

Contextual Safeguarding Practitioner Briefing



What is contextual safeguarding? Contextual safeguarding, developed by Dr Carlene Firmin [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#), recognises that as children/young people grow and develop they are influenced by a whole range of environments and people outside of their family. For example; in school or college, in the local community, in their peer groups or online. Children/young people may encounter risk in any of these environments. Sometimes the different contexts are inter-related and can mean that children/young people may encounter multiple risks. Contextual safeguarding looks at how we can best understand these risks, engage with children/young people and help to keep them safe. It's an approach that's often been used to apply to adolescents, though the lessons can equally be applied to younger children, especially in today's changing world. **Watch the video:** [What is Contextual Safeguarding?](#)

Why it matters? Traditional approaches to protecting children/young people from harm have focussed on the risk of violence and abuse from inside the home, and don't always address the time that children/young people spend outside the home. As they move from early childhood and into adolescence they spend increasing amounts of time socialising independently of their families. The nature of children/young people's relationships, that they form in these settings, inform the extent to which they encounter protection or abuse.

Peer relationships; Research tells us that peer relationships are increasingly influential during adolescence. If a child/young person forms friendships in contexts characterised by violence and/or harmful attitudes these relationships will be anti-social and unsafe.

What are the risks? There are a wide range of potential risks where the prime cause of harm is outside of the family. This list isn't exhaustive but includes: peer on peer abuse; exploitation and online abuse; missing episodes; gang involvement; radicalisation; trafficking and modern slavery.



Core Principles;

- The child/young person will always be at the centre of, and a partner in their safeguarding plan.
- All partners will understand the child/young person as being exploited, for which they are not responsible; we have a common language, understanding and application of the child welfare system first and juvenile justice system second.
- Services will respond to the whole of the child/young people's needs; practical i.e. education, a home, a job, as well as physical, emotional and psychological
- Children/young people entering adulthood will not experience a 'cliff-edge' in terms of support, there will be no differences between thresholds/eligibility criteria of children's and adults' transitional safeguarding for this cohort of young people (from 10 to 25 years).
- All partners recognise that child exploitation can have traumatic impacts on the wider family; parents/carers need to be supported and not feel 'blamed', the focus of work with them will be to develop strategies together that help them to keep their family safe. In order to do this, partners will ensure that plans are developed in equal partnership and reflect the needs of the whole family
- All partners will recognise that children/young people with SEND may be at additional risk outside the family home or setting due to their specific needs and abilities.

What can Practitioners do? A Contextual Safeguarding approach aims to disrupt harmful extra-familial contexts rather than move children/young people away from them. The approach seeks to identify the ways in which practitioners, children/young people can change the social conditions of environments in which abuse has occurred and encourage self-responsibility for making these changes. Engage with individuals and sectors who have a bearing on social contexts, i.e. shopkeepers, local policing, community leaders, to make environments safer. Use the tools for assessment and planning to ensure that the risk and the impact of constrained choice is understood. Attend the training and understand the model and relevant legislation. Report the concerns and [share the information](#).

What we know; Children/young people say that practitioners **"haven't got a clue"** and often know little about their lived experiences. Engaging with them at a superficial level can prevent them trusting those working with them and make them reluctant to talk. For those exploited, the age commonly ranges from 14 onwards, with a peak in the 15 – 19 age group, however younger children are known to being exploited as well. In most cases weapons used are knives. The significant home and parental characteristics were; parental separation, domestic abuse and substance misuse and criminality within the home. The vulnerability for the child/young person are characterised by; criminality with drugs, knives and missing reports. Most of the children/young people are excluded from school, in a Pupil Referral Unit, alternative provision or had no school or were Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). Many are already known to children's services and the most common route children/young people are first identified as being at risk of Criminal Exploitation is through the criminal justice system. Which is too late. For those children/young people at high risk of criminal exploitation it is strongly suspected that they are also under the control of an organised criminal group. **'It was hard to escape'**

What needs to be done differently?

Plans will consider the context (peers, school, social network, neighbourhoods) and address how practitioners and communities can make that safer. Practitioners language and approach needs to reflect an understanding that the child/young person/adult is not complicit in their exploitation, i.e. if a child/young person is found in possession of weapons or drugs, practitioners need to ask 'what are the vulnerabilities for this child/young person; have they been criminally exploited?' and assess the risk of exploitation when considering their response to the child/young person.

Child sexual exploitation

Children and young people can be sexually abused for money, power or status. They may receive things like drugs, alcohol and gifts in return for sexual activities, or be sexually exploited online.

Signs to spot

- Lots of phone or online messages they are secretive about
- Regularly drinking and taking illegal drugs
- Gifts they can't afford, such as clothes and jewellery
- Sudden and unusual mood changes
- Trying to hide injuries
- Older friends
- Going missing or frequently returning home late
- Changes in friends, tastes or behaviour



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For more information, guidance and support access the following;

- [Bedfordshire Against Violence and Exploitation \(BAVEX\).](#)
- [Bedfordshire Violence and Exploitation Reduction Unit \(VERU\).](#)
- [Pan Bedfordshire Inter-Agency Child Protection Procedures - 3.8 Safeguarding Children and Young People from Exploitation.](#)
- [Link to Change.](#)
- [Contextual Safeguarding Network.](#)