



8. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... create safer spaces and places for children and young people

Summary

To effectively tackle child exploitation and extra familial-harm, safeguarding partnerships and wider professionals need to pay attention to the context of children and young people's lives – the spaces and places they spend their time, the potential for harms that can exist there and the actions that can be taken to mediate and address these.

This applies across all spheres of children and young people's lives, including education settings, peer groups, community spaces and online interactions, and, as such, all these spaces and places become arenas for potential intervention. Attending to places and spaces in this way allows the response to move beyond individualised interventions, to consider wider patterns of harm and risk, wider cohorts who might be affected and the ways in which this might be prevented and addressed.

This principle also emphasises the importance of a holistic understanding of safety, i.e. the need to think beyond the physical safety of the child to also support and strengthen their relational and psychological sense of safety.

What do we mean by safer spaces and places?

This Practice Principle focuses on the context of children and young people's lives; the spaces and places they spend their time (that could be inside or outside of the family home; on- or off-line); the potential for harms that can exist there and the actions that can be taken to mediate and address these. The importance of attending to spaces and places is premised on a recognition of the relationship between the actions of others (both harmful and protective), the contexts in which they occur and the relative degree of safety experienced by children and young people. This applies across all spheres of children and young people's lives – including families, schools, peer groups, communities and online interactions – and as such, all these spaces and places become arenas for intervention.

Why is this a Practice Principle?

There is increasing acknowledgement of the need for child protection and welfare services to engage with the contexts of children and young people's lives (Firmin 2017; Featherstone & Gupta, 2018; 2020). Whilst research shows that child exploitation can and does occur within the familial environment (the traditional focus of safeguarding efforts), it also demonstrates the many other extra-familial settings in which it occurs (Beckett et al., 2017; Firmin, 2017;

2020). By its very definition, the source of harm when it is extra-familial comes from outside of the family and, as such, also requires a response that attends to a much broader understanding of where risk and safety lie, one that attends to the breadth of places and spaces where children and young people spend their time (Lefevre et al., 2020). As Firmin (2020, p. 20) notes, in relation to the importance of adopting a Contextual Safeguarding approach to extra-familial harm, ‘the safety young people experience within their family home, whether it is protective or challenging, will not necessarily keep them safe once they step outdoors or online.’

This is particularly key during adolescence, which sees a rise in the prominence of peer and social relationships and an increased influence of peer relationships, that result in increased time, often unsupervised, spent in on and off-line social spaces (Coleman, 2011; Hanson & Holmes, 2015). Attending to the risks and harms that may exist across these spaces, together with any protective capacities and opportunities for enhanced safety that may also exist there, must therefore be a key part of any efforts to respond to child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Smallbone et al., 2013, Lloyd & Fritz, 2018, Beckett et al., 2019). This is a premise recognised within Working Together to Safeguard Children (Department for Education, 2018) which highlights the needs for multi-agency partnerships to identify harm outside (as well as within) families, through assessing risks and creating safety in extra-familial contexts.

Attendance to places and spaces acknowledges the influence that wider systems and structures have on children and young people’s development and experiences, as reflected in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and public health approaches to violence reduction (WHO, 2020); the latter recognises the need to replace ‘simple, often short term, individual-level health outcomes’ with ‘complex, multiple, upstream, population-level actions and outcomes’ (Rutter et al., 2017, p. 2602).

Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm that focus only on children and young people and do not attend to the contexts in which the harm happens can locate responsibility for the harm with the child (Dhaliwal et al., 2015; Beckett, 2019; Firmin, 2020). As Beckett’s inter-connected conditions of abuse model outlines, children and young people are not exploited because of their actions or their vulnerabilities, but rather because there is someone willing to exploit them and inadequate protective structures around them, whether at local, community or societal level (Beckett, 2011; Beckett et al., 2017).

The Contextual Safeguarding framework,¹ developed to advance safeguarding responses to extra-familial harm, also emphasises the importance of moving beyond individualised responses to identify wider patterns of harm, and to intervene in the places and spaces within which these are occurring. The approach identifies the important role to be played by non-traditional safeguarding partners, i.e. those who have ‘eyes and ears’ on the places and spaces where children and young people spend their time, such as shop owners, taxi drivers, youth services, etc. (Firmin, 2020).

¹ This [briefing](#) explains what Contextual Safeguarding is (and is not).

What difference could creating safer spaces and places make to responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?

Attendance to the creation of safer spaces and places enables us to move beyond individualised responses to harm to proactively identify patterns of harm and intervene to address these. In doing so, this Practice Principle extends the capacity for prevention and protection to a wider cohort of children and young people, beyond those known to have experienced harm. This includes those who may already be experiencing harm in these environments, but have not yet been identified, as well as those who may in future be exposed to harm in the absence of any safety enhancing interventions in those places and spaces. The latter is particularly critical given the documented differences between rates of harm formally known to professionals and those being experienced by children and young people (Beckett et al., 2019; Allnock et al., 2022).

Thinking in terms of ‘safe places and spaces’ supports enhanced preventative efforts. It allows partners to think about how they might positively and pre-emptively disrupt harmful social norms that can contribute to the conditions for abuse, and how they might enhance protective mechanisms that mediate against it. When done well, this approach is carried out in partnership with the children and young people who spend their time in these places and spaces, to ensure that preventative efforts align with their lived realities and are received as supportive rather than punitive or judgemental (Beckett et al., 2019).

Linked to Practice Principle 3, learning from children and young people helps us to understand what safety means to them and therefore what they need from us to feel and be safe in their everyday worlds over time. Viewed through the lens of Practice Principle 2, this helps us to recognise that children and young people’s experiences of safety - and the factors that undermine or enhance these for them - vary considerably according to their histories, identities and interactions. As such, two children / young people in the same space or place may have very different experiences of professional efforts to improve safety and require different interventions.

Research also indicates that intervening with the contexts that compromise children and young people’s safety and improving the protective factors may reduce the need for interventions that ‘remove them’ in order to ‘protect them’ (Firmin, Wroe & Bernard, 2022). Such efforts are often driven by a singular focus on physical safety, at the expense of a child or young person’s concurrent need for relational and psychological safety (Shuker, 2013). As Beckett and Lloyd (2022, p. 71) observe, ‘whilst helpful in terms of immediate physical safety [this] can fracture positive supportive relationships. It can reinforce messages of culpability and blame... and indicate that professionals cannot keep a young person safe in their community; a message that does little to instill confidence in our protective capacity.’

Linked to this, investing in safe spaces and places is important in terms of ‘mattering’; letting a child or young person know that they matter to their family, school, workplace, community or ‘society’ more broadly (Billingham & Irwin-Rogers, 2021), and that their safety and wellbeing is a key priority, both in relation to the avoidance of harm in the first place and in how we respond to it when it does occur.



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PP8: Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must create safer spaces and places for children and young people

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