Contextual Safeguarding and Extra-Familial Abuse

Contextual Safeguarding was developed by Carlene Firmin at the University of Bedfordshire to inform policy and practice approaches to safeguarding adolescents.

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.

Why is it important?

Extra-familial risk and abuse can take on many forms, including but not limited to:

- Criminal and sexual exploitation
- Gang related violence
- Bullying and harassment
- Street-based victimization
- Intimate partner and peer on peer abuse
- Online abuse
- Missing episodes
- Risks associated with radicalisation
- Safeguarding risks in public spaces
- Trafficking and modern slavery

The child protection system, and the legislative and policy framework which underpins it, was designed to protect children and young people from risks posed by their families and/or situations where families had reduced capacity to safeguard those in their care. 'The system deprioritizes extra-familial harm to adolescents because it does not know how to identify and respond to its contextual dynamics' (C. Firmin 2019).

What does good practice look like?

- Support young people to talk about their local area, schools and peer groups.
- Initiate conversations with young people about where they feel safe or unsafe including who they associate with and which individuals they feel safe to be with and those they don't.
- Have an understanding of what's going on in the community where you work or live. This will help with early identification and appropriate referral of individuals at risk.
- Can you make/identify safe areas in the community where young people can go?
- Do our assessments include the above? Do they reflect places and people of danger and of safety?

How do we do it?

A contextual safeguarding system supports the development of approaches which disrupt/change harmful extra-familial contexts rather than move families/young people away from them. While parents/carers are not in a position to change the nature of extra-familial contexts those who manage or deliver services in these spaces are; and they therefore become critical partners in the safeguarding agenda. This approach would extend the concept of 'capacity to safeguard' beyond families to those individuals and sectors who manage extra-familial settings in which young people encounter risk and supports local partner agencies to work together to intervene to make public spaces safer for children.

Just because you have not heard/seen it happening in your area or with your clients doesn't mean it is not happening! Be curious, engage in conversations, hear and acknowledge what young people might be saying.

Further information

[3.2 Children who are Exploited | Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton](#) – HIPS Procedures.

[Contextual Safeguarding: What is it and why does it matter?](#) - An overview published by the NSCPCC on what contextual safeguarding is and why it matters.

[What is Contextual Safeguarding? (Contextual Safeguarding)](#) - A short video providing an overview of contextual safeguarding and what it means in practice for different social contexts.

[Contextual Safeguarding](#) - Information and research for practitioners developed by Contextual Safeguarding and Durham University.

[Practice Resources (University of Bedfordshire)](#) - A collection of practical resources on contextual safeguarding.