



## 7. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... approach parents and carers as partners, wherever possible

### Summary

Recognising the expertise of parents and carers offers valuable potential gains for safeguarding partnerships, enhancing agencies' abilities to support and protect individual children, young people and whole communities. Parents and carers can hold invaluable information about their child and the contexts of their lives, and can also hold important information about exploiters, unsafe places and community strengths and challenges.

This Principle requires professionals at all levels to model a mind-set that sees parents and carers first and foremost as sources of protection, support and love for children and young people, unless there is evidence to indicate otherwise. It requires them to recognise the care, protection and support parents and carers bring. It means seeing them as an asset, respecting their contribution and being sensitive to the distress they are likely to be experiencing. Critical to this approach is a welfare-oriented lens that builds an understanding of the child or young person's needs as part of their family network.

This approach does not mean applying a 'one size fits all' solution; circumstances will differ between families. However, approaching parents and carers as partners in safeguarding should always be the starting point.

### What does approaching parents and carers as partners wherever possible mean?

This Practice Principle is about shifting mindsets so that when children and young people are identified as being at heightened risk of or experiencing child exploitation or extra-familial harm, parents and carers are approached as key partners in the safeguarding response. So rather than starting from a position that could leave parents / carers feeling they are being held responsible for the harm being experienced, it is about considering the wider factors that can affect the risks a child or young person is facing and focusing on the protective capacity of parents / carers.

Such an approach is not to deny that a parent / carer may be a source of harm for some children and young people, as evidenced by documented cases of intra-familial exploitation (Beckett et al., 2017; Maxwell & Wallace, 2021), but to highlight the need to start from the premise of desired protection and partnership. Such an approach also enables recognition that there may be wider factors in a parent / carer's life, such as domestic abuse or poor mental health, impacting upon their protective capacities, whilst not making them feel to blame for these. During the consultation events for the Practice Principles, practitioners spoke of the nuance and skill required to respond to parents and carers in these situations. This means not

blaming them and denying them the opportunity to be partners, but rather providing support for their needs and working collaboratively to encourage and enable them to act protectively with their children (working in a strengths and relationship-based way), as set out in Practice Principle 3.

### **Why is approaching parents and carers as partners wherever possible a Practice Principle?**

The existing child protection system is primarily designed to address harms facing children within their home / family context, by people inhabiting those spaces with them. Such approaches do not easily lend themselves to responding to external sources of harm experienced within the home (such as online abuse) or harm that happens outside the home (Firmin, 2017; 2020). Improving responses requires a different way of engaging with parents / carers, which involves recognising the differing dynamics contributing to harm and the key role they can play in protecting their children (Fraser & Irwin-Rogers, 2021).

When thinking about the wider context of a child or young person’s experiences, there are multiple factors within a child or young person’s home life that can inadvertently act to increase a young person’s risk of exploitation and extra-familial harm, such as domestic abuse, substance abuse, mental health issues, or criminal activity, which can mean that a child or young person might not want to be at home (Children’s Commissioner, 2019; Beckett, 2019). Research also highlights the influence of wider socio-economic factors such as poverty, housing and geographical region (Maxwell, 2022), linking to the notion of trauma experienced at community level (see Practice Principle 5) and emphasising the need for sensitive curiosity (see Practice Principle 6). Recognising and attending to these issues with parents and carers whose children are affected by child exploitation and extra-familial harm can be a source of support and help to increase protection. There is acknowledgement that parents and carers need support that may look different to what statutory services can offer and may include, for example, counselling or group support (Barnardo’s, 2017). Evidence gathered through TCE’s work highlighted the benefits of peer support for parents and carers, primarily as a way of not feeling so alone and scared (Mendez-Sayers, 2022).

Research shows that parents and carers whose children are affected by child exploitation or extra-familial harm too often struggle to navigate statutory systems and report feeling blamed or not listened to (Children’s Commissioner, 2019; PACE, 2019; Plimmer, 2020). These feelings can be aggravated by the current child protection assessment process that research suggests is not fit for purpose. This is because, a) the only way of putting support in place is to categorise a child or young person as being ‘neglected’, which falsely frames the parent or carer as being responsible for the harm perpetrated, or, b) cases are not progressed because the harm is not attributable to parenting (Lloyd & Firmin, 2020).

Accounts from those with lived experience describe professional responses to parents / carers seeking support that do not always address the matter at hand, with parents and carers

instead being offered ‘a host of professional suggestions, advice and courses that will have no bearing on their child’s exploitation, nor halt their imminent harm, criminalisation or death’ (SPACE, 2021). Research emphasises that what parents and carers want (just like children and young people) is a way to be able to meaningfully participate in the system (Harris et al., 2017). Identified enablers for this include voluntary engagement, flexibility, a willingness to listen, an absence of judgement and a strengths-based approach (Plimmer, 2020).

The levels of distress that parents and carers can experience are strongly evidenced in the literature and were a powerful theme heard through the consultation for the Practice Principles. Parents and carers need support to cope and manage the distress and trauma associated with having a child affected by child exploitation or extra-familial harm (Maxwell, 2022). It is also important to recognise the impact on parents / carers of service responses that potentially contribute or compound their stress and trauma, particularly if they are making judgements or stereotyping. For example, there is a call for social work to actively engage with anti-racist practice in order to ensure that support does not replicate racism but, rather, engages with race as part of a response (Tadam & Cane, 2022). Services need to consider how they are working with parents and carers from diverse groups and whether experiences of discrimination may inform how they respond and engage, or not, with services.

### **What difference could approaching parents and carers as partners wherever possible make to responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?**

The rationale for treating parents and carers as partners is ultimately about increasing the safety of children and young people affected by child exploitation and extra-familial harm. This approach can be seen reflected in the recommendations from the Children’s Social Care Review, which acknowledge a) the need to improve parental engagement in child protection and b) recognise that using a child protection plan when the form of risk is outside the home can be stigmatising for parents and carers (Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, 2022).

Parents can be a valuable resource in a safeguarding partnership. They know their children, they often know the local area and are likely to have important information that can support professional responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. In addition, they can be an important influence on whether their children and young people engage with support services (PACE, 2019).

Engaging parents and carers as partners can function in two ways. Firstly, a significant source of protection can be harnessed in addition to that provided by professionals. Taking a strengths-based approach to working with parents and carers can promote choice and participation, as well as identify resources to promote protection (MacLeod & Nelson, 2000). This is supported by a shift in statutory services’ attitudes towards seeing parents as having strengths and capacities as well as challenges (Slettebø, 2013). By recognising the potential in parents and carers to acquire skills and knowledge to better manage challenges they may

be facing, responses to child exploitation and extra-familial-harm could also be strengthened (Dunst & Trivette, 2009).

This Practice Principle can also make a difference through the potential to strengthen and rebuild family relationships which, in turn, increases children and young people's safety (Bovarnick et al., 2016; Scott & McNeish, 2017). There is evidence about the benefits of providing support to parents and carers separately from the young person. Children and young people reported that this approach meant that parents better understood what was happening and were more able to listen, which in turn helped to identify shared objectives to increase the safety of that young person (D'Arcy et al., 2015). It should be noted that this work does require dedicated resource to ensure that parallel working between children and young people and their parents / carers feels safe and trusted (Smeaton, 2013).



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### PP7: Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must approach parents and carers as partners

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