shaped by the organisational climate, including government inspection, regulation and audit culture, austerity measures and reduction in service capacity (Ferguson et al., 2020). This wider context has implications for responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. For example, building meaningful trusting relationships between professionals and between professionals and children, young people and their families takes time, which is not necessarily afforded in time-limited interventions.

There are a number of challenges to working in a relational and strengths-based way in the context of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. There can be tensions in relationships between children, young people, families / carers and safeguarding professionals, because of the statutory responsibilities and powers that child protection professionals hold (Lefevre et al., 2019). For example, professionals may make decisions about support and protection that could involve criminal justice responses and sharing information. The negative impact of surveillance on relationships with young people is well documented (Wroe & Lloyd, 2020), particularly where this interacts with class and race (Fine et al., 2003; see Practice Principle 2).

There can be differences of opinion between all three groups. Professionals might not agree with views of children, young people and their parents / carers, but equally parents / carers might have different views from their children and / or professionals. Nonetheless, there is evidence to show that children and young people understand that adults have safeguarding responsibilities. What they want is to be informed and kept updated about decisions in an honest, transparent way (Hill & Warrington, 2022).

In relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm, it is important to understand that experiencing these harms can have a range of negative impacts, including shame, guilt, fear and anxiety. As explored in Practice Principle 5, the trauma experienced can manifest ‘in behaviours ranging from violent hostility and passive aggression through to depression, avoidance, and withdrawal from engagement’ (Ruch, 2020, p.3). This can affect professionals, parents and carers as much as it can the children and young people affected by these types of harm.

## What difference could working in a relationship and strengths-based way make to responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?

A strengths-based approach to assessments and interventions was identified by SCIE (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2015) as one of the key principles to achieving better outcomes for children and families, and was found to be a core component of effective social work and family support in the overarching analysis of waves 1 and 2 of the DfE Innovation Programme in Children's Social Care<sup>1</sup> (Sebba et al., 2017; Fitzsimons & McCracken, 2020). One of the ways to realise this in practice is by moving away from deficit-based risk assessments in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Brown et al., 2017) and moving towards assessments that take a holistic approach to understanding the young person and their relationships in context (Munro & Lushey, 2012; Beckett & Lloyd, 2022).

Implementing a strengths-based approach can be promoted by both structural (e.g., low caseload, low supervisors to case managers ratios) and practice components (e.g. strengths-based assessments and collaboration between practitioners and those being worked with) (Ibrahim et al., 2014). Research demonstrates that a focus on relationships and behaviours enables the adaptation needed to respond more effectively to the challenges and opportunities of a complex system (Lowe, 2021), a message that is highly relevant to the context and characteristics of the child protection and wider safeguarding system.

Child exploitation and extra-familial harm often occur in the context of relationships, i.e. in social interactions between children, young people and their peers, family members or adults not connected to their families (Pearce, 2009; Ungar et al., 2009; Cockbain, 2018; Hallett et al., 2019). [TCE's Joining the Dots framework](#) (TCE, 2022) emphasises the need to recognise the manipulative, coercive and controlling nature of many of these relationships. This strengthens the imperative to respond in ways that actively counter these types of harm, by working in a relational and strengths-based way.

<sup>1</sup> Evaluation of the Innovation Programme recommends local areas develop strengths-based practice frameworks. Common to the approaches to practice within the most effective projects, from large-scale system change projects to much more targeted services, were:

- the centrality of building consistent, trusting relationships, and providing time for this
- the focus on bolstering and leveraging strengths and resources to identify solutions
- working together to support progress towards positive outcomes
- the provision of multi-faceted support to address multiple needs and issues in a holistic, coherent, and joined-up way

(Fitzsimons & McCracken, 2020, p .4).



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