

# Practice Principles Research Summary

## Introduction and overview

**This research summary sets out the evidence underpinning the eight Practice Principles. The Principles are evidence-informed (Research in Practice, 2003), integrating research evidence with the expertise of professionals and those with lived experience of the issues<sup>1</sup> through engagement with three key sources of evidence:**

- **The published research evidence base in relation to child exploitation, extra-familial harm and other related areas, including relevant literature reviews, national reviews, evaluations and research.**
- **Key learning from the first three years of the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme, working with local areas and multi-agency partners on responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm.**
- **Consultation carried out specifically to develop the Practice Principles.**

As the Principles are intended to be high-level and applicable to all professionals involved in responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm, each one covers a relatively wide area of knowledge and learning. This summary does not, therefore, claim to be a comprehensive, systematic review of all available literature for each principle, which would be neither feasible nor appropriate in the context of the development of the Practice Principles. The approach to reviewing the research evidence involved a) broadly mapping the evidence territory including academic research and grey literature and b)

screening and reviewing the evidence based on quality and robustness plus relevance to both child exploitation and extra-familial harm as well as the principle in question. The summary was peer reviewed by a leading expert in this field.

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the key issues by summarising the most salient points from the review process, considered specifically in relation to their relevance and application to responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. The inclusion of research in this summary does not infer that it is endorsed or validated by Government.

For each Practice Principle, this Research Summary outlines:

- **what the Practice Principle means in the context of child exploitation and extra-familial harm and how it is being defined**
- **why it has been chosen to be a Practice Principle (including the relevant policy context)**
- **what difference implementing the Practice Principle could make when responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm.**

<sup>1</sup> This strategy is designed to avoid the risks that arise from reliance on a narrow discourse of 'evidence' in complex service contexts (see Greenhalgh, 2012).



## Practice Principles at a glance





## 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)).



## 2. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... recognise and challenge inequalities, exclusion and discrimination

### Summary

Children, young people, parents and carers can face discrimination in a number of ways, including racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism, amongst others.<sup>2</sup> Latest data shows that disparities continue to exist between ethnic and social groups in a number of areas, including safeguarding, childhood outcomes, and criminal justice.

Inequality and marginalisation can be both a driver for, and a consequence of, exploitation and extra-familial harm, and professional efforts can inadvertently reinforce inequity.<sup>3</sup> An effective response therefore attends to both the interpersonal discrimination *and* inequalities facing children and young people, parents and carers, communities and many of the professionals supporting them. Addressing this means creating an inclusive culture for professionals and those they support, in which everyone is respected regardless of their social, ethnic, or gender characteristics. It requires those who do not face discrimination to ensure that marginalised voices are heard and injustice is not tolerated.

### What do we mean by inequalities, exclusion and discrimination?

In essence, this Practice Principle is about upholding basic human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states that, 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' (United Nations, 1948). Being inclusive is a fundamental element of being a fair and equal society and applies to children and young people as well as adults. The Equality Act (2010) set out nine protected characteristics and brought legal grounds for challenge for any individual experiencing discrimination. Although inequalities, exclusion and discrimination can be experienced by individuals separately, there are also multiple overlapping and intersecting relationships between them, which are 'unpacked' in the evidence set out below.

<sup>2</sup>This is not an exhaustive list of all discrimination, and it should not be assumed that those mentioned are more important than any not specifically mentioned.

<sup>3</sup> It is recognised that 'equality' and 'equity' are connected but distinct terms (both promote fairness - equality aims to achieve this through treating everyone the same regardless of need, while equity aims to achieve this through treating people differently depending on need).

## Why is recognising and challenging inequalities, exclusion and discrimination a Practice Principle?

The reality of children and young people's lives are such that their experiences often straddle multiple aspects of identity. Inequalities, exclusion and discrimination can be experienced in multiple and intersecting ways by different groups and individuals.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this are complex and multi-faceted. Drivers of inequalities include systemic and structural issues (such as poverty and poor health) that have been shown to increase levels of need and harm and are experienced differentially, for example, by some minority groups (Featherstone et al., 2018; Marmot et al., 2020; Bywaters & Skinner, 2022).

In terms of the link with the Practice Principles, the evidence shows that certain groups of children and young people are more likely to experience inequality, exclusion and discrimination. These experiences can be associated with heightened risk of child exploitation and extra-familial harm (remembering that association does not mean causation), and can also influence the responses children and young people receive (Ofsted, 2018; Just for Kids Law, 2020; Billingham & Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Commission on Young Lives, 2022). This has implications for those involved in responding to these forms of harm. Firstly, in being alert to the strengths and limitations of data and the ways that data systems can mirror inherent biases and perpetuate discrimination. Secondly, in being able to recognise and know how to challenge inequalities, exclusion and discrimination where they arise.

It is important to be aware of the power of data; it is not neutral. Administrative data is used to provide the information that underpins key decision-making both locally and nationally, such as understanding levels of risk for an individual or local area or to plan resource allocation accordingly. Therefore, decisions about what data is or is not collected, how it is collected and analysed, have far-reaching consequences (Godar, 2020; Godar, 2021a). The systems in place to capture data are imperfect – they can mask, simplify and omit; data can be incorrectly collected and inputted; certain groups can be disproportionately over or under-represented and the data that is put into the system can reflect assumptions and biases (Godar, 2021b).

For example, certain minority groups, children or young people who have been looked after by the state and / or have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are disproportionately represented within the justice system (Lammy, 2017; Commission on Young Lives, 2022). Research into data that was collected in London about young people associated with gangs, commonly known as the 'gangs matrix', is another example of this. Racial bias in police surveillance operations was found to be influencing responses to serious youth violence and 'gang association'. For example, the disproportionate targeting of young, Black and minority groups had a significant and lasting impact on education and employment opportunities for these young people (Williams & Clarke, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>American civil rights advocate Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality (or intersectional theory) in 1989. It is the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. In her seminal work, she explores the intersection of patterns of racism and sexism in the case of violence against women of colour (Crenshaw, 1991).



Exclusion from mainstream school has been identified as one of the critical factors in relation to some children and young people's experiences of harm, including child exploitation and extra-familial harm. It was found to be a common factor in 17 out of 21 serious cases reviewed, where children and young people were either harmed or died (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020), with permanent exclusion noted to be a 'tipping point' in each case, whilst acknowledging again that association does not imply causation. The evidence base demonstrates that exclusion rates vary. Timpson's (2019) review of school exclusions, for example, notes how children and young people with certain types of special educational needs, those classed as 'children in need' and those eligible for free school meals are disproportionately represented. The review also shows that exclusion rates can vary by ethnicity, with some ethnic groups (including Bangladeshi and Indian children) associated with lower rates of exclusion and others (in particular Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils) more likely to experience exclusion (Timpson, 2019). Department for Education statistics also show high exclusion rates for pupils of Gypsy/Roma and Traveller or Irish Heritage ethnic groups, but note the need to treat those figures with caution 'as the population is relatively small' (Department for Education, 2018). Some authors have raised the question of whether discrimination and adultification contribute to the disproportionality that can be seen in the data (Gill et al, 2017; Graham et al, 2019).

Recent studies have explored the ways in which the concept of adultification (whereby 'notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children', (Davis & Marsh, 2022 p.122) manifests. It 'erases the essence of childhood innocence and replaces vulnerability with culpability' (Davis, 2022 p.10). While adultification can impact children differently based on their personal and social demographics, research suggests that Black children are at an increased risk of experiencing this form of bias (Davis & Marsh, 2022), which may result in them being disproportionately represented in the data. In relation to Black girls, for example, evidence suggests that professionals held racialised stereotypes of them being 'strong' and 'aggressive', leading to the assumption they were less in need of support, protection and nurture (Epstein et al., 2017).

It is important that those involved in responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm are alert to the issue of adultification (Davis & Marsh, 2022), which links closely to the Practice Principle of putting children and young people first. Legal protections for those aged under 18 are purposefully designed to ensure their safety and wellbeing is prioritised. This is especially important to remember if a young person is both a victim and instigating harm.

Other examples of why this Principle is important in the context of child exploitation and extra-familial harm include the documented gendered view of the types of exploitation and harm that affect children and young people, i.e.:

- girls are more likely to be seen as victims of child sexual exploitation or trafficking than boys
- boys are more likely to be seen as being involved in gangs and violence than girls (McNaughton-Nicholls et al., 2014; Leon & Raws, 2016)

Children and young people with SEND also experience discrimination. They can be infantilised and there remain significant gaps in professionals' knowledge of learning disabilities and how these might intersect with child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Franklin et al., 2015).

### **What difference could recognising and challenging inequalities, exclusion and discrimination make to responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?**

The protected characteristics represent broad and multi-faceted groups. For example, children and young people with SEND include those with speech, language and communication needs, autistic spectrum disorder, social, emotional and mental health problems, and physical and sensory disabilities,<sup>5</sup> each of which covers a broad spectrum of conditions. Arguably, it is difficult for all professionals to be experts on all aspects of all minority groups. However, demonstrating anti-discriminatory practice is critical, as the following quote highlights:

‘Once we are able to accept that racism and wider discrimination are present within [the] safeguarding responses we offer to children, we can move past the “good intentions” of professionals and service interventions and instead focus on the impact racism and discrimination can have on the children we have a duty to safeguard and protect.’ (Davis & Marsh, 2022, p. 126)

The importance of recognising and challenging assumptions and biases is critical. This will help to:

- support a child-centred approach and ensure that safeguarding all children and young people is prioritised
- minimise the risk that experiences of exploitation and extra-familial harm are misinterpreted or remain hidden
- ensure data collection and use does not contribute to disproportionality and discrimination.

Working in this way can take multiple forms, such as anti-racist practice (Tadam, 2022), promoting active allyship (Melaku et al., 2020) and demonstrating cultural sensitivity and inclusion in practice (Bowyer, 2015). It speaks to taking responsibility for one's own practice with children, young people, parents / carers and communities, as well as with colleagues, and invites consideration of who is under and over-represented in responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. This is key to being able to start developing trust and meaningful relationships with all children and young people, which Practice Principle 4 shows is so important to improving safety.

<sup>5</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england/2021-22>



### 3. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... **respect the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people**

#### Summary

All children and young people have the right to have a say about matters that affect them and be heard in decisions made about them. Listening to, hearing and responding to what children and young people are communicating (remembering that communication does not have to be verbal) helps to build trusting relationships and helps professionals to better engage children and young people. This in turn can increase their safety; participation is a core part of protection.

Respecting the voice, experience and expertise of children and young people means ‘working with them’ rather than ‘doing to them’; involving them in decision-making wherever possible and, where decisions cannot align with their wishes (for safety reasons, for example), having honest conversations around this. These behaviours form the basis of meaningful participatory practices. A child-centred approach to participation provides opportunities for children and young people to exercise control and choice. This is a powerful and practical way of inverting the coercion and manipulation associated with child exploitation and some forms of extra-familial harm.

Children and young people’s voices should be heard at all levels of safeguarding systems to influence decision-making about their own support, as well as at strategic level.

Particular attention must be paid to children and young people whose voices are sometimes under-represented or overlooked. These might include - but are not limited to - disabled children and young people, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, those placed far from home, those with complex mental health needs, those with no recourse to public funds and children and young people from ethnic minority groups.

#### **What does respecting the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people mean?**

This Practice Principle is about recognising children and young people’s right to have a say about matters that affect them, as reflected in conventions, legislation and guidance, both internationally and nationally (UNCRC, Children’s Act, 1989 and Equality Act, 2010). As Working Together outlines, ‘anyone working with children should see and speak to the child: listen to what they say; take their views seriously; and work with them and their families collaboratively when deciding how to support their needs’ (Department for Education, 2018, p. 10).

## Why is respecting the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people a Practice Principle?

There is wide recognition and acceptance by professionals that ‘child or youth voice’ is important within services that work with children and young people, an example being the development of Children in Care Councils in response to the White Paper ‘Care Matters’. However, research indicates that the involvement of children in decision-making about issues that affect their own lives can be limited within the field of safeguarding and that feeling heard is often not the reality experienced by young people who are accessing related services (Cossar et al., 2016; Dixon & Baker, 2016; Warrington, 2016; Diaz et al., 2019; Dillon, 2019; Brodie, 2022). As Hill and Warrington (2022, p. 180) observe, ‘this is particularly true within the field of child safeguarding where protection and participation rights have long been noted as uneasy bedfellows.’

Research identifies a number of different factors that can act as barriers to children and young people being able to share their views and experiences. This includes children and young people feeling judged and blamed for the abuse they have experienced, not feeling listened to, understood, or afforded sufficient time to build the trusting relationships with professionals that might enable them to express their views (Cossar et al., 2016; Hallett, 2016; Warrington, 2016; Beckett et al., 2017; Allnock, 2018). Children and young people may also have concerns about professionals’ ability to keep them safe, fears that research has shown can be well founded in cases of child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Beckett et al., 2013; Beckett & Lloyd, 2022). They may also hold anxieties about whether professionals will safely and sensitively manage their information and any negative implications of a failure to do so (Warrington, 2013; Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). Research also shows that engaging with services can erode their sense of agency and control (Warrington, 2013; 2016) and, in doing so, replicate the harmful power dynamics of abuse, an observation that has been particularly highlighted in relation to engagement in criminal justice processes (Beckett & Warrington, 2015).

Research also documents a number of issues that can act as barriers to professionals embedding the voice of the child or young person, in both individual practice and strategic responses. Developing meaningful participation processes in services and systems requires giving over control and power. This can feel risky, both for individual professionals and the agencies within which they are working (Williams, 2021; Hill & Warrington, 2022). The views of children and young people may not align with those of the professionals working with them. This can be particularly pertinent where children and young people do not see themselves as experiencing harm, or disagree with proposed responses being put forward by professionals. Research demonstrates the need for sensitivity in such situations, balancing the need for protection alongside the need to avoid invalidating a child or young person’s views and understandings of, and sense of control over, their own life (Warrington, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2017). This can be a particularly difficult tension for professionals to hold, and one that requires supportive supervision and management structures (Beckett et al., 2017). Research shows that children and young people are not unaware of statutory safeguarding obligations and do understand that decisions may need to be made that do not align with their wishes

or preferences. It shows that the implementation of such decisions does not necessarily undermine their willingness to engage with professionals, so long as such decisions are clearly communicated and explained (Warrington, 2013).

Additionally, professionals have duties and processes, such as assessments and timeframes to fulfil, that can mitigate against their ability to create the conditions that support the promotion of the voice of the child or young person, meaning that, ‘children feel (often with good cause) that professionals struggle to balance their need for protection and guidance with their right to a voice and to make agentic choices about their own lives’ (Lefevre et al., 2017 p. 2458).

The serious nature of child protection issues, like exploitation and extra-familial harm, can be felt to limit or exclude the possibility of enabling children and young people’s rights in decision-making, because the urgency of putting protective measures in place takes over as the paramount driver (Tisdall, 2017; Warrington & Larkins, 2019, Whittington, 2019).

Whilst not denying the tensions that can exist in concurrently attending to issues of participation and protection, there is increasing recognition of the need to move beyond an ‘either / or’ approach, to recognise the ways in which participation can in and of itself be protective (Lansdown, 2012; Lefevre et al., 2017; Warrington & Larkins, 2019; YRAP, 2021). As Warrington and Larkins (2019, pp. 134-136) summarise, ‘protection must not be considered distinct from participation: recognising the latter (information, expression and influence) as a necessary component of protection... Children’s protection from abuse is dependent on cultures (organisational, community or state based) which respect and amplify children’s “voices” thus challenging cultures of silence and impunity in which abuse flourishes.’

Although recognising the need for better participatory practices generally in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm, research also illustrates how particular groups of children and young people can be particularly disadvantaged in this regard. This includes children and young people with disabilities, whose ability to share their views and experiences is often under-estimated or denied (Franklin & Smeaton, 2018). Research has also highlighted the need for workers to feel comfortable to talk with young people and name issues of race and racism, so that it can inform more effective interventions (Wainwright & Larkins, 2019). In light of the documented additional barriers to participation for these, and other groups, it is particularly important that questions about ‘who is participating’ are embedded into participatory efforts, to ensure that such efforts do not inadvertently replicate existing exclusionary practices (Morrow, 2001; Hinton, 2008; Hart, 2009).

### **What difference could respecting the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people make to responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?**

Beyond realising their right to have a say about matters that affect them, recognising power dynamics and reconsidering traditional hierarchical structures enables children and young people’s voices, experiences and expertise to inform efforts to safeguard them from harm

(Winter et al., 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018). This is important at all levels of agencies and partnerships (Godar, 2015; Thomas, 2015), to ensure that both individual and collective responses are rooted in the lived realities of children and young people's lives.

In promoting the idea of working with children and young people as partners in their own care, participative approaches create openings to enhance their safety and wellbeing, and ensure services are fit for purpose (Beckett & Warrington, 2015; Williams, 2021). Learning from children and young people helps build an understanding of what might most helpfully attend to any risks, harms and needs, but also what strengths and resources can be drawn upon in doing so.

Creating room for children and young people's voices is also critical in challenging the stigma and silencing of abuse (Pearce, 2018). Respecting the voice, experiences and expertise of children and young people lets them know their experiences and needs matter and, in doing so, counters the abusive power dynamics which subjugate their choice, control and voice. It also creates a foundation for establishing meaningful relationships and developing trust, the importance of which is outlined in Practice Principle 4.



## 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>6</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>6</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).



## 5. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... recognise and respond to trauma

### Summary

An effective response to child exploitation and extra-familial harm requires a collective understanding of how trauma impacts on development and behaviour, and how individuals perceive and respond to threats and support. This means recognising the wide-ranging impacts of trauma and attending to non-verbal means of communicating an experience of trauma. It also means recognising how a professional's and organisation's decisions, language, processes and interventions can compound traumatic experiences and impact on a child or young person's engagement and ability to develop trusting relationships. Enabling children and young people to exercise voice, choice and control - all of which are undermined by trauma - is important, as is a recognition that 'non-engagement' or 'negative' coping strategies may be a direct or indirect result of trauma.

Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm need to consider trauma on three different levels:

- The direct trauma children and young people - and potentially their parents / carers, wider family and social networks - have experienced, both from the harms and (potentially) from the professional response to those harms.
- Trauma that can impact individuals and wider communities, stemming from shared experiences such as serious violence.
- The vicarious, or secondary, trauma that can impact those working to support and protect traumatised individuals, often in distressing circumstances.

### What do we mean by trauma?

Trauma is defined as an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as life-threatening or physically / emotionally harmful, that has lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual wellbeing (Huang et al., 2014). This definition has recently been included in the 'Working Definition of Trauma-Informed Practice' published by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. This working definition recognises that 'trauma can negatively impact on individuals and communities, and their ability to feel safe or develop trusting relationships with health and care services and their staff' (OHID, 2022).

Traumatic events affect individuals differently and experiences of trauma are diverse, subjective and not easily categorised (Bateson et al., 2019). The frequency and duration, as well as when and how trauma is experienced, are key variables that professionals need to consider

when working with children and young people who may have experienced trauma (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; NICE, 2005; Kisiel et al., 2009; NICE, 2018). Trauma can also be experienced at community level (Pinderhughes et al., 2015). For example, in the way a community is affected if a young person is murdered through knife crime. Vicarious, or ‘secondary’, trauma can be experienced by professionals as a consequence of the emotional impact of their work (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

In thinking about responses to trauma, it is important to make the distinction between trauma-specific services and trauma-informed approaches:

- Trauma-specific services provide specialist therapy designed to treat the core symptoms of trauma (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Palfrey et al., 2022).
- Trauma-informed approaches aim to increase awareness amongst practitioners of the negative impact that trauma can have on individuals and communities, which can inhibit feeling safe or developing trusting relationships. Approaches that are trauma-informed aim to enhance professional responses to those presenting with trauma, and to improve accessibility and quality by creating culturally sensitive, safe services that work collaboratively and seek to empower those using them and to avoid re-traumatisation (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022). It is important to note that trauma-informed approaches do not ‘treat’ the trauma itself (Asmussen, 2020).

### **Why is recognising and responding to trauma a Practice Principle?**

Recognising the diverse potential impacts of traumatic experiences has led to the development of trauma-informed approaches, so that professionals are able to recognise and respond appropriately (D’Andrea et al., 2012). Due to the levels of harm, risk and danger that can be associated with children and young people’s experiences of exploitation and extra-familial harm (Berelowitz et al., 2013; Beckett et al., 2013), this has clear relevance for all those involved in responding to such harms.

Of particular relevance to responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm, experiences of trauma can affect how children and young people perceive and respond to both threats and support (Huang et al., 2014). They may seek to ‘protect’ themselves through angry, aggressive or avoidant behaviour (Van der Kolk, 2005; Van der Kolk, 2014; Levenson, 2017). This can have a significant impact on how children and young people are perceived and responded to by professionals, meaning that presenting behaviours can be misinterpreted or can become the sole focus of intervention. Childhood trauma can distort the child or young person’s thinking about their social world, potentially leading to social isolation, low self-esteem, mistrust of others and problems of attachment, which in turn can have implications for how the child or young person engages with a professional. These emotional and psychological reactions need to be appropriately understood and accommodated in professional engagements (Knight, 2015). These factors are likely to be exacerbated if they intersect with the discriminatory problematisation of young people, both in terms of a deficit-focused lens (as discussed above)

and in terms of the impacts of racism and other forms of discrimination (as outlined in Practice Principle 2).

As noted above, trauma can be experienced at a community level, resulting from structural factors, such as intergenerational poverty, racism or social exclusion that impacts not only on individuals, but also the wider communities that also experience these issues (Shaia et al, 2019). Cumulative exposure to community violence can result in children and young people becoming desensitised to violence which may, in turn, increase the risk that children will perpetrate violence themselves (Mrug et al, 2008).

This Practice Principle also applies to professionals and supervisors involved in responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm and means that the impacts of working with people affected by trauma need to be recognised. This is important not only for their mental health and wellbeing (Triesman, 2017; 2021) but also in order for them to be able to function effectively as safeguarding professionals and provide support and protection to children and young people (Emanuel, 2002). Supervisory strategies are needed, in all settings that support traumatised children and young people, to reflect a trauma-informed lens to supervision (Hickle, 2017; Collins-Camargo & Antle, 2018).

### **What difference could recognising and responding to trauma make to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?**

Understanding the impact that trauma can have on children, young people, families, carers, professionals and the wider community is a key facilitator in the development of positive relationships (as explored in Practice Principle 4), which are fundamental to being able to provide effective support and protection. Seeing behaviours that might have seemed irrational or self-destructive through a trauma-informed lens means that they can be understood as important ways of coping with previous experiences of trauma (Levenson, 2017; Beckett, 2019). This can be reflected in service responses that, instead of asking, ‘What is wrong with you?’ ask ‘What happened to you?’ and ‘How does that continue to live on in your life?’ (Treisman, 2020).

Research demonstrates that the impact of stress and vicarious trauma on professionals can impair their judgement and result in an apparent lack of empathy, i.e. becoming dissociated, objectifying clients and reverting to a deficit model of thinking (Baginsky, 2013). Addressing and attending to the impact of vicarious trauma in professionals can help maintain more positive, strengths-focused responses and enable less defensive or deficit-focused responses (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Treisman, 2021).

Whilst the evidence on the effectiveness of trauma-specific therapies is robust (Gaffney et al., 2022), it should be noted that, although trauma-informed approaches are widely used and perceived to add value to children’s social care, the evidence base is still developing (Asmussen et al., 2020). However, research does show that being knowledgeable of trauma symptoms and understanding the impact of traumatic experiences on children and young people’s lives can

enhance the ability of professionals to keep children and young people safe in the moment and help keep them connected to services if they begin displaying unsafe behaviours (Hickle, 2017).

Through understanding the contexts of children and young people's lives and incorporating them into professional practice and the ethos of organisations, services will be best placed to help children and young people with trauma. This includes, for example, considering views on the location of service provision and whether it feels safe, making every effort to avoid re-traumatisation and providing opportunities whenever possible to enable young people to have choice and control over their lives (Warrington, 2013; Lefevre & Hickle, 2022). This is a good example of the interdependency of the Practice Principles, because it links closely to putting children and young people first, the importance of listening to their voices, working in a relational way and considering the spaces and places where they spend their time.



## 6. Responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm must... be curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable

### Summary

Responding to the complexity of child exploitation and extra-familial harm requires curiosity, critical thinking and analysis skills, a commitment to reflection and learning, and the thoughtful use of evidence at all levels of the system.

Critical thinking, evidence synthesis and analysis are crucially important in considering multiple sources of information and intelligence in order to:

- build an accurate picture of how child exploitation and extra-familial harm is manifesting in a local area
- understand what is happening in a child or young person's life
- keep up to date with evolving knowledge and research.

In direct practice and in management and strategic partnership activity, curiosity is needed to actively challenge assumptions and consider what is not known, alongside what is known. This kind of approach requires individuals and agencies to acknowledge uncertainty, invite expertise from others, to be creative and to try new things. No single individual or agency can know everything and there are no simple answers.

This approach means using data or research to ask questions, rather than expecting definitive answers. It also means learning from children, young people, their parents / carers and other sources of knowledge and insight within their wider communities, and paying attention to the potential for unintended consequences as a result of professional intervention(s).

### What do we mean by curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable?

The notion of **curiosity** holds a number of dimensions. In its simplest form, being curious is about wanting to know or learn and, in a professional context, often appears in the phrase 'professional curiosity'. Although widely used, the term is not clearly defined (Thacker et al., 2019) but tends to be attributed to a range of characteristics that manifest at both an individual and organisational level. Burton & Revell (2018) suggest that professional curiosity is a combination of:

- personality traits: including a desire for new knowledge
- attitudes: being tenacious, willing to learn, open to new ideas and interested in other people's stories
- behaviours: seeking a holistic view of a situation

- skills: good communication; critical analysis, literacy about safeguarding legalities and being research-informed.

In contrast, being **evidence-informed** is more clearly defined. The basic premise is about having a rationale underpinned by evidence for work undertaken, to maximise the chance of having positive outcomes. Being evidence-informed means drawing not just on research evidence but also the expertise of professionals and those with lived experience (Staempfli, 2020; Research in Practice, 2003). As Harrison and Graham (2021, p. xvii) describe: ‘Research is rarely the only piece of the evidence jigsaw that practitioners draw on in their practice, and there needs to be a good fit between evidence and context for it to have a chance of making a difference.’ This is especially pertinent in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm, which manifests differently depending on the local context (e.g. urban / rural areas) and for which the evidence base in terms of intervention effectiveness is emergent and evolving (Firmin et al., 2022).

Being **knowledgeable** is clearly a very broad descriptor, one that encapsulates the essential ingredients of being a professional, i.e. having the necessary skills and continually learning so as to be able to practise to the best of one’s ability and to deliver the best possible service or care. As such, it can be seen enshrined in statutory safeguarding partners’ professional standards (College of Policing, 2014; Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2018; Social Work England, 2019; General Medical Council, 2019), which also highlight continuing professional development as being a key mechanism through which learning is operationalised.

Research highlights what it means to be knowledgeable in complex contexts (Flyvbjerg, et al., 2012). The distinction between knowledge, craft and practice wisdom maps onto the different kinds of knowledge that is needed for the sensitive and complicated work of responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. For example, practitioners need to know the evidence base, but they also need to understand how it might apply (whether it is relevant or not) in their local community context, and in the context of work with a specific young person (and family). This requires bringing together holistic knowledge and understanding of the child, young person, their parents / carers and wider networks; professional knowledge of your specific area of expertise as well as practice wisdom from experience of working in the field.

### **Why is being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable a Practice Principle?**

Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable are critical attributes for those tasked with responding to the diverse, fast-paced and constantly evolving nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. This mindset can help to navigate the complexities of child exploitation and extra-familial harm in several ways. Responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm requires building up a picture of the risk, harms and strengths in a child or young person’s life, paying attention to the perspective of the child, young person and parent / carer (see Practice Principles 2 & 7) alongside research evidence and applied professional wisdom. It involves nuanced understanding of the agency and (constrained) choices of children and young people in these situations, as explored in Practice Principle 3.



Child exploitation, extra-familial harm and wider experiences of trauma (as outlined in Practice Principle 5) can affect how a child or young person interacts with those trying to put protective measures in place. Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable can help avoid making assumptions that result in children and young people not receiving the support they need and can instead facilitate more appropriately targeted responses, through a better understanding of any enablers and barriers to protection at play.

Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable are also invaluable qualities for professionals across the multi-agency partnership, considering what strengths or assets others can bring at a practice level and a management and strategic partnership level. Key enablers are supervision, reflective practice and a positive learning environment (SCIE, 2013; CIPD, 2020; College of Policing, 2022). When working with complexity, ‘the safety valve is reflective practice and external scrutiny of practice via supervisory processes and training to engender rigorous practice’ (Burton & Revell, 2018 p. 1519).

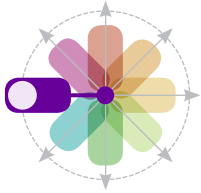
The importance of curiosity, of looking beyond presenting behaviours, challenging assumptions and biases and sharing information effectively with other agencies has repeatedly been highlighted in reviews (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020; Allnock & Rawden, 2020; Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, 2022). The Munro review (2011) noted the risks of children’s social care services being overly bureaucratic and recommended a move from a culture of compliance to a learning culture, where more professional judgement is exercised and expertise is improved through the use of research evidence. This is supported by the evidence about working in complex, adaptive systems, which are poorly suited to traditional performance management approaches of targets and performance indicators (including in commissioning) due to their interconnected nature (Knight et al., 2019; Lowe, 2021).

## **What difference could being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable make to responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?**

Given the complexities of child exploitation and extra-familial harm outlined above, thinking critically, being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable are key components of effective responses. For example, there is evidence that taking a checklist approach to assessing risk can be problematic and only partially captures young people’s experiences of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. This underlines the importance of using a more holistic and young person-centred approach to assessment, where professional judgement is applied alongside any tool that is used (Brown et al., 2017; Franklin et al., 2018; Beckett & Lloyd, 2022). If child exploitation or extra-familial harm are experienced during adolescence, understanding brain development and the important function of measured risk during this period is important (Coleman & Hagell, 2022). This knowledge can then help practitioners, partners and parents / carers develop a shared sense of how best to hold risk, in situations where it cannot be eliminated, to which the notion of ‘safe uncertainty’ refers (Hickle & Hallett, 2016; Williams, 2019).

Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable is also about understanding the local context of child exploitation and extra familial harm, asking: ‘What is child exploitation like here and what should we do about it?’ (Godar, 2020, p. 3). Several of the Bespoke Support Projects that TCE carried out with local areas between 2019 and 2022 (e.g., TCE, 2019; TCE, 2021) highlighted the importance of understanding the limitations of existing data sets and the benefits of going beyond ‘traditional’ safeguarding partners (to include community groups, stewards of public spaces, local businesses and education settings, and children and young people themselves) to obtain a more holistic understanding of the scale and manifestations of child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Peace, 2018). This closely aligns with the need for creating safer spaces and places for children and young people (as explored in Practice Principle 8).

Recognising the different forms of information that can help support effective responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm is also important. The role of ‘soft’ intelligence for example, such as the qualitative information gathered in Return from Home interviews. Care must be taken to attend to any ‘unintended consequences’ of sharing such data, given the potentially negative implications in relation to surveillance, trust and disproportionality noted in recent studies (Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). It also requires due consideration being given to balancing rights to privacy and data security with the paramountcy of keeping children and young people safe (Warrington, 2013; 2016; Warrington & Larkins, 2019). This kind of nuanced purposeful practice relies on management and supervision approaches that encourage the use of evidential learning and allow space for reflection.



## 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).



## 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,<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> 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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