Contextual Safeguarding: A framework for responding to the extra-familial abuse of children

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Although Child Protection approaches are not limited to the family setting, the focus of much of the assessment and intervention is with the children and families. These largely focus on the threat of, or actual harm, that children experience from family members or from others within the home or family environment. However, as children develop and mature towards adolescence they start to spend more time socialising independently and spend more time in environments and contexts outwith the family home. The relationships that are formed within these environments can determine the extent of safety and protection they experience, or indeed the extent of abuse and exploitation they experience outwith the home.

Where children experience harm outwith the family home it often occurs between peers or within shared social spaces such as schools, parks, youth clubs, public transport or on the streets. Sometimes within these social spaces, cultures can develop so that attitudes linked to harmful behaviours can become the social norm, leaving these behaviours regarded as socially acceptable and unchallenged (Firmin, 2017). Relationships formed with peers and adults can also lead to children being exploited criminally and sexually within the community and online. When children are safe at home but facing abuse and harm in extra-familial settings, child protection procedures are generally not applied. There is therefore a significant gap in how we respond in a formal multi-agency/partnership manner in order to keep these children safe.

Although these children will likely be referred to social work, the role of social work intervention is traditionally to improve outcomes through focusing on the individual child and their family. Where other people are causing the harm, and the spaces in which the harm is occurring are outwith the family home, this approach is unlikely to be effective. Assessment of, and intervention with, the wider context in which the harm is occurring also needs to be undertaken in order to create safety.

A Contextual Safeguarding approach has been developed by Carlene Firmin and her colleagues at the University of Bedfordshire in response to these issues. Contextual Safeguarding is described as:

"an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts and young people's experiences of extra-familial abuse can undermine parent-child relationships."

Four domains have been identified as providing the foundations for the Contextual Safeguarding framework and are helpful for structuring the design of the approach in local areas (Firmin, 2017a). These are:

1. Target: Seeks to prevent, identify, assess and intervene with the social conditions of abuse
2. Legislative framework: Incorporate extra-familial contexts into child protection frameworks
3. Partnerships: Develop partnerships with sectors/individuals who are responsible for the nature of extra-familial contexts
4. Outcomes measurement: Monitor outcomes of success in relation to contextual, as well as individual, change

As research and learning from practice has developed, the concepts of interplay and context weighting have been added to the framework. Considering the interplay between contexts assists in the understanding of the link between different relationships; and context weighting supports the identification and determination of the contexts most in need of intervention (Firmin & Lloyd, 2020).

Work undertaken in England and Wales to implement contextual safeguarding approaches to date has been identified as falling into two levels, with each facilitating and supporting the other. Level 1 is where intervention has remained focused on individual children and their families, but has been informed by extra-familial contexts/relationships and their interplay with the child's decision making. Level 2 is where the partnership practices, systems and structures are developed for identifying, assessing and intervening with the extra-familial contexts (Firmin & Lloyd, 2020).

When considering work at Level 1 it is important to bear in mind that Contextual Safeguarding is more than seeing children in contexts, it is an approach for working with those contexts including peers, school and communities. It involves developing plans to address the contexts. This can take many forms such as: the creation of safe spaces in the community; safety planning; bystander intervention training; targeting the factors that are undermining the relationships between children and their parents or carers; addressing the dynamics of school or peer contexts associated with a particular child's behaviour; and shifting cultures or norms that contribute to harm. Interventions should complement and enhance any individual or family interventions that are required, not replace them.

Considerations at Level 2 include questions such as: how referrals about peer groups or spaces/places get made as opposed to referrals for individual children; how the nature of extra-familial contexts is built into assessments; how partners work together to discuss contexts of concern rather than individual children or families; how contextual interventions are overseen when they involve a number of children and families. System change at this level recognises that parents or carers are not in positions to change the nature of the extra-familial contexts, but that those who manage these spaces or who have services in these spaces are. They need to become partners in safeguarding these children (Firmin, 2017a).

In Scotland, Child Protection is located firmly within the context of GIRFEC. The Contextual Safeguarding approach is congruent with the GIRFEC practice model and can add dimension, understanding and tools for assessment, planning and partnership working. As well as being relevant to protection, contextual safeguarding is also relevant to preventative work where children are not yet in need of child protection processes, and need not be drawn into them. Some third sector organisations and local authority areas in Scotland have been working to implement contextual safeguarding approaches, learning from the experiences of colleagues in England and Wales who have been able to overcome some of the issues raised above. The Contextual Safeguarding Network brings together practitioners, across the UK and internationally, to share and generate knowledge on contextual approaches to safeguarding children. Resources to support implementation of the approach across both Level 1 and Level 2 are published free on the network and can be accessed by network members. In addition, presentations and a summary report from the event Contextual Safeguarding in Scotland: Approaching Practice and other relevant resources can be found on the Social Work Scotland website. These provide information on the work that has already taken place in Scotland, and work that is underway, to implement Contextual Safeguarding approaches. The embedding of a contextual safeguarding approach within existing policy and practice could assist with the calls of The Promise, with the upholding of children's rights to be safe from abuse and exploitation (Articles 33-36) and the recent recommendations made in the *Policy Report: Sexual exploitation of children involved in the Children's Hearing System.*

References

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