



Contextual Safeguarding

An overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework

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Introduction

Contextual Safeguarding is 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. Therefore children's social care practitioners need to engage with individuals and sectors who do have influence over/within extra-familial contexts, and recognise that assessment of, and intervention with, these spaces are a critical part of safeguarding practices. Contextual Safeguarding, therefore, expands the objectives of child protection systems in recognition that young people are vulnerable to abuse in a range of social contexts.

Contextual Safeguarding has been developed at the University of Bedfordshire over the past six years to inform policy and practice approaches to safeguarding adolescents. Initially emerging from a three-year review of operational responses to peer-on-peer abuseⁱ, Contextual Safeguarding provides a framework to advance child protection and safeguarding responses to a range of extra-familial risks that compromise the safety and welfare of young peopleⁱⁱ. This briefing collates and summarises learning from multiple publications on the subject of Contextual Safeguardingⁱⁱⁱ with particular reference to the:

1. International evidence on why context is important to adolescent welfare
2. Contextual Safeguarding framework with specific reference to how contexts relate to each other and inform young people's behaviours
3. Contextual Safeguarding system and the role of contextual interventions
4. Implications of Contextual Safeguarding for child protection systems and practices

Why is context important

As individuals move from early childhood and into adolescence they spend increasing amounts of time socialising independently of their families^{iv}. During this time the nature of young people's schools and neighbourhoods, and the relationships that they form in these settings, inform the extent to which they encounter protection or abuse. Evidence shows that, for example: from robbery on public transport, sexual violence in parks and gang-related violence on streets, through to online bullying and harassment from school-based peers and abuse within their intimate relationships, young people encounter significant harm in a range of settings beyond their families.

Peer relationships are increasingly influential during adolescence^v, setting social norms which inform young people's experiences, behaviours and choices and determine peer status. These relationships are, in turn, shaped by, and shape, the school, neighbourhood and online contexts in which they develop (Figure 1). So if young people socialise in safe and protective schools and community settings they will be supported to form safe and protective peer relationships. However, if they form friendships in contexts characterised by violence and/or harmful attitudes these relationships too may be anti-social, unsafe or promote problematic social norms as a means of navigating, or surviving in, those spaces.

Young people's engagement in extra-familial contexts can also inform, and be informed by, what is happening in their homes. Therefore, when young people are exposed to violence or exploitation in their school, community or peer group this may fracture their family

Figure 1: Contexts of Adolescent Safety and Vulnerability(Firmin 2013:47)

be the largest box in the illustration– in another case it may be norms at school etc.). At a strategic level this framework proposes that any local safeguarding partnership should have oversight of the nature and number of the contexts in which abuse has occurred within their geographical area of responsibility as well as the individuals affected. Such information could inform the commissioning of contextual preventative, early and reactive interventions as part of a wider safeguarding system.

A case example helps to illustrate the implications of this model. Dean is groomed by a street gang in his neighbourhood to traffic drugs across the country. He is approached by them when hanging-out with his friends at a local take-away food shop. The influence of those who have groomed him means that Dean doesn't come home when his parents ask him too and stops answering their calls while running drugs. Slowly Dean's parents lose control of him and when they try to lock him in the house he physically attacks his mother to get out. Dean is one of six peers who have all been approached at the take-away shop for the purposes of drug trafficking. Within a Contextual Safeguarding model the risk in Dean's neighbourhood, and the group who have groomed him, appear to be more influential than his parents. Addressing this issue may in turn address the challenges that Dean is facing at home – whereas intervening with Dean's family is unlikely to impact the risks he is facing in the community. Strategically the safeguarding partnership is made aware of the trend associated to the take-away shop, a street gang, six young men and the issue of drugs trafficking and work together to design a plan for disrupting risk in that context (and thereby safeguard all six young men affected by it).

At this stage Contextual Safeguarding offered a framework to shape the development of policy and practice models for safeguarding young people affected by extra-familial risks. The framework needed to be applied in order to identify the resources, structures and partnerships required to bring the model to life and test its usability.

A Contextual Safeguarding system and interventions

From 2013-2017, the emerging Contextual Safeguarding framework was applied to develop local responses to peer-on-peer abuse with 14 multi-agency safeguarding partnerships across England¹ – referred to as sites in this briefing^x. Each site engaged in a contextual audit^x to identify the extent to which its policies and practices addressed the extra-familial dynamics of peer-on-peer abuse. Following audits an action plan was developed in each site

2. Drew extra-familial contexts into child protection and safeguarding processes (which were traditionally focused on families)
3. Built partnerships with sectors and individuals who managed extra-familial settings where young people spent their time (such as those responsible for the management of schools, transport services, shopping centres, libraries, take-away shops), and;
4. Measured its impact in relation to a change in the nature of the contexts where young people were vulnerable to abuse or harm (rather than just focusing on a change in the behaviour of individuals who continued to spend time in harmful spaces).

Figure 4 Four Domains of Contextual Safeguarding (Firmin et al., 2016:46-49)

These four domains provide the foundations for a systemic change in the way that services describe, and respond to, abuse in adolescence.

Contextual Safeguarding and child protection systems

The child protection system, and the legislative and policy framework which underpins it, was designed to protect children from abuse and neglect.

safeguard is undermined when a child is exploited at school, on a bus or in their local shopping centre – who can contribute to creating safety in these contexts? Such an extension of the term ‘capacity to safeguard’ is likely to have implications for child protection and safeguarding processes and structures, raising a number of questions:

- x To what extent can existing systems receive referrals about peer groups or extra-familial contexts in which young people encounter significant harm?
- x How can the nature of extra-familial contexts and peer relationships (and their impact on parental capacity to safeguard) be built into child and family assessments?
- x What are the screening and reviewing structures for processing such referrals through a child protection system?
- x What are the terms of reference, and partnership roles, for strategy and planning meetings to discuss concerns related to contexts as opposed to families?
- x What are the oversight arrangements for an intervention plan related to an extra-familial context that may be attached to multiple children and families?

Returning to the case example of Dean introduced earlier in this briefing. In the current system it would be Dean and his family who would be referred, assessed and receive intervention to address his behaviour. In a Contextual Safeguarding system extra-familial settings and relationships could be subject to this process; so the take-away shop, street gang and/or Dean’s peer group may be referred into a safeguarding system, assessed, discussed by a partnership and then to subject to an intervention as a means of keeping Dean safe.

In addition to the site work that we have undertaken, a number of organisations in the UK and internationally have developed interventions that could be used to disrupt risk in shopping centres, take away shops, peer groups, schools, parks and other public settings. A Contextual Safeguarding practitioners’ network is collecting, and sharing, examples of such interventions (www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk). A child protection, social care or safeguarding system with the capacity to generate (and assess) contextual referrals into such interventions (and answer the questions outlined above) is in development. The London Borough of Hackney received social care innovation funding to embed Contextual S

To join the Contextual Safeguarding Network please visit:
www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk

References

- ⁱ Firmin, 2017a; Firmin, 2015
- ⁱⁱ Firmin, et al., 2016b
- ⁱⁱⁱ Firmin, et al., 2016a; Firmin, et al., 2016b; Firmin, 2017a; Firmin, 2017b; Lloyd et al., 2017; Firmin & Hancock, Forthcoming, 2018
- ^{iv} Coleman, 2011; Hanson & Holmes, 2015; Sidebotham, et al., 2016
- ^v Barter, et al., 2009; Firmin, 2017b; Warr, 2002
- ^{vi} Barter, et al., 2009; Catch 22, 2013; Centre for Social Justice, 2016; Cowie, et al., 2008; Firmin, 2017a; Letourneau & Borduin, 2008; Ringrose, et al., 2011; Smallbone, et al., 2013; Transport Select Committee, 2014; Women and Equalities Committee, 2016
- ^{vii} Firmin, 2015; Firmin, 2017a
- ^{viii} Firmin, 2017a; Firmin, 2017b
- ^{ix} Firmin, et al., 2016b

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